Southern Oregon University

Best Practices in Online Course Design and Delivery

Provided by the SOU Distance Education Center

9/10/2009

Online Course Design and Delivery

Southern Oregon University is committed to providing high-quality online educational experiences to our students. The following sections provide best practices in online course design. The instructor and Director of Distance Education will review these practices during the initial course development meeting required by the SOU policy on course development.

Getting Started

Faculty who are new to teaching online or who wish to explore new technologies to enhance an existing online course are encouraged to contact the SOU Distance Education Center to schedule a meeting with an instructional designer to maximize learning and teaching processes using the most appropriate technological tools.

Based on extensive research and best practices in distance education, the Distance Education Center offers a course template for developing a quality online course. We recommend using the template as the foundation upon which to build a new course, customizing it as necessary. The template provides the basic course structure and navigation, introductory information modules, and suggestions for content to enhance the course site. Using the template also speeds up development time for your online course. For more information,or to access the course template, contact the SOU Distance Education Center.

While no two courses are the same, there are important elements that should be a part of every online course:

- Detailed syllabus
- Course content
- Opportunities for Interaction
- Opportunities for Feedback
- Assessment
- Accessibility

Detailed Syllabus

A syllabus represents a **formal academic agreement** between an instructor and students. Rather than a schedule of events, a syllabus serves as an *academic contract* defining how students can successfully meet the objectives of the course. All instructors are required to provide their students a detailed syllabus at the start of each quarter in every class. Changes to a syllabus after

the course has begun are not recommended and may only be made in the case of unusual and extenuating circumstances.

The syllabus provides a basis upon which to resolve academic misunderstandings: it is the official document of record regarding all classroom activities and policies. The distribution of a detailed syllabus at the start of the course ensures that each student has received a written statement of policy. Without such a record, misunderstandings between students and faculty can occur. Students should be encouraged to consult the syllabus throughout the course and to ask questions about the course or the syllabus.

The elements of a syllabus for an online course are no different than the elements of a syllabus for a face-to-face course. SOU provides faculty with a syllabus template to assist with the creation of a well-developed, comprehensive document to serve faculty and students. The template identifies the following elements to be included in a syllabus:

1. Course Title and Identification
2. Instructor Contact Information
3. Course Description
4. Course Goals or Outcomes
5. Required Texts and Materials
6. Recommended Texts and Readings
7. Class Format or Outline
8. Assignments and Expectations
9. Attendance Policy
10. Grading Policy
11. Academic Honesty Statement
12. Academic Support/ADA Statement
13. Other Policies as Needed
14. Course Plan
15. Disclaimer

A description of each element in the Standard Syllabus Outline is provided by the SOU Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at http://www.sou.edu/ctla/syllabus-design.doc.

Course Content

Technology provides a variety of tools for delivering content to students. Before developing an online course, faculty should consider:

1. When teaching in a traditional classroom, how do they deliver content to students?
2. When teaching in a traditional classroom, what interactions do they use with their students?

Answering these questions will be helpful in selecting tools and techniques to deliver course content to students. The *Online Instructional Method and Tools Matrix* (Table 1) provides suggestions for techniques and tools based on preferred instructional methods. The SOU Distance Education Center can help faculty identify ways to adapt their preferred teaching methods to the online environment.

When presenting course materials online, breaking them into small, manageable units or modules increases student awareness of the conceptual structure of each unit and also allows for greater flexibility in pacing their learning (Johnson, 2003).

Quality online courses are well-organized and easy to navigate. An easy way to organize course units or modules is by using folders. Each folder can be labeled with the name of the unit and the dates of completion for all work within the unit. Folders should include all reading assignments, lecture materials, supporting websites or activities, links to discussion board threads, etc. for the unit represented by the folder. This practice helps students easily locate all the materials and complete all the tasks for a given unit.

Aesthetic appeal is another aspect of designing and delivering course materials. While the determination of whether or not something is aesthetically appealing is often a matter of personal preference, there are some general practices that should be considered when designing course materials and course sites.

- File naming systems should be consistent so that students always recognize when a file is a lecture, supplemental reading, assignment, etc. Including the unit/module number in the file name helps students stay organized.
- Font colors and styles should be consistent.
- White space is important! Lines and lines of text are boring and often difficult to read on a computer screen.
- Text should be broken up text by using brief, concise sentences; bullets and numbers are best for lists. Images can be inserted to help students visualize concepts. Sometimes text does not explain a concept as well as a simple image can.

