



CENTRUM INFORMAČNÝCH
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HOW TO TEACH ONLINE

SHORT TUTORIAL FOR THE COMENIUS UNIVERSITY FACULTY

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CENTER FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY COMENIUS UNIVERSITY

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WHAT IS INSIDE THIS TUTORIAL

This is a short text on how to deal with the express transfer to online learning, due to the recent situation. Whichever platform or software you decide to use, there are some basic principles built on practical experience that can be very helpful.

The tutorial has five parts:

- **Basic Principles of Online Learning Planning** – general guidelines on planning for an online course independent of the approach you decide to take.
- **Synchronous and Asynchronous Approach** – how to decide between synchronous and asynchronous approach and what support is offered within Comenius University.
- **Asynchronous Activities** – practical advice on how to plan asynchronous activities with your students. This includes activities like providing materials for students, collecting assignments, online tests, asynchronous discussions (at Comenius we use Moodle for most of these activities; however, this also concerns asynchronous activities in MS Teams or other environments).
- **Synchronous Activities** – practical advice on how to approach synchronous activities with your students, i.e. how to organize and manage video-conferences in real time (at Comenius mostly used within MS Teams).
- **How to Avoid Breaching Copyright** – information on basic principles of using content from the Internet.

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE LEARNING PLANNING

First, you need to understand that elearning tools are just tools. You can use them to create and teach high quality courses or you can have poor results. So what are the basic principles you need to follow independently on form and tools you use?

1.1. PRINCIPLE NO. 1 – INTERACTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION

Firstly, you need to look at and consider student needs. There are students who don't need school. They can just pick up a printed textbook and simply learn from it at their own pace, but this is not the case for the vast majority of students. Besides access to course content, most students also need:

- Regular contact with the teacher – deadlines, feedback, encouragement.
- Contact with classmates – peer help, support, feeling of solidarity with peers.

In face-to-face class the teacher only needs to focus on maintaining his/her contact with the students. Contact, collaboration and encouragement among students takes part naturally. However, in an online environment with each student in his/her home, social contact is not taking place naturally and suddenly the teacher needs to encourage it. That is why, it is very important for an online teacher to think about what to do to get the students to communicate and to work together – in the form of discussions, group tasks, projects, questions etc. Lack of communication between both the students and the teacher, and then between the students themselves is the most frequent reason for online courses to be marked as boring, poor or of low quality.



WHAT TO DO:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Your students need to feel your presence in an online course and not only during live sessions. Answer questions, chase inactive students, and ask students to express their opinions: to tell you how they feel, what they think, what experiences they have.
- Select activities and tasks that will encourage students to communicate with each other. Group work, team tasks, discussions etc.

1.2. PRINCIPLE NO. 2 – INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

In an online course, your students are not in the same room with you and you don't get the opportunity to explain the logistics to them, to tell them what exactly they need to do. A total lack of information for students at the beginning of the course is one of the main mistakes teachers who are starting with online learning can make. If the students feel like they don't know what, how and when they are supposed to do their tasks, they most probably end up doing nothing. That is why it is very important to make it clear at the beginning of the course. Basic principle is to explain everything clearly, simply and even repeatedly. The less opportunity you provide for a student to say, "I could not understand what I was supposed to do, so I've done nothing," the better. Besides knowing what to do, it is important for students to know how much work will be required for the course. There is a widespread belief that online learning is supposed to be easier than a face-to-face class. Of course, this isn't true. A student, in order to learn something needs to put in effort, whether the course is online or in the classroom. Students that sign up for an online course expecting not to have to do much are usually very surprised. It is good to provide that information for them at the beginning.

HOW TO PROVIDE INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

Provide students with information on what exactly is required for the work, when it's due and any other deadlines, how they will be required to do the work and how they will be evaluated on it.

Introductory module of the course should contain not only general information from syllabus (goals, content, technical requirements and evaluation), but also descriptions of activities and their evaluation and information on how often they are supposed to log into the course, what they will be required to do and how much time and effort will be required.

