

# The eLearning Leader's Toolkit for Evaluating Online Teaching

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## Abstract

College and university administrators who are tasked with leading distance-education programs can rely on several strengths: program and curriculum development expertise, knowledge of trends and needs among employers, budgeting skills, and experience in navigating the various regulations and accreditation requirements for new programs. Many of us in leadership positions have not, however, taught online courses ourselves, having left the classroom to become administrators before the “wave” of online teaching reached our institutions.

Although some department chairs and deans have taught online courses themselves (and thus have a feel for the challenges and flow of online teaching), many more administrators conducted their teaching careers exclusively in the face-to-face classroom. Especially for those administrators who moved away from teaching in the early 2000s, they are likely not to have developed or taught courses in a mode other than face-to-face. This chapter is designed to provide eLearning leaders three sets of tools for creating, implementing, and operating an evaluation program for online teaching at your campus.

## Decision Making Guidance

This chapter will help you make decisions about:

- what criteria should be used in evaluating online-teaching performance,
- who should be involved in the online-teaching observation itself,
- when (and for how long) the observation of online teaching should take place,
- what biases should be designed out of the evaluation process, and
- how to use evaluation measures to promote and re-hire the best online faculty members.

## What You Need to Know

Starting in the late 1990s, distance-education transformed into eLearning. This has meant significant shifts for campus leaders and students alike in three areas. Let's look at how things used to be. First, "traditional" distance education provided access to learning for students who were geographically distant from our campuses, but they faced obstacles to their learning, such as having to watch a cable-access TV channel at a particular time in order to see course lectures, or needing to communicate with their professors via slow or clunky mechanisms like using the postal service or attending scheduled phone calls. Second, traditional distance learning programs were modeled on the best practices from the face-to-face classroom, so that students and instructors often relied on lecture and recall as the primary ways to share information and measure student progress. Third, traditional distance learning was predicated on the assumption that students would be, for the most part, self-directed and independent learners. They had to be: there was little interaction with the instructor and with other students designed into the model.

Fast forward to today, where online courses allow students to be both geographically and temporally different from our institutions and instructors. Students need not be available for learning in the same place or at the same time as we are. We also now have a robust body of research demonstrating that best practices for the face-to-face classroom are different from best practices for asynchronous eLearning. There are even entire scholarly journals (e.g., the *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, JIOL*) and professional organizations (e.g., the Professional and Organizational Development [POD] Network) dedicated to nothing but the best practices in online learning. We are no longer tied to lecture and recall as the teaching model. Finally, these days, we expect that every class, no matter whether it's being offered face-to-face or online, has some elements for collaboration and interaction between students and the materials, students and classmates, and students and instructors.

### ***Why We Aren't Observing and Evaluating Much Online Teaching Now***

The majority of instructors in higher education in North America today teach at least one course in an online or hybrid mode (Allen, et al., 2012). In fact, more than ten percent of the sections we offer in colleges and universities are now online courses, attended by nearly a third of all students (Allen et al., 2016, p. 43). One of the challenges facing eLearning leaders is that the people on whom we rely to evaluate the teaching happening in our eLearning courses are often ill prepared to perform those evaluations—or they simply don't. Based on conversations at more than fifty colleges and universities across North America, a significant number of instructors have never had their online teaching evaluated in any summative way (Buller, 2012). Typically, for instructors teaching online, either they are observed only in their face-to-face courses, they are never observed by peers or supervisors, or—the most common scenario—their online teaching is assessed based solely on student end-of-course ratings. Why might our instructors who teach online courses receive poor (or no) scrutiny of their teaching when it takes place online?

Think for a minute about the last time you taught. Most administrators' teaching careers before they became campus leaders didn't include teaching in modes outside of the face-to-face classroom (McCarthy & Samors, 2009). This is changing slowly, as newer administrators with online-teaching or teaching-with-technology experience are joining our ranks. Perhaps you're one of them.

In any case, you probably know at least one administrator at your institution who fits the "never taught online" description, and that's why this chapter is designed to give you the skills to

be a kind of “secret evangelist” for the best practices in evaluating online teaching. After reading this chapter, you will be able to define a set of seven measurable and actionable online-teaching practices; create a rubric-based system of observation and evaluation for teaching in online courses; link the outputs of your online-teaching observations to your institution’s existing promotion, tenure, and retention measures; and train other leaders on your campus to adopt and implement the online-teaching evaluation system outlined in this chapter.