Table 1
Online Instructional Method and Tools Matrix

Instructional Method	Techniques	Online Tools/Resources
Cooperative Learning	Multimedia Presentations	Windows MovieMaker, PowerPoint, Audacity, or Garage Band
	Research Project	Blogs, Wikis, Group Pages
	Student-Led Instruction	Discussion Board or Web Conferencing
Demonstration	Video Clips	Streaming Video, You Tube
	Text and Images	PowerPoint Presentations
Discovery	Research Projects	Wikis
	Web Quests	Internet/Library Searches
Discussion	Asynchronous Discussion	Blogs, Course Email, Discussion Board
	Synchronous Discussion	Chat, Web Conferencing
Drills	Exercises featuring multiple choice, fill in the blank, crosswords, matching/ordering, short answer, jumbled sentences	Hot Potatoes
	Self-tests	Quizzes
Presentation or Lecture	Narrated Slides/Images	PowerPoint Presentations
	Podcasts	Streaming Audio/Video Files
	Video Clips	You Tube Videos
	Written Lectures/Lecture Notes	Word/Rich Text/HTML Files
Problem-Solving	Problem-Based Learning	Word/Rich Text/HTML Files Group Pages
Simulations and Tutorials	Animations	Flash
	Self-Paced Modules	HTML Files
	Video Clips	MERLOT, WikiMedia, Wisc-Online, World Lecture Hall

Opportunities for Interaction

In online courses, interaction can occur in three ways:

- Students interacting with course content;
- Students interacting with one another; and
- Students interacting with the instructor.

It is a good practice to intentionally design for all three of these types of interactions to occur in online courses. Below are some tips to accomplish that goal.

Interaction with Course Content

Provide students with time and opportunity to learn to use and interact with the resources provided.

- Think beyond the standard assignments of reading a textbook and writing a paper. The Internet is a rich reservoir from which to draw materials and activities for students. It is easy to find audio and video files, journal articles, news reports, interactive tutorials, simulations, and more with a few clicks. To locate academically relevant materials on the web, visit:

  Hannon Library's Online Teaching Resources
  http://hanlib.sou.edu/distance/onlineteachingsources.html

  New York Times Video Library http://video.on.nytimes.com/

  Open Education Resources (OER) Commons http://www.oercommons.org/

  OpenLearn Courseware from Open University http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/

  Wisc-Online http://www.wisc-online.com/

  For additional support locating and integrating online resources into a course, contact the Distance Education Center or Hannon Library.

Interaction with One Another

The most common way to include interaction in an online course is through the use of online discussions. There are two types of online discussion:

1. Synchronous – discussion occurs when everyone participates at the same time.
2. Asynchronous – participants need not be present at the same time. The discussion occurs in a series of postings ("threads") that can be read and responded to at any time.

While both formats are appropriate in an online environment, asynchronous discussion occurs most often in online courses, primarily because of the flexibility it provides for everyone to

participate at any time, from any place. The Discussion Board on Blackboard can be used to facilitate asynchronous online discussion.

- If discussion is an important part of assessing student learning and if meaningful contributions are desired, discussions should represent a significant portion of the overall grade.

- Rubrics for grading online discussions encourage high-quality postings on the discussion board. Communicate the minimum number of postings required of each student for each discussion and hold students to the criteria listed in the rubric. An example of a well-developed rubric for online discussion is available on SOU's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment site at: http://www.sou.edu/ctla/Bb-response-rubric%20.doc.

Due dates for primary and secondary postings on the discussion board can be staggered so that discussion is deep and meaningful. For example, require that all initial responses by students be posted by Thursday of each week, while all secondary responses and beyond are posted by Saturday. This technique also helps students manage their workload for the class.

SOU has access to Elluminate, a web-conferencing system that allows for synchronous discussion with visual aids. Contact the Distance Education Center for more information to learn more about using synchronous discussion in online courses.