1.3. PRINCIPLE NO. 3 – SCAFFOLDING THE CONTENT TO SMALLER PARTS/WEEKS/MODULES, THEIR CONSISTENCY AND PLANNING

Experts recommend splitting the content into smaller parts/modules, so that students will be able to work through them one by one, and so that they won't feel overwhelmed. Common are modules that cover content for approximately 2 weeks. Semester long courses of 15 weeks usually have about 7-8 modules containing activities and evaluations that students need to pass in certain time periods. A critical piece of information provided at the beginning of the course is the schedule, so that students will not only be aware of what work is expected of them but also the timeline they are expected to follow. Students have an unfortunate tendency to procrastinate and hence, end up running late with their work. So it is very important to set firm deadlines for them to finish activities and modules.

HOW TO SCAFFOLD AND PLAN COURSE CONTENT

Split the content and activities to smaller parts. The course should have an introductory activity (icebreaker). It is often a non-formal discussion for students to introduce themselves, to state reasons for taking the class, what they expect



to learn etc. Many courses then have a closing activity within the last module of the course, usually a final essay or test. The other modules usually contain:

- Module overview and instructions. As stated above, it is necessary for the student at any point in the course to know exactly what to do. In practice, this means that it is a good idea to have detailed instructions for students within each module, whether it is a repeat of or more detailed version compared to the course syllabus. The module introduction usually consists of two parts:
 - Module overview (information on what the module contains)
 - Instructions (what is expected from the student, deadlines)
- Interactive Activity. In every module, there should be an activity that forces the students to communicate with each other. Engaging in discussions where students engage and compare their thoughts and opinions with each other significantly helps them remember much more from the reading material compared to when they would just read it passively for themselves. This can be achieved through the use of a discussion forum. When using a discussion forum it is again very important to make sure students have all the information they need (what they are supposed to do by what deadline, what question to answer, what issue to express opinion on). Many teachers also add instructions on length and format of discussion contribution (minimum word count, number of sentences, the need to add citations, etc.)
- Evaluation Activity. Every module should also contain activity that will enable the teacher to verify whether the student gained the knowledge and skill they were supposed gain by studying this module. These activities could be essay assignments, case studies, problem solving, research tasks, analyses, interviews, simulations, experiments, stories, storyboards, art creation, lesson plan, reviews, data analysis, etc.

One of the things that might be very helpful for the teacher to do is to keep similar structures and systems for every module. Students usually try to figure out the logic and system of the course and then they expect the rest of the course to follow the same logic.

ACTIVITY PLANNING

In order to be able to plan course activities, it is necessary to determine first what order they will appear in in the course and with what frequency and amounts.

ORDER

When determining order for the activities to appear in modules, you need to consider the following:

- What does the student need to know before starting to work on the activity?
- Is it necessary for the student to participate in the discussion before formulating an opinion to stand by and defend in the assignment?
- Is it necessary for the student to read the appropriate book chapter, to listen to the lecture before participating in discussion, or working on a written assignment?

AMOUNT

When determining amount of activities within modules, you need to consider following:

- How many hours per week do I expect the students to dedicate to working on this course in a face-to-face setting? (you should expect your online students to dedicate approximately the same amount of time to work on the course independently)



- How many students will be taking the course (depending on the amount of students in the course the amount of discussions or other activities might change)
- What is the importance of particular activities, how will they be evaluated?

TIMING

When considering the timing of particular activities you need to consider the following:

- How much time will it take the students to conduct the activity?
- Are there factors tied to the online form of the activity that would influence the amount of time? (for instance, in online discussion participants need more time than in verbal discussion, as they need to write their contributions.)
- How much time does the teacher need to evaluate and mark the activity and send feedback to students?

2. SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS APPROACH

When you finally have a plan on what you want to do with the students in your online course and why, then you can start to consider the technical side of the course. From a technological view, there are two basic approaches to communication with students:

- Synchronous approach – teacher and students meet while each at a different place, but they communicate in real time (video conference, online lecture, chat)
- Asynchronous approach – teacher and student are each at a different place and they don't necessarily work on the course at the same time – the students have time intervals to fulfill tasks, but they have flexibility within the time frame (assignments, group work, text discussions etc.)

Each of these approaches has its advantages and disadvantages.

2.1. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SYNCHRONOUS APPROACH

Teaching in the form of video conferences is the approach that simulates traditional lectures, so many teachers feel that this is the simplest way to transfer their course online. However, it is not that simple. There is live contact with the students, but with a higher number of students (especially in a situation when they switch off their cameras as students tend to do), you don't have many options to receive non-verbal clues and to determine whether they are paying attention or not, or whether they understand what you are trying to explain.