## What You Can Do

College and university administrators who are tasked with leading eLearning programs can rely on several strengths: we have program and curriculum development expertise, knowledge of trends and needs among employers, budgeting skills, and experience in navigating the various regulations and accreditation requirements for our programs. We can add three “toolkits” for creating, implementing, and operating an evaluation program for online teaching at our institutions.

*Toolkit 1: Creating the Process.* There are purposes for evaluating online teaching that are largely apolitical: we evaluate our online teaching practices so that we can improve our teaching methods, retain students, and best support students in accomplishing their educational goals. Student ratings, self-evaluations, and peer evaluations—especially informal ones—fall into this category.

Conversely, when administrators and their proxies observe and evaluate online teaching, we typically do so in order to determine whether the instructor is re-hired for the following semester (in the case of contingent faculty) or whether the instructor progresses through the promotion-and-tenure process (for tenure-line faculty).

Because the purpose of administrative review is so narrowly conceived, many institutions have already created or adopted an administrator-observation instrument that is separate from peer-evaluation and student-rating instruments. Administrative evaluators for face-to-face courses seldom receive (or need) guidance about

- determining the people with whom it is appropriate to conduct the review session,
- differentiating between teaching behaviors and course materials, and
- determining the length of the observation period.

The existence of separate administrator-observation instruments—however open-ended—is an opportunity for opening the conversation about what behaviors constitute good teaching practices, what evidence of those behaviors can be observed, and how those behaviors can be quantified and evaluated (rather than merely noted as existing or not).

*Toolkit 2: Implementing the Procedure.* Before we can create instruments to evaluate teaching behaviors toward retention and promotion, we must confront several myths about the observable qualities of good teaching. The administrative-observation instruments developed for face-to-face teaching typically share some common observational biases, which are invisible until we start thinking about shifting the modality of teaching from face-to-face to online. We will uncover six biases that may favor face-to-face instructional methods, and one bias that favors online teaching methods.

*Toolkit 3: Operating the Program.* Instead of looking for specific behaviors or affective elements of the instructor (such as “speaks clearly” or “maintains the interest of students”), administrative observers can find modality-neutral, measurable evaluation criteria by focusing on the effects of instructor behavior. For example, “the instructor communicates in a way that students respond to throughout the range of observation.” By observing the behaviors of instructors for what those behaviors elicit from the learners, administrative evaluators can make yes-no determinations and further assign measurable values to the behaviors.

### ***Toolkit 1: Creating the Process***

Especially when administrative observation of teaching occurs for the purpose of determining whether to re-hire or promote an instructor, the overarching goal is to make the observation process as standardized as possible: to observe each instructor under conditions as similar as possible to those used to observe his or her peers and to evaluate instructors using a common set of criteria. It is tempting to create a table of equivalences between face-to-face and online course delivery. If one observes 90 minutes of a face-to-face course, where (and to what extent) should one look in an online course environment to see the same amount of teaching happening?

Part of the confusion about observing face-to-face and online versions of the same course has to do with the visibility of the content and behaviors observed. For a face-to-face class, we do not typically come to the instructor’s office hours to observe one-on-one interactions with students, nor do we review samples of the instructor’s class notes or e-mails to students.

We have access to all of these elements, and often more, in online courses. We can see the course syllabus, lecture content and multimedia for every unit, students’ posts to the discussion forums, student assignments and instructor feedback on them, as well as the instructor’s e-gradebook.

Because of these differences in visibility and access between face-to-face and online courses, we should think of what actions administrators can take that other reviewers cannot. For example, a department chair can

- e-mail current students to follow-up on the observation;
- look up past-performance data on current students’ previous courses;
- compare observation data from the instructor’s previous offerings;
- recommend (and often enforce) instructor remediation actions for noted challenges; and
- provide incentives for improved teaching practices, retention, and student satisfaction.

All of these actions take place outside of the observation itself, and administrative observers are in a unique position to be able to integrate the observation of online teaching practices into an overall program of feedback to the instructor. Thus, when administrators are the observers, we should employ the process that follows.

