

Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching & Learning

Preparing to use Instructional Technology in your Course

Instructional use of computers requires careful and strategic planning to ensure that it provides a good learning environment for students. While electronic “bells & whistles” may be enticing, use them only when you are [reasonably] sure that they enhance learning. The following suggestions are designed to help you think about the instructional use of technology either in courses for which you are a TA or are planning to teach yourself.

1. Think carefully about your goal for adding a computer component to the class and tailor your teaching strategies accordingly.

- Are you hoping the computer will let you teach more topics in the same amount of time? –or the same topics, but with greater student understanding?
- Are you using the computer to do things that cannot be done with traditional teaching tools?
- Are you trying to teach students computer skills essential for anyone working in your field?
- Do you hope the computer will increase student interest in the course content?

Each of these goals is different and will affect the amount of time to be devoted to computer work, the teaching strategy used and the type of support given to students in completing their assignments.

2. Use technology only where it is the best teaching and learning tool.

For example, placing short reference documents (e.g., a reading list) on a server for electronic access can be a convenient way to make information available to a large number of students. But students tend to prefer printed copies of long documents (over three pages) or documents needed for extensive study (e.g., old exams), so you may as well distribute them as handouts, place them on reserve at the library or make them available at copy centers.

3. Plan the computer component of your course carefully, and well in advance.

Computing and Information Services (CIS) Instructional Technology Group staff can help you plan the support needed for your course activities and can direct you to other faculty who have tried similar things in their courses, so you can take advantage of their experience. CIS, the Library and the Sheridan Center also work closely to provide integrated services for users of instructional technology. Check the Sheridan Center web site and the CIS/Instructional Technology Group web site.

4. Make the overall educational purpose of computer assignments clear to students.

Students are most positive about using computers when they understand how the assignment contributes to the course content and feel the assignment is essential for mastering course objectives. When computer assignments are optional, most students opt not to do them, perhaps because they feel the assignments are not valued by the professor.

5. Know which computer skills students need upon entering the class and which skills you will need to teach in conjunction with the course.

Providing clear descriptions of prerequisite skills in the course announcement and offering computer training options to students can help. CIS offers short classes at the beginning of the semester to help students begin using electronic mail, electronic course conferences and software accessed from servers. If you plan to conduct your own training sessions for students, you may want to reserve a computer classroom or a classroom with computer projection capabilities (contact CIS or check the CIS/ISS homepage).

6. Allow ample time for the computer component of your course.

Many faculty report that they underestimate the time needed the first time they teach with computers, and that it takes at least two semesters to fine tune their use of technology in a course. If you are using a computer classroom for the first time, practice using it before the course starts, so you will be comfortable with the equipment. Try completing your own computer assignments to see how much time students will need.

7. Convey a sense of excitement and a willingness to be flexible about the computer content of your course.

Professors who are flexible—extending deadlines when reasonable, providing extra help sessions when necessary—and who are good humored when minor problems arise have found that their students respond positively (and vice versa!).