Another advantage is the opportunity to use multiple tools within the video conference. Video conference softwares (like MS Teams) enable screen sharing, text chat, file sharing, use of whiteboard etc. On the other hand, when leading a video conference session as a teacher, it is not easy to hold the lecture, follow the chat and shared files, and also continuously guide the 'confused' students on where to go. Another common problem is that students who get lost in the technical side of the video conference don't follow or fully understand the lecture, or perhaps for different reasons are not able to participate at that particular time. The advantage is that it is possible to record the session and later use it asynchronously – i.e. let students go back to it at their own time and watch it at their own speed.

Another issue might be the sufficient speed of Internet connection necessary to transfer audio and video. It is true that at this time most students have access to high speed Internet from home, but this isn't necessarily the case for all students.



2.2. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ASYNCHRONOUS APPROACH

The main advantage is time flexibility. With asynchronous approach the student usually gets a time period of days or even weeks to fulfill particular task and it is student's responsibility to manage the time and to decide when and where to complete their work and assignments. This is also a disadvantage when there are students who are not ready to take on this kind of responsibility. However, with university students this should not be a problem.

Managing their own time also provides students with more opportunities to go deeper into issues that catch their interest. On the other hand, with asynchronous approach the social contact among students is extremely low and it is necessary to include activities that help increase more social interactions among the students.

2.3. COMBINING OF APPROACHES

Every tool and each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. When planning a course it is important to consider all options and to select the best combination of tools. There are many combinations and very often a version where students work asynchronously between synchronous meetings seem to be the most suitable.

Comenius University supports two environments – MS Teams and Moodle, both of which you can use for your courses. Of course, you can also choose to use different tools and environments, however Comenius University only provides technical support, tutorials, workshops and access with university login and password for these two environments. You can select one of them, or use both for one course.

MS Teams has a strong video conference tool, it includes file sharing, option for students to submit assignments, text chat and it is possible to prepare a simple test for students as well.

Moodle environment does not include the video conferencing tool; it only offers text chat as a synchronous tool, however, besides file sharing, or assignment collecting, there is a well structured environment for asynchronous discussions and a very well structured and variable system for tests for students.

3. PLANNING OF ASYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES

3.1. HOW TO PLAN ASYNCHRONOUS INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES

There are a number of different asynchronous activities that encourage students to communicate with each other. These could be group projects, presentations, peer evaluation, case studies etc. However, most courses use discussion forums for asynchronous interaction between students. Its advantages are:

- Time flexibility (each participant can choose the day and time to contribute)
- Flexibility of content (besides discussion it is possible to use the discussion forum for group projects, presentations, peer feedback, case studies, etc.)
- Every participant has an opportunity to contribute (it does not matter how long it takes for you to formulate the contribution before submitting it)

USE OF DISCUSSION FORUM FOR DISCUSSION

Besides increasing social interaction, a well moderated and prepared discussion can help students understand the course content better; to learn to formulate, defend and analyze opinions; and to think more critically.

TIPS ON HOW PREPARE GOOD DISCUSSION



- Avoid questions with simple answers. If there is only one correct answer to a discussion question, the first participating student will answer the question and then there is not much to discuss afterwards.
- Create open ended questions, where the answer can be approached from different sides, angles and perspectives, so that the students can come with different theories, analyze possible answers and exchange ideas.
- Direct students' attention to an article, case study or other source of information connected to the topic in order to enrich discussion.
- You can let the students choose the topic of discussion, something they are interested in analyzing and discussing. If you do this, you also need to set clear rules for the discussions to make sure it will be an actual discussion and won't dissolve into an argument.
- It might seem like in subjects of math or science there won't be too many topics for discussion. However, if part of the course topic are formal issues or research methods, students can discuss the hypotheses, research methods, ethics etc. And this might help them understand the subject better.
- Give students an opportunity to analyze given topics, to enrich discussion through their personal experiences or knowledge connected to the subject, so that they also learn from each other.