Instead of looking for affective instructor behaviors (such as “speaks clearly” or “maintains the interest of students”), we can use modality-neutral, measurable criteria for evaluation by focusing on the effects of those instructor behaviors. For example, “the instructor communicates in a way that students respond to throughout the range of observation.” By observing instructors for what their behaviors elicit from the learners, we can assign measurable values to the behaviors. In their seminal article, “Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate

Education,” Chickering and Gamson (1987) analyzed a wealth of research on good teaching in colleges and universities. They revealed seven core principles of effective teaching practice that are themselves modality-independent:

1. Encourage student-faculty contact.
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. Use active learning techniques.
4. Give prompt feedback.
5. Emphasize time-on-task.
6. Communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

By seeking instructor behaviors that help to meet each of these core areas, administrative observers can tailor their observations to the tools and methods being used, regardless of the course-offering modality. For online courses, especially, focusing on Chickering and Gamson’s principles allows administrators who may not have taught online themselves to look for evidence of effective teaching interactions throughout the online environment: everything that is not an interaction can be seen as a piece of content.

To answer an earlier question, there is no online equivalent to a 90-minute face-to-face observation. Time and place are the “givens” of face-to-face observation. Online givens are not time or location (both vary), but the online environment itself. To create the process for observing online courses, we should agree on five key factors.

*1. Definition of Teaching Practices.* There are many analogues to face-to-face teaching practices that may not be considered “teaching” for the online course. Face-to-face lecturing is a key teaching practice. Videos and lecture notes in online courses are part of the course media, and are not themselves direct evidence of teaching behaviors—especially if the person who developed the lecture notes or videos is not the person facilitating the class.

One strategy for making clear what counts as a teaching practice in an online course is to examine those elements that lead directly to interaction among the students and/or instructor. For example, a set of lecture notes that is presented as a single web page, and which presents information—in the manner of a textbook or article—is part of the course design, and would not be considered in an administrative observation of the online course. Likewise, videos, audio podcasts, and the like are also as part of an online course’s materials, and do not “count” as observable teaching behaviors. However, if an instructor responds to student questions in an online-course discussion by posting a mini-lecture or video to explain a concept, that certainly “counts” as an observed teaching behavior, because the content is created or shared as a result of interaction between the learner and the instructor.

Agreement on which elements of the online course represent teaching practices is often the most contentious discussion on a campus, since many elements may be considered either part of the course design or teaching practices, depending on their structure and function, as seen in the example of lecture content above. Create a core agreement that identifies elements of online courses

- that are *always* counted as teaching practices (e.g., discussion forums, feedback on student assignments);

- that *may* be counted as teaching practices, depending on structure and interactivity (e.g., spontaneous “mini lectures,” news/announcement items); and
- that are *never* counted as teaching practices (e.g., pre-constructed lecture content, assignment directions, content created by third parties like textbook publishers).

The overall question to apply is one of information presentation versus interaction. As a final caveat, items that were created by a person other than the course instructor should never be counted toward administrative observation of online courses. This leads to the second area needing agreement: communication.

2. *Communication between Observer and Observed.* Prior to observing face-to-face teaching, we let instructors know that they will be observed on a given day and time. Perhaps we ask for the syllabus or any handouts. There is little communication between us and instructors during the actual observation.

For online courses, we must still notify the instructor that observation will take place. Instructors should share where they want us to focus, and what is unique about the instruction, especially if there are interactions that go beyond the usual places where interaction occurs. Clarifying and directional questions are often beneficial during the online observation. For example, we may want to see supplemental content that is released to students only after they accomplish various course tasks (and which we cannot unlock). This brings up the next area where agreement is needed: the extent of the observation.

3. *Scope of the Observation.* Instructors perform teaching actions outside of formal instruction. Both face-to-face and online instructors engage in student consultations via office hours, e-mail, and telephone calls. Face-to-face, such contact, although it definitely meets the definition of “teaching,” is not counted toward administrative observation because it is not readily visible and measurable to observers.

Online, these interactions may or may not be visible, depending on our institution’s technological setup. Where the learning management system (LMS) includes real-time text chat, faculty “office hours” may be stored in logs accessible to us as observers. Many instructors have “Q&A” forums in their online discussions that are intended for general questions about the course.

