

## George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences

### *Applying Best Practices to Online Instruction*

#### **Background**

Based on an integrative review of best practices in undergraduate education, Chickering and Gamson (1991) defined the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Education, as follows:

1. Good Practice encourages contacts between faculty and students.
2. Good Practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. Good Practice uses active learning techniques.
4. Good Practice gives prompt feedback.
5. Good Practice emphasizes time on task.
6. Good Practice communicates high expectations.
7. Good Practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

In her comprehensive review of learning effectiveness research for online education, Karen Swan (2003) integrates these seven principles with other research guiding the design of web-based instruction and extrapolates six common themes. Her analysis indicates that effective online education should provide:

- Clear goals and expectations for learners.
- Multiple representations of course content.
- Frequent opportunities for active learning.
- Frequent and constructive feedback.
- Flexibility and choice in satisfying course objectives.
- Instructor guidance and support.

From Swan's meta-analysis, we can feel confident that Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles of Good Practice in Education, originally developed specifically for undergraduate education, remain relevant to both online education and adult education in general.

Chickering and Gamson point out that, although the best practices are important and useful individually, when all are present, their effects multiply. Together, they employ six powerful forces in education:

- Activity
- Cooperation
- Diversity
- Expectations
- Interaction
- Responsibility

These six forces are consistent with the common themes from Swan's online learning research and provide a framework for the definition of "essential elements" for GWUMC's online courses. By basing these guidelines in broadly accepted principles, this framework also provides a mechanism for evaluating the quality of GWUMC's online courses. (Note: The Flashlight Online student inventory provides a test bank of questions linked to the Chickering and Gamson principles. See <http://www.tltgroup.org/flashlightonline.htm>).

## Essential Elements

The following “essential elements” have been defined collaboratively by GWUMC’s Distance Education and Technology Committee. The group has agreed that every online course should include all of these elements; however, the manner in which they are implemented will vary based upon the creativity and style of the instructor and the specific requirements of each course.

*Note: These guidelines are intended to guide instructors in the design and development and conduct of individual online courses. Other best practices for online learning include appropriate student orientation, technical infrastructure, and student support services. These issues will be addressed separately.*

### Activity

*Activity refers to practices that promote learners’ active engagement with the learning process. Learning is not possible without learners’ active participation. Active learning requires a) a learning context that stimulates and enables the construction of new knowledge, skills, or attitudes and b) learners’ motivation to engage with that context.*

- ✓ Provide a combination of self-directed, facilitated, and collaborative learning experiences that actively engage students with the learning content and with each other.
- ✓ Promote motivation & engagement by situating learning in relevant, authentic contexts.
- ✓ Encourage critical thinking and the development of higher level skills through inquiry, analysis, synthesis, and reflection.

### Cooperation

*Cooperation refers to practices that promote the sharing of effort, expertise, and resources among learners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes or common goals. Cooperation promotes interdependence and the socialization of students into a community of learning and practice.*

- ✓ Create opportunities for students to contribute to the learning of their classmates.
- ✓ Foster cooperative skills and spirit through collaborative activities.
- ✓ Encourage students to support each other by sharing information, insights, etc.
- ✓ Provide forum(s) for peer networking and off-topic communications.

### Diversity

*Diversity refers to practices that celebrate and support the unique characteristics of learners, including differences in culture, experience, perspectives, skills, and talents. In addition to supporting the individual needs of diverse learners, diversity promotes an appreciation for multiple perspectives and a rich, shared learning experience.*

- ✓ Use diverse teaching strategies and media to appeal to different learning styles.
- ✓ Demonstrate respect for student backgrounds and past experiences, integrating them into the learning process as appropriate.
- ✓ Ensure that all course materials are accessible and usable by all students, including those with disabilities.
- ✓ Provide options, flexibility, and choice to enable students to personalize learning activities.

### Expectations

*Expectations refers to practices that establish, communicate, and assess the achievement of course requirements. Expectations provide a clear, unambiguous, and mutually understood framework for learning.*

- ✓ Communicate clear goals and expectations in writing at the beginning of the semester, including learning objectives, assignment instructions & evaluation criteria, participation requirements, time commitments, and potential consequences.
- ✓ Provide regular updates throughout the semester to clarify expectations.
- ✓ Define and communicate enabling objectives that link lesson/session materials to overall course goals.
- ✓ Establish high standards for academic achievement (e.g., writing standards).
- ✓ Assess student understanding and mastery using tests, written assignments, projects or other strategies that reflect achievement of stated objectives.
- ✓ Provide a clear, intuitive path to learning materials.

### Interaction

*Interaction refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and opinions between and among learners and teachers. Constructive dialogue is an essential element of the learning process. A generally accepted concept of interaction in an online course discriminates between learner-teacher interaction, learner-learner interaction and learner-content interaction.*

- ✓ Communicate regularly with students.
- ✓ Communicate a process for contacting course instructor(s).
- ✓ Establish guidelines for peer to peer communication & collaboration.
- ✓ Explicitly encourage open, honest communications and multiple perspectives.
- ✓ Provide timely, thorough, constructive, incremental feedback.
- ✓ Elicit student feedback about course content and learning activities.

### Responsibility

*Responsibility refers to practices that foster and govern student and instructor accountability for learning. Instructors are responsible for providing a learning environment that enables student success; students are responsible for organizing and monitoring their own learning process and making the effort needed to succeed.*

#### *Student*

- ✓ Emphasize the importance of self-direction (i.e., pacing/ scheduling, participation, and self-assessment).
- ✓ Encourage students to monitor their own progress and request extra help when needed.

#### *Instructor*

- ✓ Establish a positive, safe environment for learning.
- ✓ Structure content hierarchically and facilitate the learning process to enable student achievement of stated objectives.
- ✓ Provide an appropriate balance of meaningful learning activities & assignments.
- ✓ Evaluate, update and revise course materials regularly.
- ✓ Map course content and requirements to the overall curriculum to avoid redundancy and ensure that students have necessary pre-requisite knowledge and experiences.

**References**

- Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, A.F. (1991). *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. Jossey-Bass, Inc., San Francisco, CA.
- Swan, K. (2003). Learning effectiveness: what the research tells us. In Bourne, J. and Moore, H.C., Eds. *Elements of Quality in Online Education*. The Sloan Consortium, Needham, MA.