



# Student-Centered Course Design

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While online students come from all backgrounds and walks of life, the early indications about online learners is that they tend to be working professionals seeking to better their circumstances. However, this characteristic is shifting as more schools introduce online degree programs, as tuition drops and, importantly, as a new generation of learners moves onto the scene. Young learners who grew up with computers and the internet integrated into their lives are showing signs of interest in online education. It may seem obvious, but one important characteristic of online students is their belief that learning can take place outside the classroom as well as inside. And, frankly, if they do not believe in the process, they should not participate.

Just as faculty need to be in tune with their teaching philosophy and style, students also need to be realistic about their learning styles. Students preferentially take in and process information in different ways: by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, analyzing and visualizing, sometimes steadily, and at other times, spontaneously.

When mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the professor, the students may become bored and inattentive, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases change to other curricula or drop out of school. To overcome these problems, professors should strive for a balance of instructional methods (as opposed to trying to teach each student exclusively according to his or her preferences.) If the balance is achieved, all students will be taught partly in a manner they prefer, which leads to an increased comfort level and willingness to learn, and partly in a less preferred manner, which provides practice and feedback in ways of thinking and solving problems which they may not initially be comfortable with, but which they will have to use to be fully effective professionals. So how do we become more student-centered in our course design? In the general sense:

**Consistent faculty presence:** It may seem ironic given the goal of being student-centered, but in this case it means to take on the role of giving initial directions and guidance, but also constantly pop in to give kudos for good student posting, suggestions to help their learning, and applause for discussion or team postings that developed into long threads from one initial student's thoughts. All of this will go a long way in keeping students engaged and helping them to learn more.

**Chunking/scaffolding out your lectures:** If students were to see lecture after lecture posted by a professor it becomes "blah-blah-blah," and students soon find it difficult to absorb all the information. But by posting mini-lectures (one to three paragraphs centered on one subject), the students will recognize these as important because of their infrequency, hopefully be more eager to read them, and will certainly absorb—and remember—their contents easier.

**Use a dynamic interaction or two:** In a few modules we will discuss the value of Web 2.0 tools and other emerging technologies that increase student engagement and their learning goals. That is the key--active learning. Students will be learning in deeper layers of what the course initially offered, and they have another internal motivator to stay engaged in the course.

**Acknowledge that students have various learning styles in your course design:** Some students will, in fact, work better with a teacher-centered instructional model. But times are changing, and by focusing more on the learning processes of your students, you are providing them with more ways for them to take ownership of their learning.

## Orienting Your Students to the Virtual Learning Space

One way to begin the process of designing your course to be student-centered would be to have a "Course Overview" and/or "Ready for Online Learning" on your course navigation menu (like you see in the Academy). An online course orientation is an excellent place to explain the use of online course components and gives the opportunity for students to "ramp up" their skills, without being penalized. It is a good idea to provide ample time during the first week of the semester for students to ensure their system is set up correctly and they have everything (hardware, software, add-ons, etc.) that they will need during the semester.