So, where may we look? Face-to-face, the boundary is the classroom itself. Interactions that take place outside the classroom, including office-hour consultations, phone calls, and e-mail messages, are not counted toward our observations. Consider excluding those same types of outside-of-formal-instruction communications from the observation and evaluation process for online teaching, as well.

A last word about scope: the best practice is to allow administrative observers student-level access to online courses, unless there is a compelling reason for access to an instructor-only area of the course. Agreement on this point, and a process for making the request to see instructor-access parts of a course, are best made in advance of the observation. Such agreement helps to keep the focus of the observation on the interactions accessible to students.

4. *Duration of the Observation.* We typically observe one face-to-face class meeting: 50 to 90 minutes watching the class unfold in real time. Our time spent observing the online environment does not correlate directly to that face-to-face class covering the same scope of ideas and content.

First, conduct observations after the course is completed, so that there will be a rich set of interactions to evaluate. If observations take place early in the course, there may not yet be a lot of teaching behaviors in evidence.

We should allow access to the online course environment over a set period of days, and to communicate time-spent expectations up front (e.g., spend no more than two total hours observing). This helps observers to know how much attention and detail is required for completing a thorough observation, allows us to focus on the must-observe areas of the course environment, and offers an opportunity to look at other areas of the course environment to determine whether they contain evidence of interaction.

*5. Assistance Available to the Observer.* Face-to-face observation requires little technical skill. We arrive at the classroom and take notes about the class. For online courses, administrative observers may not be skilled at navigating the online course environment or may need technical help in observing various elements in the online course. Agreement about the availability, extent, and role of technical staff is needed prior to the observation.

If we require guides who will “drive” during the online observation process, first determine from what area(s) of the institution such technical assistants should come. For instance, tenure and promotion observations may be facilitated by staff members from the teaching-and-learning center, who should draw a “bright line” about answering only process-related questions, leaving the domain of “what to observe” squarely in the hands of the administrative observers.

Further, define the role of the technical assistant. The continuum of assistance can range from fully-embedded (where the assistant is at the keyboard all the time, and takes direction from the administrative observer) to consultative (where the administrative observer is at the computer and the assistant offers verbal help) to on-call (where the assistant is not initially involved in the observation, and is brought in only if the observer requests help).

Any assistance offered must be facilitative and not evaluative. For instance, a technical assistant may show an evaluator an online course’s discussion forums and may mention that the instructor appears to be responding at the rate of about one message per ten student messages. The assistant should not, however, provide evaluative or comparative advice during the observation, such as saying that a good benchmark for instructor postings is to post between ten and twenty percent of the total number of messages in online discussions. This can be challenging for assistants who are, outside of the observation setting, resources for the institution on precisely these kinds of issues. In institutions where teaching-center staff members train administrators in the process of observing online courses, it is a good practice to source the pool of technical assistants from another campus unit, such as the information-technology area, to avoid potential conflicts regarding who is providing the evaluative response in an observation.

## ***Toolkit 2: Implementing the Procedure***

To assist us in implementing our evaluations of online teaching behaviors toward retention and promotion, we must confront several myths about the observable qualities of good teaching. The administrative-observation procedures and instruments developed for face-to-face teaching typically share some common observational biases, which are invisible until we start thinking about shifting the modality of teaching from face-to-face to online.

*Bias 1: Good teaching is embodied.* Based on our experiences teaching face-to-face, we can worry that, online, “students can’t see the professor or hear his voice:” a bias that body language and voice inflection are integral to effective teaching. While it is true that varied voice inflection and open body language help to keep face-to-face learners engaged (Betts, 2013), such indicators are not the only means of demonstrating instructor involvement.

Likewise, evaluators may observe online video content in the same way we would observe a face-to-face lecture. We may be swayed by professional-style, longer lecture-style videos and disappointed by brief “bare bones” videos of instructors discussing course concepts. Flashy presentation skills can mask a lack of instructor subject knowledge, and chunking of video content is an established best practice for course-related multimedia regardless of the course-offering modality.

By expanding beyond the bias, we see that communication between the instructor and the learners is the key measurement, especially with regard to its frequency, nature, and quality. Think of all of the signals that face-to-face instructors send, and look for similar signals in online courses, such as the frequency of instructor discussion posts and the regularity of follow-up communication with learners about posted video content.