OTHER USE OF DISCUSSION FORUMS – TIPS AND EXAMPLES

- Show examples or case studies at the beginning of discussion and ask students to analyze the materials using the tools they just learned about.
- Ask students to publish their assignments within the discussion forum and to provide feedback to each other as well.
- Ask them to collect as many reasons as possible for and against one of the controversial issues connected to the course topic.
- Ask students to collect information connected with the course topic; to publish the information in the discussion forum and then to analyze it together.
- Ask students to use the discussion forums to compare and analyze different theories connected to the course.
- Connect discussions to the topic of the final essay, so that it helps them while working on the essay.
- Use frequently talked about current social or political events as discussion topics.

3.2. HOW TO PLAN ASYNCHRONOUS EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Evaluation activity is an activity that provides answers to questions:

- What are students learning?
- How much have they actually learned?

When evaluating students in online courses, it is necessary to provide them with:

- Clear information on what are the goals of the course and what is expected of them.
- Feedback should be based on the goals and outcomes of the course, and it should be provided to the student in a timely and frequent manner.
- Opportunities for them to evaluate their own progress.
- Clear information on what will be expected of them during the final course evaluation.

TYPES OF EVALUATION

Evaluations are divided into two parts:



- formal (connected with certain amount of points, or mark)
- non formal (with no marks, more like feedback)

Other divisions split evaluations into formative (during the course) and summative (at the end of the course).

EVALUATIONS IN ONLINE COURSE

Evaluations during the course are very important. They are the most often used tool to keep students active during the semester, to fulfill their tasks and to spend time on the subject.

Formal evaluations during the course can include:

- quizzes and tests during the semester
- student presentations, projects and assignments
- self-evaluations and self-reflections performed by the students

Non Formal evaluation can include:

- discussions
- observations
- peer evaluations of students, evaluation of teamwork

The final evaluation takes place at the end of the term and can be tested through:

- final tests
- term assignments
- final projects (could also be multimedia outcomes)
- presentations, performances, etc.

SCAFFOLDING

It is highly recommended in an online course to divide the content into smaller parts spread across the whole semester. The goal is to make students work consistently throughout the whole term so that they won't get overwhelmed towards the end.

Example: A good example can be a final term paper. In order to write a high quality research paper, the students first have to pick a topic and formulate a hypothesis, or question. Then they must find relevant sources and literature pieces, which they can then analyze and use to aid them in coming to their experiment results. Finally, the students need to complete the process by writing up recommendations. It is a complex process and it is more practical to divide it into smaller tasks. Assignments can be alternatively structure in the following order:

- Module 1 Assignment - Topic and hypothesis for the research paper. Pick a topic for your research paper. Select your topic, form a hypothesis or research question and write a short explanation including general information such as why this topic is important in the given research field.
- Module 3 Assignment - Literature review for your research paper. Write up a research review for the topic of your paper. Organize facts and opinions found in the literature into one text and analyze its relationship to your topic. Include correct citations. You are required to use at least 6 different sources.
- Module 7 Assignment - Research paper. This is the last step of writing a research paper. Combine the paper topic and literature review into one text with adjustments based on your teacher's recommendations. Finish the rest of your paper – add analysis, recommendations and conclusion.



4. PLANNING OF SYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES

4.1. PREPARATION

Before starting the video conference, it is important to conduct preparation. The first step is to prepare the topic of the presentation, meaning the topic that you want to talk about. It is worth it to consider using some interactive activities during the conference. As is stated above, during a video conference, you are not able to follow nonverbal signals that show whether the students are paying attention. It's good to get into the practice of planning an interactive activity approximately every 10-15 minutes that the students have to participate in. Whether they are asked to answer a question, to contribute to a shared document, to share their screen, or to work in a group, research on the use of video conferences in university settings suggests that video conference sessions that don't use any interactive activities are often described as boring and ineffective by students.

Don't only prepare yourself regarding the content and methodology, but also pay attention to the technical side. Make sure to test the online environment, and conduct a practice video conference with your colleagues and friends. Practice how to share a screen, how to switch on and off your camera and microphone, and how to switch between applications you are planning to use.

