Best Practices in Online Course Seat Time

March 2020

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The following report summarizes strategies that institutions offering online courses can use to ensure students' "seat time" or "time-on-task" allows for regular and meaningful engagement with course materials. The report includes a sample of relevant seat time formulas and calculation methods of "seat time" or "time-on-task."

TIME IN SEAT OVERVIEW

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEAT TIME

The literature on education widely recognizes the importance of active engagement in the learning process. Whether described in terms of seat time or the related concept of time on task, various researchers have noted same core principle. As summarized in the foundational "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, "time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task."[1]

CALCULATING SEAT TIME/TIME ON TASK

While the importance of time investment is well established, higher education institutions offering distance education have recognized that understanding "how time 'works' in online courses can be a challenge for instructors."[2] Tasks that are straightforward in an in-person environment, such as calculating attendance or ensuring that students engage with course materials on a regular basis, can be comparatively complicated online. Moreover, determining "total time on task expected of students" and calculating the "time students will need to complete course work" may be challenging for instructors.[3]

Broad guidance is that instructors should account for all activities that are included in the course when making a seat time estimate. Moreover, as outlined by the University of Kentucky Online, instructors "developing and/or teaching the online course should calculate how much time a student doing satisfactory work would take to complete the work of the course, including:

- Reading course presentations/"lectures"
- Reading other materials
- Participation in online discussions
- Doing research
- Writing papers or other assignments
- Completing all other assignments (e.g. projects)."[4]

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[1] Chickering, Arthur and Zelda Gamson. "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." *AAHE Bulletin* (March 1987). P. 4.
https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282491.pdf

[2] "Time on Task." Rochester Institute of Technology.
https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/tls/course-design/online-courses/time-task

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Time on Task: How Long Will it Take?" University of Kentucky Online.
https://www.uky.edu/elearning/time-task

Still, the challenge of developing an understanding of how long "a student doing satisfactory work" should take to complete those tasks persists. To calculate the time a student may need to engage with course material and related tasks, a range of higher education institutions have adopted resources that the Innovative Learning Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) first created in 2015, as well as guidelines developed by the New York State Education Department. RIT recommends applying "time on task" rather than "seat time" as this unit is more easily conceptualized in online courses. Regardless, faculty is advised that "total time on task is the same for online and on-campus courses of equal length."[5]

To estimate the time required for various tasks, RIT directs faculty members to three methods of conceptualizing student time investment. These methods are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Calculating Time Requirements for Student Tasks

Method	Description
Experiential	Faculty can use their experience to estimate the time and effort needed by the typical student to engage successfully in each of the learning activities in a particular field, course, or program.
Proxy	The instructor… calculates how much time it takes them to complete a given task, and this figure is then multiplied by some factor. Multiplying by three to four times is common.
Survey	Surveying students after they have completed a given task and use this to estimate how long it will take the next group of students to complete that task.

Source: Adapted largely verbatim from RIT

To assist with these sometime cumbersome estimates, many higher education institutions have gone beyond this type of guidance and have created toolkits to facilitate the conversion of tangible actions into meaningful assertions of time on task. For example, a fairly simple seat time formula offered by University of California Irvine Extension is shown on the following page in Figure 2. A more elaborate calculator available through the Rice University Center for Teaching Excellence is shown in Figure 3.

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[5] Starenko, Michael. "Online Course Design: Time on Task V2.0." Rochester Institute of Technology.(December 2015). https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/tls/sites/rit.edu.academicaffairs.tls/files/docs/RIT_Time%20on%20Task%20In%20Online%20Courses_v2.0.pdf

Figure 2: UC Irvine Task Time Estimates

Activity	Seat Time Formula
Synchronous lectures	1 hour seat time = 1 hour activity
Synchronous discussions	1 hour seat time = 1 hour activity
Synchronous group activities	1 hour seat time = 1 hour activity
Original "text lecture" (not textbook)	1 hour seat time = 1 hour reading
Required recorded lectures to be viewed asynchronously	1 hour seat time = 1 hour activity
Asynchronous discussions or small group activity	1 hour seat time = the reading of 5 other student posts + 1 completion of 1 post in response to the prompt + the response to 1 other student's post
Interactive web-based lab simulations	1 hour seat time = the amount of time it will take an average student (a student falling in the middle 40-80% of performance) to complete
Proctored online assessments	1 hour seat time = 1 hour activity