Student to student interaction can also be developed in the following ways:

- Student-to-student interaction can be promoted in the first week of an online class by using an icebreaker activity. An icebreaker establishes individual presence, opens the lines of communication between students, and allows students an opportunity to practice using tools within the course management system (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). It is during this first exercise that faculty can help students build a learning community in which they feel accepted and supported. Online icebreakers are available at:

  Using Online Icebreakers to Promote Student/Teacher Interaction
  http://www.southalabama.edu/oll/jobaidsfall03/Icebreakers%20Online/icebreakerjobaid.htm

  Illinois Online Network's Technology Tip of the Month: Ice Breaker
  http://www.ion.illinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2002_01/index.asp

- Offer a variety of communication options for students: email, discussion board, chat, web-conferencing, and telephone are most common.

- Engage students with collaborative learning assignments. Break the larger class into small online groups and have them

  - Give and receive feedback on individual papers

  - Locate, share, and critique resources and report group findings to the entire class

  - Work through a case study online
  - Debate a topic
  - Discuss ways they would apply theories or concepts to real-world situations
  - Complete a research project and write a paper together

- Create a "Help" or "Assistance" forum on the discussion board and encourage students to post questions or problems for their classmates to answer. Let students help one another.
- Create a social space on the discussion forum for students to use for discussions not directly related to the assigned course discussion. Label this area "The Coffee Shop," "The Water Cooler," "Just for Fun," or a catchy title that relates to the course discipline. Make it a place where casual conversation and sharing can occur.

Interaction with the Instructor
Many of the techniques used to engage students with the content and with one another will ultimately lead to communication with the instructor.

- Instructors should make time to periodically communicate with students on an individual basis via email. Some exchanges with students may also take place via telephone.
- Faculty should be explicit in how they expect students to communicate with them and state how they will communicate with students.

An extensive list of interactive techniques is available at the University of Central Florida's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning resource site: http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/TeachingAndLearningResources/CourseDesign/Assessment/content/101_Tips.pdf.

Opportunities for Feedback

One of the challenges associated with teaching and learning online is that the participants lose the physical cues that confirm when someone is following the concepts and materials related to the course (Johnson, 2003). To compensate for the lack of physical cues, faculty must intentionally design online courses to include opportunities for giving and receiving feedback. Feedback can be creative; it does not always have to be in the form of formal, written messages to each student.

Below are some tips for using feedback in online courses.

- Provide clear feedback to each student periodically using email or in comments attached to digital assignments links on Blackboard.
- Inform students of the method(s) to be used for providing individualized feedback and state how often they can expect to hear from the instructor.

- Track student progress weekly to identify and assist at-risk students promptly.

- Use the Gradebook in Blackboard to record student progress. Encourage students to refer to the Gradebook to track their own progress and consider adding a course tool link to the navigation links in your course site for "My Grades."

- Respond to students' emails within 24 hours during weekdays, and within one working day on holidays and weekends.

- Respond to students' discussion board postings in a timely manner. It is not necessary to respond to every single posting, but it is appropriate to acknowledge when students have posted exemplary work, are headed in the wrong direction, or are having an interesting discussion about course content. Acknowledging students posts demonstrates teaching presence.

- Create "Assignment" links on Blackboard so that students can confirm successful submission of their assignments and easily receive files and comments from the instructor.

- If students submit assignments via email, reply to each student to confirm receipt of the assignment and to let them know when they will receive a grade. This reduces student anxiety about whether or not their work has been received and creates a realistic timeframe for when students can expect to receive a grade and feedback (Johnson, 2003).

- Consider offering online office hours using a web-based conferencing tool such as Elluminate® or through the Virtual Classroom or Chat features in Blackboard. Contact the Distance Education Center for information and training on tools available.

- Return exams, papers, and assignments within one week of submission.

- Create open book review quizzes in Blackboard that are automatically graded so that students receive immediate feedback. Consider allowing students to complete the review two or three times, with the highest score recorded as a small portion of the overall grade.

- Send or post a weekly summary message to the class to clarify any areas perceived as problematic for students and to acknowledge their work in the course for that week.

- Provide options for peer review and feedback. Consider grouping students into dyads or triads to exchange papers/assignments with their group members.

Instructors need feedback from students as well.

- Create a discussion forum in Blackboard where students can post questions to the instructor related to course materials, content, or assignments. These questions can pinpoint problem areas or identify where further explanation may be necessary.

- Use the survey feature on Blackboard to conduct periodic anonymous surveys of students so that improvements can be made to the course in the coming weeks and in coming terms.

