Developing, Facilitating and Assessing Engaging Online Courses

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Abstract: The University of Findlay has recently completed a four-year PT3 project, focused on a campus-wide transformation in teaching, learning and technology. A major focus of this project was teaching and learning online. This presentation will introduce a useful instrument for examining and improving the quality of an online (Internet-based) course, “Guidelines for Teaching an Online Course.” Participants will explore practices for on-line instruction and will acquire a digital platform for sharing instructional strategies in on-line teaching.

Introduction

This paper introduces a useful instrument developed at The University of Findlay for examining and improving the quality of an online (Internet based) course, Guidelines for Teaching an Online Course. As the University engaged in the process of transformational change in teaching, learning and technology, the emerging domain of online teaching became of paramount interest for faculty. As part of a four-year PT3 project, a faculty development center was created where faculty received training and mentoring in creating high quality online learning experiences for their students.

As online learning gains popularity among students, increasing attention must be paid by the instructor to the student’s style of learning in the new learning environment. Although instructors are adept at providing for varied learning styles in the face-to-face classroom, they will need support in meeting these needs in an online environment.

The web-based Guidelines, which are the focus of this presentation, were developed as a result of a comprehensive review of literature Crys, 1997; Jonassen, D., n. d.; Mehrotra, Hollister & McGahey, 2001; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2006; Wright, n. d.), the field research of the author on learning styles of online students (Witta & Lee, 2005), and collective feedback from various practitioner professionals. The purpose of the Guidelines is to help The University of Findlay faculty members improve their online teaching experience and to encourage effective engagement of students in the online learning environment. The Guidelines are to be used as a compass while designing and reviewing Internet based online courses.

Guidelines

The Guidelines are distilled into eight categories that outline the most critical components of a quality online course. Each category provides the faculty member with ‘Baseline Expectation’ and ‘Effective’ practices.

Guidelines for Teaching an Online Course *
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 1: Course Ambience</th>
<th>Baseline Expectations</th>
<th>Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic information</td>
<td>Indicators: (Do you find the following items on the Blackboard course site?)</td>
<td>Indicators: (In addition to the items / suggestions listed under Baseline, do you find the following items on the Blackboard course site?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Analysis Support</td>
<td>1. Welcome message in the announcement section (Preferably set to &quot;Permanent&quot;)</td>
<td>1. Course Information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Principle: A welcoming course ambiance and basic course information are necessary to "get off on the right foot." Careful analysis of the target student population lays the groundwork for building an effective distance-learning course. Areas worth considering are (a) demographics, (b) previous experience and coursework, (c) technological skill and access, (d) learning preferences, and (e) possible special needs | □ Syllabus (complete & relevant to the course prepared in UF syllabus template format including but not necessarily limited to: 
- Catalogue information
  - Course ID
  - Semester Hours
  - Prerequisites
- Instructor information
- Course Description
- Relationship to Conceptual Framework
- Specific course objectives/Expected learner outcomes
- Course materials (including purchasing information for distance learners)
- Course Schedule/course organization
- Knowledge base
- Instructional Strategies
- Methods of Assessment
- Grading policy (that fits the distance learning environment…easy to comprehend)
- Disabilities Statement
- Preparation for Online Learning
- A preparation activity (email, homepage creation, discussion forum, posted thumbnail student autobiography, etc)
- Clear set of instructor expectations for student responses or performance
  - Plagiarism statement
  - Grading rubrics
- Netiquette/Protocols for
  - Online chats
  - Asynchronous postings and
  - E-mail
- User Support
- Atomic Learning
- Writing Center
- Disabilities Services
- Expected turn around times for instructor responses |
| | 2. Course Information | |
| | 3. Complete Staff Information | 2. Complete Staff Information |
| | □ Learner Analysis Survey | □ Thumbnail of hobbies or other information related to “getting to know you” |
| | □ Preparation for Online Learning | |
| | □ User Support | |
| | □ Links/phone numbers for technical support | |
| | □ Help desk | |
| | □ Blackboard Adm. | |
| | □ Title | |
| | □ Full Name | |
| | □ E-mail address | |
| | □ Office Location | |
| | □ Office Hours | |
| | □ Photograph (optional but recommended) | |
### Category 2: Content / Course Organization

**Principle:** Clear learning objectives provide a useful framework for the course’s content, activities, and learning assessments. Construction of units or modules around discrete objectives help structure students’ learning, making the course more unified and coherent.

- **Observations:**
  - Instructions or directions are clear and concise.
  - Deadlines are specified, and the consequences of missing deadlines are clearly stated.
  - A variety of instructional or learning activities are used to promote interactivity. These may include online discussions, online conferencing, collaborative assignments, and listserv participation.
  - Activities encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
  - Learners are encouraged to interact with others and benefit from their experience and professional expertise.
  - Activities are realistic and appropriate and can be performed with the resources and time available to the learners.
  - Is the instructor primarily a facilitator of learning, rather than a provider of content?

