Online Teaching Toolkit

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ITEC 67444 – Teaching Online Courses

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Orientation/Introduction Policy

Overall Approach

Each distinct course or learning module will begin with a course orientation and introduction. The goals of the course orientation and introduction are twofold: to allow users to decide if the course is right for them at the current time, and if so, to allow them to become accustomed to the course itself, the technological environment in which it will be delivered, and other learners enrolled in the course. Depending on the duration of the course or learning module, an orientation may not be needed, but an introduction to the materials and other learners should always be provided.

Orientation

To provide an opportunity for students to decide whether or not it is feasible for them to remain enrolled in an online course or training module, it is extremely important to provide them with an orientation session and introduction to the course and material **prior to the start of the course**.

Timeline: approximately two weeks prior to the start of the course, contact all enrollees via e-mail to alert them of upcoming orientation sessions. (If at all possible, such an orientation session should be offered in a face-to-face environment.)

Topics for a course orientation session include:
- Introduction to course objectives
- Syllabus including required course materials, readings, and activities: link to sample syllabus
- Time commitments required to be successful
- Technology requirements: link to sample technology requirements document

Introduction to Course Organization and Other Learners

Once learners have decided that they are able to commit themselves to participating in the course, it is critical to provide an interactive opportunity that introduces them to the course organization and to their fellow learners.

The course organization introduction should include an introduction (or review, depending on the learner) of online learning, a recap of the prerequisites for the course and an overview of the material to be covered. Possible delivery methods include web pages, video, and/or narrated presentations. Sample course organization and online learning introductions include:
- Allegany College of Maryland Online Course Orientation
- Ohio University Online Student Orientation
- Penn State Online Orientation and Tutorials
- Lakeland Community College General Online and BlackBoard Orientation

The introduction to fellow learners provides an opportunity for learners to begin to build a sense of community with their peers and form relationships that foster deeper learning and engagement with the material. Since it is often difficult to "put a face with a name" in an online learning environment, it's best to provide an activity that combines the use of technology with personal introductions.

Possible activities include:

- Using Google Earth as the basis for a narration about one's background (shamelessly taken from ITEC 67444, Summer 2009)
- "Which Is the Real Me?" Learners create a brief podcast about themselves and post four pictures: one of the "real me," and three extremely different pictures. Peers have to guess which one is the "real me," and the original poster provides feedback after all have had a chance to guess.
- "Two Truths and a Lie." Learners post two facts and one falsehood about themselves; peers have to guess which one is the incorrect statement. The original poster provides feedback after all have had a chance to guess the lie.
- "9 Nouns." Learners post nine nouns about themselves and describe how the noun relates to and describes them.
- "Three Words." The class writes a story together, but each learner can only post three words at a time and must wait until another person has posted before posting again. Invite someone to turn the story into a podcast once it is completed.

If the icebreaker activity does not specifically include an opportunity for learners to introduce themselves, create a discussion thread where each person needs to provide an introduction, including something memorable about themselves so others can begin to build a mental picture of the person.

Sources for online icebreakers:
Lasagna and Chips blog
Using online icebreakers to promote student/teacher interaction
Nancy White's online facilitation course

Communication Guideline and Policies

Official Course Communication Policy

Course communications will primarily be handled electronically, as both educational and corporate standards dictate that the learner's institutional e-mail address will be used for delivery of official course-related communications. The instructor's official policy document will include a rationale for having a policy and the policy itself.

Link to sample official course communication policy – to be revised as needed

Practical Course Communication Policy

Separate from the official policy, the practical policy sets out expectations for communications between the instructor and learners, including the methods by which communications can occur, turnaround times for response to communications, turnaround time for grades to be posted after assignments are completed, and escalation procedures.

Remember that the practical policy needs to be fair to both the learners and the instructor! Set reasonable, appropriate expectations and meet them.