Assessment

Assessment serves multiple purposes in the online environment. It provides an opportunity to monitor student progress and performance throughout the term. It also provides an indicator of progress for students, which enables them to take on greater responsibility for their own learning. Simonson et al. (2000) provide the following recommendations for using assessments in online courses:

- Consider the use of ongoing, non-graded, and self-paced assessments to help students assess their own progress.
- Assessment should not be an afterthought. Rather, course materials and assessments should be developed to match course objectives.
- Develop assessments that not only measure a student's progress and understanding, but also the ability to transfer skills and knowledge beyond the learning environment.

Many of the same techniques used to assess learning in the traditional classroom can be used in the online environment. Those techniques include:

- Essays
- Multiple choice tests
- Research papers
- Short-answer tests

If these techniques are appropriate measures of achievement, by all means, continue to use them—with some adjustments to accommodate the online environment, of course. Alternative assessments offer options for gauging student progress. Consider using some of the following assessment techniques in online courses:

- Blogging
- Case study discussion/writing
- Collaborative writing projects
- Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios)
- Reflective journaling
- Student-created podcasts or other multimedia
- Student-led discussions

All assessments should be appropriately aligned with learning objectives. Rubrics can help faculty and students assess learning on each assessment. For assistance with designing alternative assessments and rubrics, contact the Distance Education Center or the Center for Teaching and Learning.

Accessibility

(Provided by SOU Disability Services)\

Common Obstacles and Solutions to Electronic Accessibility
Obstacle: No description (alt-text) provided for embedded image
Solution: Include a description for every informative image. Decorative images should have an empty string (“ ”). This applies to images in Blackboard as well as those within Word, PDF, and PowerPoint documents.

Obstacle: Missing or poorly used headings
Solution: In Word documents and pdf files, use heading style labels to indicate font size, such as Heading 1 for a page title, Heading 2 for a section heading, and Heading 3 for subsection headings. These are both beneficial to you as the document creator and for people who use screenreaders.

Obstacle: Scanned documents incompatible with assistive technologies
Solution: Convert PDFs directly from Word documents and/or provide different formats for the same document to make documents readable by screenreaders and other assistive technology.

Obstacle: Poorly labeled links
Solution: Label hyperlinks to describe where the link leads (e.g., DSS Homepage instead of “Click here to go to the DSS Homepage,” or worse, just click here.)

Obstacle: Color used to convey information
Solution: Use symbols or explanatory text (with or without color) to convey information (e.g., “Classes in red text and with location HEC meet at the Medford campus.”

Working with File Types
PowerPoint

- Describe graphics in the Notes pane and with alternative text (in Image Properties)
- Many PowerPoint presentations are not accessible and may mean long download times for some users. Offer an html or PDF version in addition to the PowerPoint version.

Word

- Use Styles to format text (especially headings), not just bold, italics, and font size
- Describe graphics using alternative text (in Image Properties)
- Create links that are descriptive of where they lead

PDF

- Check to make sure there is real text in your document by selecting text with the cursor tool – if you can select text, it will be accessible
- Use the Accessibility Checker in Adobe Acrobat Professional

Multimedia

- Ensure that controls can be accessed with the keyboard as well as the mouse
- Provide captions for video
- Provide transcripts for audio

Other Tips

- Avoid long blocks of italic, underlined, or capitalized text. These can be difficult to read.
- Avoid posting more than 10 links on a page. Since screenreaders read links linearly, it can be tedious and time-consuming to navigate them. Students may also have trouble navigating to the link that they need when presented with numerous links.
- If an assessment has a time limit, post an alternate assessment that is untimed or extended (time and a half and twice as long are standard accommodations). Name the tests generically (Test A and Test B, for instance) to avoid stigmatizing accommodated students.
- For assistance in creating captions, transcripts, and audio descriptions, contact Disability Services for Students (DSS). Please allow adequate lead time!
- Avoid the use of real-time (synchronous) discussion for your class, *especially* if you have a student with a print disability. Screenreading software cannot read live chat, so some students would not have access to that learning activity.
- Validation of your pages will help ensure accessibility. An easy validation tool is **Cynthia Says** at http://www.cynthiasays.com.
- More tools, resources and information can be found at the Disability Services Assistive Technology site: http://www.sou.edu/access/dss/facstaffresources.shtml.