

## 5 Ways to Support Flexible Learning Models

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The COVID-19 pandemic compelled schools around the world to adopt emergency remote teaching measures, canceling face-to-face classes and moving courses online to allow teaching to continue. This fall, there's no doubt that students and educators are looking forward to getting back into the classroom in some capacity. So, does that mean online learning is going to go away?

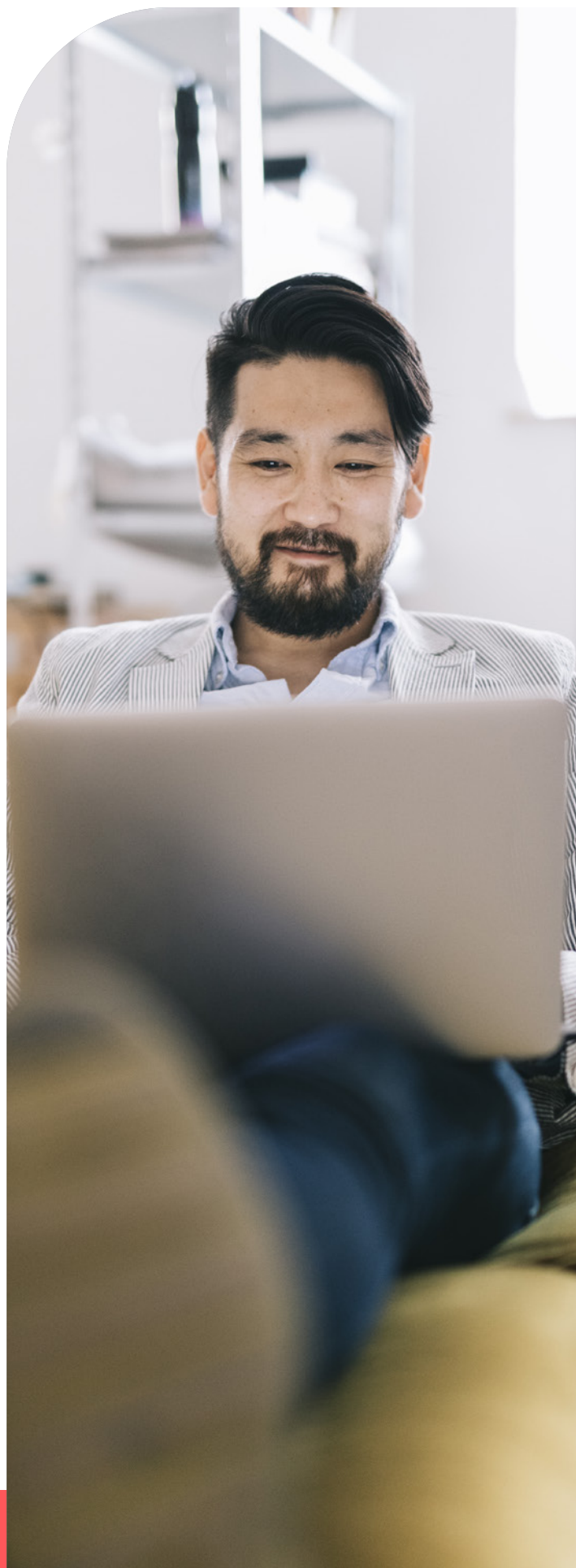
The short answer is no. The pandemic made it clear that as excited as people are to return to labs and lecture halls, institutions must put practices in place now that can protect the quality of learning for all students, no matter the situation

**A flexible response to learning can help colleges and universities optimize the delivery of quality higher education to support equitable learning experiences.** With this model, teaching is no longer limited only to the traditional classroom. Instead, students have more control over how and when they learn—whether they want to attend their classes all in person, all online, or a blend.

Yet whether learning happens in person, online, or both, we still have to ask ourselves: how do we deliver flexible education well and keep students engaged outside the traditional classroom?

**THIS EBOOK OUTLINES FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP SUPPORT FLEXIBLE LEARNING MODELS:**

1. Outline clear course expectations
2. Harness different mediums to drive engagement
3. Encourage open communication
4. Provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration
5. Share feedback with students—and ask for it in return



# 1. Outline Clear Course Expectations

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Although online classes differ from traditional classroom settings in many ways, the need to share clear and concise course expectations with students applies in both.



## **Describe your teaching style.**

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Tell students how you'll be engaging with them. Will you be posting announcements, using email, or monitoring discussion threads? Will you be teaching synchronously, asynchronously, or both?



## **Explain the course environment.**

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Describe how you'll be teaching the course and what the main takeaways will be for your students. Is the course designed with distinct modules? What additional resources will you be providing? Where can they find them?



## **Clarify performance expectations.**

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Incorporate tools such as rubrics, assignment summaries, and exemplars on the course homepage so students can more easily understand what success could look like. What level of reflection and analysis do you expect to see? Should students look for resources beyond the required readings? Is there a particular citation style they should use?

It's important to share information early both on rules that are specific to your class and on relevant college or university policies. Ideally, you want to make this information readily available via FAQs, announcements, and other tools so students can go back and refer to it as needed.

## 2. Harness Different Mediums to Drive Engagement

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Educational technologies today include a variety of features and functions that can help educators keep students involved and on track with their courses, opening doors to create student-centered online classrooms and to power project-based learning.

Consider the roles different elements can play, including:



### **Course calendar**

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Developing an online calendar with assignment due dates and classroom events can give students quick visibility into the work they have coming up. This can help them prioritize tasks and better manage their time, and you can alert them via email or notifications if anything changes.