Link to my practical course communication policy

Communication Tools

Recognizing that not all students will have access to the same technologies for use with course materials, **online course administration materials such as syllabi and assignments will be offered in at least three formats:** Microsoft Word documents, Adobe PDF files, and podcasts containing a reading of the document. When applicable and appropriate, these same formats will be used for other course materials throughout the semester. Additionally, when it is necessary to includes images or pictures in instructor-designed Web pages or activities pertaining to the course, such images will be coded with ALT tags so that screen readers can describe the function of the images.

Throughout the class, many communication media may be used, including but not limited to: e-mail, LMS postings, telephone calls, conference calls, text messages, and podcasts.

(Also see *Management Guidelines: Content Delivery*.)

My Expectations for Myself as Instructor

It's critical that whatever time constraint I impose upon myself for communicating with learners, I hold myself to it and ensure that I never miss a deadline without at least providing a reason. Auto-responders don't work – they're too impersonal, so even a quick note saying "Got your message, but Im swamped, so please give me another day" will work, but then I absolutely cannot miss a second deadline or else my credibility will be nil.

Management Guidelines

Management Style – Does It Work Online?

My typical management style can best be described as 50% laissez-faire, 50% control freak. Those two don't sound like they go together, but in my experience in the project management world, I've found that I need to let people do what they do best without hounding them about the "how" they're doing something, while holding them strictly to the "when" related to what they're doing. To work well in an online environment, the laissez-faire part of my style needs to have more structure put around it. It's neither sufficient nor fair to throw learners into the course without helping them along somewhat, as explained by the "guide on the side" role we've described. As an instructor, I also need to lose the "control freak" moniker and allow learners to take responsibility for their own participation and engagement.

Content Delivery

Recognizing that not all students will have access to the same technologies for use with course materials, online course materials will be offered in at least three formats: Microsoft Word documents, Adobe PDF files, and podcasts containing a reading of the document. When applicable and appropriate, these same formats will be used for other course materials throughout the semester. Additionally, when it is necessary to includes images or pictures in instructor-designed Web pages or activities, such images will be coded with ALT tags so that screen readers can describe the function of the images.

Throughout the class, many different media may be used to deliver content, including but not limited to: e-mail, LMS postings, conference calls/synchronous chat sessions, text messages, and podcasts.

(See also *Communication Guideline and Policies: Communication Tools*.)

LMS Setup
Learners' navigation within the LMS needs to be intuitive and clearly-defined. Pages used must be designed with hardware response time in mind; a large and/or overloaded page will take a long time to load and will reduce the likelihood that learners will actually access the page. Links to online and offline help will be provided to allow learners both self-help and help desk capabilities. A link to an overview of the institution's academic support system will allow participants to learn more about support services available to them.

When Things Go Bad

In all courses, it is likely that I'll encounter learners who are not keeping up with assignments, who are not active in discussions or course activities, or who experience technical difficulties. To minimize the possibilities of this occurring, and also to minimize disruptions, all assignments for the course will be described in detail in the syllabus or a standalone assignment document, along with clear deadlines for submitting assignments. Due dates will not change throughout the semester except in the case of truly extraordinary circumstances.   Discussion participation is weighed according to participation guidelines and a published rubric; learners who are not keeping up will receive at least one reminder from the instructor about the responsibility to actively and thoughtfully participate in discussions.

Direct Instruction Ideas and Tools

What Requires Direct Instruction?

Within the context of my online courses, direct instruction is the best delivery method for information that is fact-based or procedural and does not require detailed analysis or synthesis. As such, I will be most likely to use direct instruction early in the course, when I am providing an introduction to new material, rather than later on when I'm trying to encourage learners to apply their newfound knowledge to real-life situations.

Creating Direct Instruction Materials

Well-designed direct instruction integrates multiple modalities to teach material to the learner. Research performed by Mayer and Paivio indicate the effect of dual-coding and of cognitive load, so activities will be designed to minimize cognitive load and afford the learner the best opportunity to learn and retain the material.