*Bias 2: Good teaching is intuitive.* The evaluation of face-to-face teaching is often based on the subjective feelings of the administrative observer. Even where there are score sheets, rubrics, or other observation instruments, the questions asked sometimes do not lend themselves to quantifiable responses. Using “I know it when I see it” as an observation criterion exposes a bias for the observer’s own learning preferences. Administrators who themselves learned best in lecture courses will rate lecturers as more competent teachers than instructors who favor other teaching practices.

The impact of the bias is magnified when observing online courses: A department chair’s concern that “the students can’t see the professor or hear his voice” is also a coded way of saying that he can’t see the professor or hear his voice, either. To expand beyond this bias, shift your thinking away from charismatic traits (e.g., ability to hold students’ attention, strong classroom “presence”) and toward their support-behavior analogues (e.g., providing multiple ways for students to consume course content, reaching out to every student with a personal communication at least once per unit).

*Bias 3: Good teaching happens in real time.* There is a strong bias toward synchronicity as a hallmark of effective teaching. While online teaching can happen in real time, most eLearning is asynchronous: any time, any place. Real-time conversations allow instructors and students to have immediate feedback, but in face-to-face classrooms, it is often the instructor and a small core of students—between five and ten students, regardless of class size—who are engaged in the class discussion at any given time (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Many students remain silent throughout the entire class.

We can move beyond this bias by focusing on the instructor’s ability to engage students through ad-hoc interactions. In fact, engaging one-on-one with learners asynchronously is a uniquely online teaching behavior. Look for evidence of teaching practices that invite learners and instructors to share and shape the conversation through discussions, collaborative group work, and the like.

*Bias 4: Good teaching appears effortless.* Remember the very first time you taught? Many of us first entered the classroom with a legal pad filled with information and notes, or with a PowerPoint presentation bristling with notations and resource links—reminders of the things we did not want to forget to talk about with the class. Over time, that legal pad got put aside in favor of index cards with a few bullet points to remember. Some of us now rely solely on our experience and memory in order to facilitate each face-to-face class session.

Theatricality, or the appearance of effortless, is the most common mental shortcut that we observers use to stand in for “effectiveness” in face-to-face teaching. We are often biased toward the faculty member who can “wing it” from memory. In eLearning, however, instructors are brought back to “legal-pad mode:” much of what instructors typically speak and perform in face-to-face classes ends up as documentation in the online environment—and is thus not observed as an online teaching practice.

Further complicating this bias is the situation that in online courses, the people who design the course outline, lecture content, assessments, videos, and initial discussion prompts may not be the people teaching the course. To the biased eye, this suggests that all that is needed to teach online is a warm body, one who can occasionally answer student questions, grade the tests and quizzes, and report on student achievement at the end of the course.

To work against the sage-on-the-stage bias, avoid confusing information delivery with teaching behaviors. Define ahead of time what behaviors are to be evaluated as online teaching practices. One of the most common forms of face-to-face information sharing, even today, is lecturing. In an online environment, lecture content is information delivery, akin to the textbook readings in a face-to-face course: it’s a piece of media to be consumed by the learners in their own time, rather than an interaction to be shared with the class. While it is important that media elements in online courses be expertly created, it is the delivery of the online course—the “teaching”—that is key to administrative reviews conducted for staffing and promotion decisions.

*Bias 5: Quantity Bias.* There is one factor in administrative evaluation of online teaching that is not typically encountered in observation of face-to-face classes, and which deserves separate consideration: quantity bias. Especially for those of us who have not taught online ourselves, it can be tempting to equate “more things” with greater quality of the online course experience for students—such as the amount of content in the online course, the amount of multimedia used in the course, or the number of communications from the instructor.

To avoid quantity bias, focus exclusively on the interactions among the students and instructor. It is safest to evaluate only the “spontaneous” aspects of the course and not the “canned” materials at all. Instructors might not have authored the content of the course and might have inherited the structural aspects of the course, too. By focusing on just the interactions between students and instructor, as well as on the instructor’s facilitation of student-to-student interactions, evaluators can get a true sense of how well online courses are being taught. This points to two take-away lessons for implementing the observation and evaluation process.