Furthermore, prepare your students. Let them know ahead of time what is expected from them, when to log in, what are the rules of conduct during the conference, etc. For instance, it is recommended to ask the conference participants to switch off their microphone when they are not talking. This will prevent unnecessary disturbance due to background noise. Also, let students know what to do if they get disconnected during the session. They should know which technical problems they should contact you about, and which ones to contact CEPIT about, etc. Make sure to set up a secondary or backup form of communication – text applications such as WhatsApp or email are often used.

4.2. DURING THE SESSION

Log into the system at least 10 minutes before the start of the session. This will provide you with an opportunity to address possible technical issues, and to make sure that your microphone and headphones work as well. And of course, it is rude to be late for a session you yourself are hosting.

You need to guide and control the conference. If more people start to talk at the same time, nobody hears anything. At any given moment it should be clear whose turn it is to talk. If there are a larger number of students present, you can expect that the role of moderator will take some time and effort to properly establish. It is a good idea to have two teachers involved for video conferences with large numbers of students; one of them to focus on teaching the content, while the second can focus on the logistics of the online call. Some research studies claim that the only way to effectively host an interactive video conference is to have a second teacher to join the first one and to act as a moderator.

4.3. AFTER THE SESSION

Even when participation in the video conference is obligatory, there might still be students with reasons that prevent them from participating at the given time. In addition, students who participated might not exactly remember all of the content that was taught. So, it makes sense to record the meetings and provide the videos to the students after the class has ended. You can also consider asking students to conduct an asynchronous assignment connected to the information from the video so that the students go back to it and learn to apply the knowledge.



Of course, following the law, don't forget that you need the students approval in order to record a session they are participating in, so make sure to inform and ask them about it beforehand.

5. HOW TO NOT BREACH COPYRIGHTS (CODEX FOR SHARING OF INTERNET CONTENT)

Breach of copyright is illegal and furthermore, it is unethical. Even though it is only you and your students who have access to your course, you are not allowed to breach copyright laws within the Comenius University servers.

In order to stay within ethical behavior concerning use of Internet content, you need to follow six principles of ethical codex according to the IAB Slovakia association. The full version of the codex (in Slovak) is on the [IAB website](#), while a more simple description of the principles (in Slovak) [are also on this site](#). In 2015, [SME newspaper](#) also listed them in an article (Slovak).

What are the principles about:

5.1. THE FIRST PRINCIPLE – EVERYTHING IS PROTECTED

All content published online is automatically protected under copyright, even when the site where the material is located does not say so. In order to use somebody else's material on your site, you need to have agreement from the author.

Some materials online are published under special licences (like Creative Commons licences). Using these licences, the author states circumstances under which others are allowed to use the material. In this case, if you follow the circumstances, you can use the material without contacting the author.

5.2. THE SECOND PRINCIPLE – WHAT IS ALLOWED, IF I DON'T HAVE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION

If you don't have author's permission, you can't download the material from the internet and place it in the course. However, you are allowed to:

- Insert the link into your course that leads to the original material. After following the link, students will access the original material published by the author, so there is no breach of copyright.
- Insert videos, maps or other materials by embedding them using a code provided by the author. Embedding still uses a link to the original material, so there is no breach of copyright.
- You can use short citations, or parts of other author's work without obtaining permission only in the case of you writing a review, or a news piece, where you inform the public about the existence of the original material. This particular way of using somebody else's work is specified in the copyright act of Slovakia and we need to follow it.

5.3. THE THIRD PRINCIPLE – LISTING THE SOURCE

When using or referencing material from a different author, it is always necessary to list the source where the material is taken from and who the author is. Exceptions may include situations such as your agreement with the author stating that it is not necessary to list the source.

5.4. THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE – ORIGINAL SOURCE HAS HIGHER PRIORITY



If you are placing into your course a material that has already been used by other people online, it is necessary to list the original source. If you feel that a source you are considering to use might not be ethical and does not seem to list the original source, it is better to not use the material at all.

5.5. THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE – PAID ACCESS DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN THAT FURTHER USE IS ALLOWED

If you pay to access some internet content, verify clearly what rights come with your paid access and what are not.

5.6. THE SIXTH PRINCIPLE – THE OWNER OF THE SERVER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTENT

If you breach copyright in your course placed at a server owned by Comenius University, legally the University can be held responsible. This is the reason why the Comenius University administrators for Moodle and MS Teams reserve a right to remove materials from your course that are in breach of copyright.

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