In an online environment, particularly an asynchronous one, there is not as great an opportunity to get questions asked the first time around, so the technology used to create direct instruction must lend itself well to reuse and replaying of the instructional content. I have used PowerPoint in the past to provide direct instruction, both with and without accompanying narration, and anticipate continuing to do so. I also am learning DreamWeaver and plan to learn Camtasia, which will provide me two more methods to provide instruction – I realize DreamWeaver is really a web design tool, but I see its utility as allowing me to design and build WebQuests and other interactive learning modules. I have also seen the effectiveness of video as a teaching tool for direct instruction, so I will work to build up my catalog of content-appropriate public domain videos. (Thanks to a couple of my classmates for demonstrating that YouTube can be a valuable instructional tool!)

Reuse of Existing Educational Materials

Teaching an online course is a time-consuming experience, so one of the first tasks I plan to tackle in developing courses is to search for already-existing instructional content and components. In other classes I've learned of how to search for WebQuests that can either be used without changes or that can be easily modified to meet my particular instructional objectives, and the same search process holds true for other instructional materials. Beginning with a targeted Google search of both the regular Google and Google Scholar, I will first seek to identify materials that could be adapted for use in my instruction. I'd rather not take items verbatim and reuse them, even if other instructors have granted permission, because I'm not sure that projects the right attitude for my learners – how can I fault them for turning in a properly attributed open source or freely distributed assignment as their own if that's what I'm doing in creating my materials?

Discussion and Collaboration Policy, Guidelines, and Tools

Discussion Policy

In an online course, participation in course activities plays a greater role in determining learning outcomes than it does in a traditional course. Learners' abilities to take an active role in asking questions, volunteering opinions, and responding thoughtfully should be fostered throughout the duration of the course. Therefore, clear expectations and a rubric for evaluating class participation are vital to allowing learners to take ownership in the outcome of the course. Both expectations and the rubric must be defined early on so that learners know what they are accountable to do.

[Link to my discussion and collaboration policy](#)

[Link to sample rubric to assess learner participation in discussion threads](#)

To help you become successful in discussion participation, you will choose one topic we're covering in this course for which you'd like to lead the discussion. You will post the initial questions to get the discussion going, and you will monitor and guide the discussion throughout the week. Further details about potential topics and the weeks in which they'll be covered are provided in the syllabus.

How Can I Help?

Throughout the course, we will be experimenting with various collaboration technologies. In some cases, the tools will be widely known to learners, and in such cases, learners can take the lead on demonstrating and leading the use of such tools. From time to time, though, there may be new "bleeding edge" technologies that learners want to discuss, at which point I'll have to take the lead on learning enough about them myself to be able to successfully model their use. Alternatively, if an investigation of new technologies fits with the course objectives, I can assign a technology to each learner or group of learners and have them report back on the basics, pros, and cons of using such tools.

In terms of the day-to-day maintenance of collaboration within the course, I will monitor participation and step in as needed to begin or continue developing concepts important to the course. Close monitoring of course activities will allow me to quickly respond to potential derailments and keep the class moving forward rather than standing still.

Online Collaboration Tools

Within my online courses, learners can expect to see these technologies utilized:
- Discussion threads
- Microsoft's SkyDrive, SharePoint, and other cloud computing shared file systems
- Chat rooms and Skype sessions
- LiveMeeting and NetMeeting
- Other collaboration tools as they are introduced

Assessment and Feedback Personal Policies

Assessment and Feedback Policy

Assessment is an important part of all courses and learning modules, and without feedback, assessment offers little value to the learner. In my mind, assessment's primary role is to provide a formative evaluation of the learner's work product. Feedback is a subprocess of evaluation, in that it provides the substantiation for the grade a learner has earned, but it also has utility in the day-to-day activities of the course to let learners know how they're doing. Given its importance, my assessment and feedback policy is a section that will be included in the syllabus and also as a standalone document on the course home page.

Link to my assessment and feedback policy

How and When Are Assessments and Feedback Provided?

Formal assessments will occur according to the assignment submittal due dates included on the syllabus; learners are encouraged to submit their assignments early so that they can be first in the queue for feedback. Informal assessments and self-evaluations (including quizzes, surveys, and other checkpoints to gauge learner understanding of the course materials and processes) will be provided throughout the course.