- **Indicators:**
  - Content organized in an easy to follow / navigate manner
  - The organization of components is consistent throughout the course. For example, each module may have the following sections: introduction, objectives, pretest, directions, explanatory text including learning activities such as case studies, suggested answers for learning activities and links to additional information, module summary, self-test, self-test answers, references, additional readings, and module assignment.
  - A clear structure of course content
  - A clear timeline for the learning process (e.g. due dates for each assignment)
  - Buttons not in use have been deactivated (and cannot be seen by students)
  - Colors are used with consideration for readability and printing on B/W printers
  - A clear structure of course content
  - Module-based? Unit-based? Weekly-based? Chapter/Lesson-based?
  - Clear objectives for each learning unit
  - Units of instruction or topics are divided into subunits or subtopics
  - Readable fonts are used throughout
  - Use legend of icons and colors consistently

### Category 3: Instructional or Learning Strategies and Opportunities for Practice and Transfer

**Principle:** Do the instructional or learning strategies enable learners to learn effectively in a variety of ways and to engage in activities that promote practice and the transfer of skills?

- **Observations:**
  - Instructions or directions are clear and concise.
  - Deadlines are specified, and the consequences of missing deadlines are clearly stated.
  - A variety of instructional or learning activities are used to promote interactivity. These may include online discussions, online conferencing, collaborative assignments, and listserv participation.
  - Activities encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
  - Learners are encouraged to interact with others and benefit from their experience and professional expertise.
  - Activities are realistic and appropriate and can be performed with the resources and time available to the learners.
  - Is the instructor primarily a facilitator of learning, rather than a provider of content?

- **Indicators:**
  - Learners are informed about their own responsibilities in online learning.
  - Procedures for grouping learners for team-based learning activities are specified.
  - Activities and materials are presented sequentially in order of difficulty.
  - Constructive, relevant, and frequent feedback is provided to promote clarification, elaboration, and transfer.
  - Summaries are provided throughout the material, particularly at the end of topics, lessons, and modules.
### Category 4: Class Management

**Principle:** Managing your course materials, student communication and class activities in an effective manner can keep your online class moving smoothly.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide Blackboard orientation as an online tutorial or a word document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require that all online students use the UF e-mail system (Students who chose to rely on another email account must forward UF mail to that account)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a uniform announcement area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require students to login to Blackboard on a very frequent basis (no less than 3 times a week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Netiquette/Protocols for asynchronous and synchronous communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage asynchronous and synchronous communications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indicators:**
- Provide an "Introduction Unit"
- Manage groups (Establish learning community for each group)
- Utilizing online chat
- Gradebook is built according to grading rubric
- Select a balance of student-centered and instructor-centered activities
- When utilizing Blackboard "assignment" process, provide specific instructions to students
- Manage course materials in folders

### Category 5: Course Evaluation

**Principle:** Are the evaluative activities feasible, relevant, accurate, and congruent with the objectives, content, and practical applications of the content?

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<tr>
<td>Learners are given clear expectations and criteria for credit assignments. Examples of assignments that meet the criteria may be included for students to review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of assignments and their due dates are reasonable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and grading procedures are clear and explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationships between course learning outcomes, evaluation strategies, and course assignments are evident to the learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationship between individual assignments and the final course grade is clearly specified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation procedures are congruent with the objectives and reflect any priorities that have been established for the objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indicators:**
- Students are informed about the criteria that will be used to evaluate their participation in online activities such as discussion groups.
- A variety of feasible and content-relevant assignments or evaluative exercises are provided.
- The evaluative exercises are relevant to the learners and the career or profession they may pursue.
- Criteria and procedures for peer review and evaluation are clearly specified if these elements are included in the course.
- Learners are told when they can expect to receive feedback from the instructor.

### Category 6: Online Resources, Legal and Ethical Use

**Principle:** Use of online resources – academic journals, professional organizations, etc. – are fully integrated into assignments and course schedules, making full use of existing services. Resources are included in accordance with copyright regulations and

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All links are live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web sites (e.g. links to course related educational resources)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Indicators:**
- Online Resources:
  - Academic resources (e.g. stable links to database articles)
  - Web sites (e.g. professional organizations, educational resources)

- Legal and Ethical Use:
  - Links to e-journals or e-reserves (e.g. copyright permission sought)
  - Ethical and legal expectations clearly stated for student work
Category 7: Optimized Use of Multi-Media, Graphics

Principle: Multi-media materials – video, audio, graphics, and presentations – are optimized for online delivery and targeted to support specific learning goals. Existing resources are researched, and utilized, prior to embarking on local production. Materials are created in accordance with copyright law, are housed on appropriate servers, and removed in a timely manner.

Indicators:

- Multi-media materials support learning goals:
  - Ethical and legal expectations are met (e.g. copyright permission sought)

Suggestions/Recommendations:

- Materials are optimized for web delivery:
  - Larger PowerPoint, video and audio files are compressed
  - Graphics, photographs use web resolution standards
  - Files are maintained on smeia or condor servers appropriately

Category 8: Editorial Checking

Typos:

- Unclear sentences:

The feature that makes these web-based Guidelines remarkable is that along with each component, there are hyperlinks to examples of best practice in that area by a University faculty member. As a result, this instrument not only can help an online instructor improve their online teaching, but also offers a platform for sharing instructional strategies and experience, thus fostering an intimate community of learners among faculty on the campus. Guidelines for Teaching an Online Course can be found at [http://tlc.findlay.edu](http://tlc.findlay.edu) in the Online Support tab.

References