Source: University of California Irvine Extension[6]

Figure 3: Rice University Course Workload Estimator

Source: Rice University Center for Teaching Excellence[7]

STRATEGIES TO ENSURE SEAT TIME/TIME-ON-TASK

ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN REGULAR DEADLINES

The lesson that online courses need deadlines was established early in the United States' experience with online learning. As far back as 2000, Mary Dereshiwsky and Eugene Moan noted in *Education at a Distance* that strict enforcement of periodic due dates "encourage[s] students to remain actively engaged in the course," and serves as a hedge against procrastination or the temptation to manufacture excuses."[8] However, Dereshiwsky and Moan are far from the only scholars who have made the connection between deadlines and on-task time. A similar observation was made by Charles Graham et. al. in *The Technology Source* when they noted "regularly-distributed deadlines encourage students to spend time on tasks and help students with busy schedules avoid procrastination."[9]

Similarly, of the eight different methods for "emphasizing time on task in online courses" identified by Eugenia Conway, three relate to the need for strong deadlines[10]:

- Provide specific deadlines that require students to participate in the class on a regular basis

- Provide intermediate milestones for projects

- Emphasize the importance of regular work, steady application, sound self-pacing, and scheduling

- Structure the course to spread deadline throughout the semester rather than clustering them at one or two points

- Use asynchronous conferencing to improve student time on task

- Monitor student discussion to make sure they remain on topic

- Make sure course resources are easily accessible

- If you haven't heard from a student, find out why. It is all too easy to fall behind in an online course.

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[8] Dereshiwsky, Mary and Eugene Moan. "Good Connections: Strategies to Maximize Student Engagement." *Education at a Distance.* Vol. 14 no. 11. November 2000.

[9] Graham, Charles, et. al. "Seven Principles for Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses." *The Technology Source*. March/April 2001.

[10] Bullet list verbatim from Conway, Eugenia. "Teaching Strategies for Distance Education: Implementing the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Online Education." 5th Annual Science, Engineering, and Technology Education Conference. Pp 16-17. http://webb.nmu.edu/Webb/ArchivedHTML/UPCED/mentoring/docs/dIStrategies.pdf

Set Clear Expectations, Rules, and Procedures

Beyond establishing deadlines, instructors can improve the course experience, and with it time on task, by setting, communicating, and managing online course expectations in a clear and explicit fashion. Such efforts can "help create a good structure and empower students to know how they can succeed in your class."[11] Relatedly, outlining expectations for specific assignments or activities may also be beneficial. For example, the University of Central Florida has created a guide on "Setting Discussion Expectations" for online courses that encourages instructors to explicitly outline the time investment students are expected to make with various tasks, such as class discussions.[12]

Be a Role Model

To motivate students to engage with course materials (and related tasks and assignments) regularly and in a meaningful way, instructors should set an example. Some authors suggest that when instructors schedule the "same amount of time each week to be visibly present and engaged," students are more likely to show greater presence and engagement as well.[13]

Ways in which instructors can create a visible and regular online presence include:

- o   Posting weekly announcements
- o   Holding online office hours
- o   Posting "a quick video to clarify misconceptions about a class topic or assignment"
- o   Grading and returning "students' work in a timely fashion"
- o   Talking with "students in online discussions."[14]

Monitor Performance/ Early Warning Signs

Current learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas) typically allow instructors to track some or all student actions. An analysis of students' engagement with assigned readings, participation in discussion forums, and similar tasks can help identifying at-risk students, or predicting student learning performance.[15]

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[11] Marie Norman, "Course Expectations: Why You Need Them and How to Communicate Them," Center for Teaching and Learning. https://ctl.wiley.com/course-expectations-why-you-need-them-and-how-to-communicate-them/

[12] "Setting Discussion Expectations." University of Central Florida. Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository. https://topr.online.ucf.edu/setting-discussion-expectations/

[13] Darby, Flower. "How to Be a Better Online Teacher," in: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ya-Han Hu, Chia-Lun Lo, and Sheng-Pao Shih, "Developing Early Warning Systems to Predict Students' Online Learning Performance," in: *Computers in Human Behavior*, 36 (July 2014), 469-478. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563214002118

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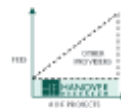200+ analysts with multiple methodology research expertise

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