First, consider student interaction load. Estimate the amount of effort being asked of learners in the unit or week under evaluation. In a 3-credit course during a 15-week semester, the total effort asked of students typically ranges between 6 and 10 hours, including in- and out-of-class work (SACS COC, 2012). Give higher evaluative credit to instructors who interact more often with students as part of the student workload. For example, instructors may ask students to

report on assignment progress, provide feedback on collaborative student work, and take an active part in guiding course discussion threads.

Second, look for a balance of planned and just-in-time communication. Provide higher ratings to online courses where the instructor posts regular communications, such as unit introductions, milestone-achievement messages, and roundup/review messages. In addition, look for just-in-time communications that respond to student requests for assistance and provide praise and correction for individual students. It is possible to have an entire online course “in the can” and post only pre-written messages—the equivalent of the same-lectures-every-semester professor who reads from fifteen-year-old notes. Evaluate the quality of instructor feedback on student work using Chickering and Gamson’s principles (e.g., the instructor communicates high expectations, gives prompt and meaningful feedback, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning).

Especially in online courses, it can be tempting to equate greater quantities of interaction with better course experiences. Be sure to take into account the number of students in the course when evaluating the number of instances of interaction seen in the online course environment, as well.

### ***Toolkit 3: Operating the Program***

By categorizing elements of online courses as either content or interactions, we can make more fine-grained determinations about which parts of online courses are actually examples of teaching behaviors. Table 1 illustrates one way to match teaching principles against commonly-observed teaching behaviors in online courses.

**Table 1.** Online Teaching Behaviors that Exemplify Teaching Principles

<b>Teaching Principle</b>	<b>Common Online Teaching Behaviors</b>
Encourage student-faculty contact.	Set regular online “office hours.” Adhere to a maximum response time for communications. Facilitate regular course discussions. Post course news updates on a regular basis.
Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.	Assign group or dyad projects. Require discussion responses to peers. Offer encouragement via the public discussion forum, and criticism in private grade-tool feedback.
Use active learning techniques.	Ask students to summarize and propose next steps. Assign “butts out of seats” tasks away from the keyboard (e.g., interview experts); ask students to report back to the class. Have students create and post study guides.
Give prompt feedback.	Respond to each student at least once per graded discussion topic. Keep to turn-around time expectations for instructor grading. Give students encouragement, reflection, and correction feedback.
Emphasize time-on-task.	Give students estimates of how long assignments will take. Communicate progress of the whole class toward week/unit goals. Provide individual-progress milestones for graded work.
Communicate high	Give preview, status, and review communications.

expectations.	Provide samples of good practice on assignments & discussion. Spotlight students who do good work or improve their efforts.
Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.	Provide multiple ways for students to respond to assignments (e.g., write an essay, record an audio response, create a video). Allow students to respond to discussions using a variety of media. Present materials to allow for a range of possible learning paths.

*Five Places to Look.* Consistent instructor presence is one of the most important components of online teaching practice, helping students feel less isolated and more supported in their learning. In fact, instructor presence supports each of Chickering and Gamson’s seven principles. In online instruction, where another course or even institution is just a click away, instructor presence goes a long way toward student retention, academic success, and building a sense of community.

Piña and Bohn (2014) identify specific behaviors unique to the online environment that administrators perceive as effective indicators of teaching quality.

Our desire was to identify a set of criteria that would yield objective data easily examined by supervisors and peers during an online course observation and serve as a balance to the more subjective data gathered from student surveys. This study focused upon quantitative measures of instructor actions and behaviors that could be readily observed in the online course and/or collected using the reporting tools of the learning management system:

- Has the instructor logged in at least an average of every other day?
- Has the instructor posted a biography of at least a paragraph, in addition to contact info?
- Has the instructor posted announcements at least weekly?
- Is there evidence that the instructor answers student inquiries in two days or less?
- Does the instructor participate in discussion forums where appropriate?
- Does the instructor provide feedback on assignments?

Piña and Bohn’s categorizations provide us with criteria to apply across our evaluation programs. This leads us to the last part of the evaluation program: where to look to find evidence of teaching behaviors. There are five places to look in any LMS to see, count, measure, and assess the interactions of online teaching.