### **Online simulations and role plays**

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These can complement traditional teaching methods by giving students opportunities to apply what they're learning in real scenarios, further developing important durable, technical, and intellectual skills.



### **Video/multimedia lessons**

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You can bring lessons to life with images, videos, visual effects, and music and have students create assignments that incorporate different mediums to help nurture and showcase their presentation skills.



### **Discussion forums**

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Allow students to form, defend, and reflect on their own positions and opinions. A well-crafted discussion can encourage students to critically analyze ideas, concepts, and philosophies taught in class.

Especially in an online learning environment, it's important to be clear with students about where they can go for technical advice. This could be reaching out to a teaching assistant if they have a course-specific need, or it could be asking support personnel within the institution about larger issues.



## 3. Encourage Open Communication

Keeping in regular contact with students in an online learning environment can help reduce uncertainty and foster a sense of connection.

### **a) Outline Communication Standards**

As part of setting expectations for the course, you'll want to outline how you'll be communicating with students and enabling students to talk among themselves.



#### **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

- **How will students be able to reach you?** Provide your email address. If there's a phone number or social media handles you use, you can share those too.
- **When will you respond to students?** Make sure students know how quickly you'll be responding to inquiries. Should they expect to hear back within 48 hours? Will you be responding to nonurgent issues over the weekend?



#### **COMMUNICATION AMONG STUDENTS**

- **What are the guidelines for communication?** The course outline should include requirements and standards (frequency, length, etc.) for contributing to group projects and discussions.
- **What are the course netiquette rules?** Since online learning may be a new environment for some students, it's important to help them understand what is and isn't socially acceptable.

## **b) Communicate Often with Students**

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Students want to feel connected to what they're learning and to others in the class, even if they're not there in person. Taking a multifaceted approach—leveraging different types of communication throughout the course—can help you bridge any gaps.



### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

This can be an effective tool for sharing changes, due dates, and reminders with the whole class.



### **EMAILS**

You can get in touch with specific students or share important news or updates.



### **AUTOMATED NOTIFICATIONS**

Your institution's learning management system (LMS) may allow you to set up notifications, which can be released automatically based on criteria you define, congratulating them on their progress and giving them nudges where they're needed.

It's also important to consider which form and style of communication works best for your students in given situations. While some students may check their email religiously, for others, an announcement on the course homepage may be where they see important information first.

## **c) Make Yourself Available Through Office Hours**

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For students, office hours can give them valuable opportunities for one-to-one, face-to-face connections—especially in courses where interaction with instructors may otherwise be limited. Notify your students of the day and time (or days and times) you'll be available and how to reach out to you if they need to set up an individual appointment.

Office hours can also help instructors gauge how students are doing with the course content and in new learning environments.

## 4. Provide Opportunities for Interaction and Collaboration

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Student-to-student interaction is a vital part of any course experience. Regardless of the environment, you must integrate opportunities for interaction in a way that enhances and balances the lecture content and other instructional materials:



### **Online seminars**

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Allow students to share personal applications of course concepts, analyze using higher-level thinking, and connect with their peers.



### **Group work**

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Assigning group work can create more opportunities for students to interact with each other. Group work can push students to problem solve together in order to plan and complete assignments.



### **Informal communication**

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Creating spaces for students to have informal communication with peers also creates a sense of community. If you already have discussion forums dedicated to course activities, could you set one up for students to use to ask questions and to request feedback from their classmates?

## 5. Share Feedback with Students—and Ask for It in Return

### Providing Feedback for Students

Providing feedback to students is integral to online and in-person instruction, as it helps give students a clear sense of both what they're doing well and where they could potentially improve. In designing an online course, you need to think carefully about how students will be receiving feedback in a way that supports their learning:



#### **SYNCHRONOUS FEEDBACK SESSIONS**

You can schedule feedback sessions with individual students to share what went well with an assignment, where there were gaps, and future ideas for development. This is particularly useful for projects that are done in phases or include multiple elements.



#### **AUDIO AND VIDEO FEEDBACK**

If students submitted a recording of themselves delivering a presentation, as an example, you could provide audio or video feedback in turn that's tied to specific moments.



#### **WRITTEN FEEDBACK**

You can give specific feedback on submissions or via email that acknowledges both successes and opportunities on a personal level. You can also add a note in discussion forums to let students know you appreciate the effort they put into sharing their thoughts.

Rubrics can also be a great tool in helping students clearly understand how they performed on assignments or in relation to course expectations. Using this feature and adding a personal touch—whether by connecting with students or adding a unique note—can help your feedback stand out and motivate students.



## Getting Feedback from Students

Not only is it important to give constant feedback to your students, but it's also important that students share their thoughts with you. This feedback loop involves you asking students for their opinion about elements of the course. Are they getting the information and support they need? Is there anything you discussed that they want to know more about? You can gather opinions in a variety of ways, including through surveys or discussion forums, and use the insights to modify instruction or course content to better support student success.






## Ready to talk to an expert?

**Brightspace Core** combines the powerful tools, services, and support you need in order to deliver a best-in-class teaching and learning experience for faculty and students—all in one convenient package.

# About D2L

D2L has a personal stake in educational equity. For over 20 years, D2L has worked to transform the way the world learns, with the belief that all learners should have access to the best possible learning opportunities and experiences.

D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is a leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It's easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver real results. Brightspace is used by learners in K-12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000. Learn more about D2L for schools, higher education, and businesses at [D2L.com](https://D2L.com).

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