Perhaps the most important feature of assessments and feedback is timeliness; the further from the time an assignment is submitted, the less effective feedback becomes. To support learner growth, the timeliness with which assessments and feedback are provided is outlined in both the communications policy and the assessment policy. Providing informal feedback can be accomplished through individual communications with learners as well as through collective feedback in discussion threads and other collaborative technologies. Such informality allows for feedback to be given more frequently and will allow me as an instructor to try to help all learners accurately assess their progress and understand what is required for improvement or to sustain high achievement.

Knowing that appropriate feedback can take quite some time to think through in order to be most effective, I plan to include rubrics for all assignments so that both the learners and I know what is expected to achieve a given level of performance. Using the rubric to grade an entire assignment or to review participation will provide a baseline from which further substantive comments and suggestions can be provided

Student Success Strategies

Setting the Stage for Success

Research shows that there is a positive correlation between learners' level of social presence and the degree of success they experience within coursework. To be most successful in this course, learners must be comfortable with the environment, the content, and their peers.

To meet learners' basic needs, the course materials will include telephone and e-mail contact information for the institution's Help Desk, a section on FAQs for both the technology and the content, and instructions on how to access remedial services (writing, math, etc.) provided by the institution. Through both the syllabus and announcements throughout the duration of the course, learners will also be encouraged to confidentially raise any concerns, questions, or comments with the instructor.

Learners' navigation within the LMS needs to be intuitive and clearly-defined. Pages used must be designed with hardware response time in mind; a large and/or overloaded page will take a long time to load and will reduce the likelihood that learners will actually access the page. Links to online and offline help will be provided to allow learners both self-help and help desk capabilities. A link to an overview of the institution's academic support system will allow participants to learn more about support services available to them.

Addressing ADA Compliance

Recognizing that not all students will have access to the same technologies for use with course materials, online course materials will be offered in at least three formats: Microsoft Word documents, Adobe PDF files, and podcasts containing a reading of the document. When applicable and appropriate, these same formats will be used for other course materials throughout the semester. Additionally, when it is necessary to includes images or pictures in instructor-designed Web pages or activities, such images will be coded with ALT tags so that screen readers can describe the function of the images. **All web pages used in this class will be tested with a screen reader compatibility checker to ensure their compliance with ADA/Section 508 standards.**

Throughout the class, many different media may be used to deliver content, including but not limited to: e-mail, LMS postings, conference calls/synchronous chat sessions, text messages, and podcasts.

(See also *Communication Guideline and Policies: Communication Tools*.)

What Leads to Success? (message to learners)

Engagement and participation. Find something about this course that excites you and run with it – you'll be much happier, and your enthusiasm for that topic will probably be extended into other areas as well. If you don't see anything in the syllabus that prompts you to have an "a-ha" moment, feel free to discuss with me and we'll work to find you a concept or topic that ties everything together for you. You succeed when you're comfortable and happy – so if at any point you're not comfortable or you're not happy, it's your responsibility to let me know and we'll work together to rectify that situation.

My Glossary

Accessibility: The ability of a particular technology to be used by learners with disabilities. According to the ASTD (2009), "accessible Websites can be navigated by people with visual, hearing, motor, or cognitive impairments. Accessible design also benefits people with older or slower software and hardware."

Asynchronous learning: Learning in which there is no formal, set time for the class to meet. Learners can access class materials and activities at any time and from anywhere they are able. There is usually a delay in the interaction between the instructor and learners.   Possible formats for asynchronous learning include instruction via the Internet, online forums, and participation in wikis and blogs.

Collaboration technology tools: Commercially-produced software solutions or services that allow multiple users to create, edit, present, critique, and/or present information, usually within a self-contained workspace. Examples used in class include discussion threads within Vista, Google Docs, and iLinc (presentation, discussion, and chat); other technologies include Moodle, SharePoint, wikis, whiteboards, and shared drives or FTP sites.

Discussion board: An online communication in which one person posts a question or comment, and by so doing, invites further questions or comments from other participants. Discussion boards are a key feature of asynchronous learning in that participants can view and reply to the messages at any time.