*News/Announcements.* Every LMS has a feature that allows instructors to post messages that display when learners enter the course. In evaluating instructors, look for frequent, brief messages posted throughout each unit, rather than few lengthy posts. Quality instructors focus their news items on students’ progress through the course, include reminders to keep students on task, and include feedback to demonstrate that they are listening to student needs. Advanced-level online instructors create announcements that are audience-specific (e.g., students who earned passing scores see a different announcement than students who need remediation) and that use the personalization features of the LMS (e.g., using “replace strings” to address students by name).

*Grades.* Unlike in face-to-face evaluation, observers can have access to instructors' gradebook feedback. Look for timely feedback (compare actual turn-around time to promised turn-around), both numerical and text-based feedback, feedback that focuses on learner skills and opportunities for improvement, and use of rubrics to guide feedback and minimize grading inconsistency. Advanced online instructors will send back a separate file to students with comments and feedback (often a marked-up version of the student's own submission file), and they will also personalize feedback as much as possible.

*Dropbox.* Every LMS has a tool that allows students to send and receive files with their instructors. Look in the dropbox for timely feedback (measured against promised limits) that refers to student expectations. Like with grade-tool feedback, look for instructors to accept diversity of learner responses within the limits of the subject, and for rubric use in providing feedback. Advanced online instructors provide dropbox feedback with an active-learning focus on what student can do with their performance and learning, and they also personalize feedback where possible.

*Discussions.* The heart of measurable teaching behaviors in most online courses is the asynchronous discussion tool. Competent online instructors are active in the conversation (a good rule of thumb is to look for activity on one more day per week than students are required to participate), challenge their learners to develop the conversation beyond the initial prompt, and provide quality responses to learners (responding to each student in a high-quality way at least once per unit). Good online instructors post messages within or near the "golden ratio" of 10-15% of the total messages posted by the class (cf. Cranney et al., 2011 and Mandernach et al., 2006). Advanced online instructors adopt a discussion stance of guiding student examination, and they provide clear expectations for student behavior and for their own behavior, as well.

*Surveys.* Most LMSes have tools that allow instructors to create anonymous surveys to solicit formative feedback from their students. The surveys themselves may not be evidence of online teaching behaviors; they can be part of the pre-loaded content in online courses. Competent online instructors tell their students that they wish to receive formative feedback throughout the course (at least at mid-term), act on student responses, monitor feedback from students, and feed-forward by making changes to their teaching in response to student needs and requests. Observers should look for advanced behaviors such as sharing all responses received and instructors who adapt the rules and/or pace of the course in response to ongoing learner feedback.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these toolkits helps eLearning leaders to define the measurable teaching behaviors that can be observed in online courses. By treating the evaluation of online course content and the evaluation of online teaching separately, we can ensure that we are assigning praise and corrective feedback to the right people—that we are promoting faculty members along the promotion and tenure line and asking adjunct faculty members to teach again for us, based on measurable and defensible criteria. Especially because evaluation by administrators counts

toward job-related decisions, it is imperative that we are consistent and balanced in observing and evaluating our instructors regardless of the mode in which they teach for our institutions.

By addressing potential biases, creating processes for observation and evaluation of online teaching, and teaching campus leaders where and how to look for evidence of good teaching in the online environment, we create consistency. On many campuses, the greater detail available to evaluators of online courses leads them to re-examine their methods, instruments, and level of detail for face-to-face observations, as well. As a final thought exercise, call to mind the people at your institution who are tasked with administrative observations and evaluations for employment purposes. Are they well prepared to evaluate online teaching? If not, who can help them to get the core skills for observing and evaluating online teaching behaviors? Those people are your core change agents; share Toolkits 1, 2, and 3 with them, and begin bringing your online-teaching evaluation processes into the life cycle of your whole institution's evaluation efforts.

## For More Information

The administrative evaluation of online teaching is still a relatively new field. To keep up with the latest research in the field, eLearning leaders should read the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/>. Key recent resources in the field include

- *Effective Evaluation of Teaching: A Guide for Faculty and Administrators*: this includes several chapters on evaluating online teaching (see Drouin, 2012 and Ismail, Buskist, & Groccia, 2012).
- *Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices* (Tobin, Mandernach, & Taylor, 2015).
- The *Faculty Development* web site at the John A. Dutton e-Education Institute at Penn State University (<http://facdev.e-education.psu.edu/>) contains many resources such as the peer review of online teaching rubric/process and a list of faculty online-teaching competencies.

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