LMS (learning management system): Software or application that provides for the creation, maintenance, use, and administration of course content. Some applications serve only as a repository for information, while newer ones such as BlackBoard/Vista 8 allow for full class management, including discussions, postings, assignment submission and grading, and e-mail interfaces.

Online learning: Learning in which the course material is delivered via the Internet. Online learning is a form of technology-based learning, which also includes distance learning via television, audio and video tapes, and CD-ROM activities. Online learning can be further described as either asynchronous or synchronous learning, depending upon the rigidity with which activities are scheduled.

Social presence: The feeling a class participant (either learner or instructor) has of being connected with the course material and the others enrolled in the course. Social presence is also often defined as the extent to which a person is aware of the environment in which they are learning and the characteristics that transform participation as a faceless "comment writer" into someone who has developed an online persona.

Synchronous learning: Learning that occurs at a set time and requires simultaneous involvement between the instructor and learners. Synchronous sessions can be scheduled for the same time each day/week or may be scheduled sporadically. Synchronous learning is often called "learning in real time," since the communication tool used provides for instantaneous feedback and participation among users. Possible formats for synchronous learning include chat rooms, technologies such as iLinc, and virtual classrooms (i.e. Kent's island within Second Life).

Resources used for My Glossary:

Class postings in discussion threads

American Society for Training and Development. (n.d.) *E-learning glossary.* Retrieved from
http://www.astd.org/LC/glossary.htm

Conrad, R., & Donaldson, J.A. (2004). *Engaging the online learner: activities and resources for creative instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Finkelstein, J. (2006). *Learning in real time: synchronous teaching and learning online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Glossary of e-learning. (n.d.) Retrieved from http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Glossary_of_e-learning

Palloff, R., & Pratt, K. (2005). *Collaborating online: learning together in community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

My Tips, Strategies, and Techniques

My main set of resources going forward will be the materials we've developed through the discussion threads and activities in this course. I also plan to utilize materials from previous classes, as well as my own searches of the available materials, activities, and research regarding course materials.

ITEC 67444 Discussion Threads:

SocialPresence.PDF Communication.PDF DirectInstruction.PDF FacilitatingDiscussion and Collaboration.PDF StudentSuccess.PDF

Strategic resources for designing instruction and presenting instructional content:
- www.AECT.org
- www.ASTD.org
- www.ISPI.org
- Handbook of Training Technologies

Resources for providing feedback:
- Strategies for assessment in and of collaborative learning
- Designing Online Learning Assessment

Self-Evaluation

In building my toolkit, I'd hoped to develop a resource that I can use as a reference as I move forward in my academic and professional career, and I think for the most part, I've succeeded. I see this not as a static document but rather one that will continue to be revised and revamped as I continue through the program and through my own teaching experiences. Not having a formal educational background, this assignment has been extremely valuable to me in helping to identify the best of class techniques and formats for effectively delivering online instruction.

If I had this to do over, I would have spent more time on it each week. I did add content every week as we worked through the material, but as I went back and reviewed the discussion threads prior to making PDF copies of them, I identified more information that I wanted to include, so that entailed more work here at the end. I probably would have focused on this assignment first each week, rather than on detailing my participation, because I believe that work for this assignment could easily be itemized for creating the participation log. My classmates and I continued to post to old topics throughout the course, which is by no means a problem, but it hampered my ability to capture the entire thread until the end and led me to think it wouldn't be much work to revamp the older materials.

In completing this activity, I found that I was doing even more research than we had done during the weekly assignments. Wanting to put together a quality final product, I spent a lot of time each week reviewing online sources and trying to find appropriate journal articles to help me – and they did help me, but moreso in my understanding of the weekly topics than in actually creating this toolkit.

Completing this assignment has helped me to understand how much more I need to learn about direct instruction and assessments. I'd like to focus more on understanding the process of instruction so that I can develop solid course materials, and I need to understand the concepts behind assessment before I can adapt them for my use in the adult learning environment. I've enjoyed both this assignment and the entire course – and I say thanks for your help and your comprehensive feedback as I've gone through it!