

Effective Practices for Fully Online and Blended Courses

Initial Course Development

Below are some tips and strategies for initial development and conceptualization of your course:

- **Blueprint your course.** Developing a blueprint of your course will help you identify the types of content pages and activities you want to include, such as readings, videos, discussions, assignments, etc., and conceptualize the flow and order of your activities before you begin to build your course in a LMS. The blueprint is used only to identify and map out your course activities and selected pieces of content; it should not include fully detailed instructions.
- **Organize your content.** Organizing your content into a Word document is a recommended practice before building in the Learning Management System (LMS). This practice allows you to easily gather your materials into one place and to refine your content so that there are minimal changes after inserting the content into the LMS.
- **Develop a clear and consistent format from week-to-week.** Using a similar format from week-to-week or lesson-to-lesson allows learners to develop a rhythm in your class and helps them establish a routine. Establish consistent deadlines by having your discussion posts, assignments, and quizzes due on the same day from week –to-week. Segmenting content into weekly formats will provide learners with an easier understanding of what is to be accomplished week-to-week.

Course Design Strategy

Below are 8 strategies, with corresponding tips for achieving each strategy, for designing a high quality, fully online course. Bolded statements are critical, or “must haves,” in your course to maximize the learner experience.

Getting Started: Introducing Learners to the Course

Below are tips and strategies for introducing your learners to course content and instruction:

Develop a Getting Started & Support section that provides learners with important information that they need to know before beginning course content. Typically, the Getting Started section includes the course syllabus and schedule, a welcome message, an introduction to course components, netiquette and academic honesty statements, technical skills and requirements, learner support information, and library support information.

- **Provide an initial statement on how learners should get started, or create an environment that is intuitive for learners to know where to begin, such as a Start Here link on the course landing/home page.**
- **Clearly state the purpose and structure of the course. This is typically included in the course syllabus and schedule, respectively.**

- Include brief descriptions on how learners will access content, participate in class, and submit graded activities.
- Include a brief statement in regards to netiquette, or how your learners should be expected to communicate and conduct themselves in class for discussions, email, etc.
- Provide course and institutional policies, written or linked, such as late work policy and academic integrity. Include prerequisite knowledge or competencies in the discipline. These are typically included in the course syllabus.
- Develop a page that includes the minimum technical skills and technology requirements that are expected of the learners. This may include appropriate computing power and technology skills, such as Word processing.
- Create a welcome announcement or letter for your learners and develop an area for you and your learners to provide self-introductions.

Competencies and Learning Outcomes

Below are tips and strategies for developing course and module level learning outcomes:

Develop course learning outcomes that precisely describe what learners gain from the instruction. Additionally, develop module-level learning outcomes that are consistent with the course learning outcomes.

- **Create specific and measurable outcomes. Use Bloom's Taxonomy to identify acceptable verbs for the appropriate level of learning. Avoid using unmeasurable terms such as *understand, learn, or know*.**
- **Create outcomes that are clear and easily comprehended by all learners.**
- **Provide course-level learning outcomes in the course syllabus.**
- **Provide module level outcomes at the beginning of each module (module overview page).**
- **Include detailed instructions within your learning activities that clearly state how the learning activities support the learning outcomes. Instructions can be a bulleted list that guides learners through the activity or information indicating which activities within the course supports the specific learning outcomes.**

Assessing and Measuring Learners

Below are tips and strategies for designing assessment and measurement strategies to evaluate learner progress and effectiveness:

Develop assessments that allow you to perceive how well learners are performing and mastering the stated learning outcomes throughout the course. Assessments should also provide learners the opportunity to measure and reinforce their learning throughout the course.

- **Align your assessments with course and module learning outcomes.**
- **Clearly articulate the course grading policy within your course syllabus that includes your late policy and breakdown of points, percentages, and weights for each graded component. Be sure to identify the relationship between letter grades and points/percentages.**

- **Each time a learner is evaluated, be sure to provide detailed criteria (Rubrics are a great tool to accomplish this) that can be traced back to the grading policy. Don't forget about learner participation!**
- Include different types of assessments throughout the course that promote varied levels of thinking, such as multiple choice quizzes for reinforcement, or term papers that allow for application or analysis.
- Develop opportunities for learners to check their own learning progress that includes comprehensive and timely feedback. Think about using short quizzes, about 5-10 questions, or allowing learners to submit rough drafts of an assignment for feedback/guidance.

Instructional Materials

Below are tips and strategies for developing and choosing instructional materials that will lead learners to mastery of the stated course competencies and outcomes

Instructional materials that are chosen or developed for your course must be directly aligned to the course competencies and learning outcomes. These materials form the core of your course, thus they should be relevant, current, and varied.

- **Choose instructional materials that align directly with the course/module learning outcomes and competencies.**
- **Clearly state the purpose of each instructional component included. How should the learner consume the material, and in what order?**
- Include citations with all instructional materials.
- Vary your materials so that learners have multiple ways of consuming content (videos, journals, textbooks, audio clips, etc.)
- Indicate which materials are optional. This is especially important if learners need to purchase materials.

Interacting and Engaging Learners

Below are tips and strategies for developing and choosing course activities that promote learning interaction and engagement:

Course activities that are developed for your course should promote active learning, or involving your learners in the learning process through interaction and engagement.

- **Course activities align directly to the course/module learning outcomes and competencies.**
- **Course activities must encourage either learner-learner interaction, learner-instructor interaction, or learner-content interaction.**
- **Develop a plan that covers response time to learner communications and expectations for feedback and grades on assignments.**
- Clearly indicate your expectations for learner participation within required course activities. How often? How long? When?

Course Technology

Below are tips and strategies for ensuring chosen course technologies aid in learner mastery of the stated course competencies and outcomes:

Course technologies that are chosen and integrated into your course should not interfere with the learning process. Technology should not be chosen for the sake of using technology. Choose technologies that will support learner achievement of courses competencies and outcomes.

- **Integrated technologies allow for learners to interact with the content, instructor, and/or each other and support the course competencies and learning outcomes.**
- Choose technologies that are easy for learners to learn and easily integrated into the LMS.
- Include support information, instructions, and requirements for using technologies not native to the LMS.
- Include links to privacy policies for tools that require learners to create accounts to access the tool.

Learner Support

Below are tips and strategies for providing institutional support information that promotes learner success:

Providing institutional support information to your learners within your course allows learners to be aware of what type of support is available to them and how these services can be leveraged for a successful learning experience.

- **Provide information for technical support on campus. Include support contact information and services offered.**
- **Include instructions and a link to accessibility services and policies. These are typically included in the syllabus.**
- Provide a list of other academic and student services offered to learners, such as tutoring, writing, testing, library, registrar, etc.

Course Accessibility and Usability

Below are tips and strategies for designing an accessible and usable course for all types of learners:

Designing an accessible and usable course reduces roadblocks and challenges for learners as they access course content and activities.

- **Create a logical and consistent navigation of course components and activities from week-to-week (or module-to-module).**
- **Link to or create statements regarding the accessibility of all required technologies such as the LMS, video/audio presentations, conferencing tools, etc. These statements are typically included on the technology requirements page or the syllabus.**
- Provide text-based alternatives to all auditory and visual content. For example, audio and video clips should have closed captioning or a transcript provided in text format.

- Be mindful of the readability of your course. Use contrasting colors, appropriate fonts and font sizes, spacing, and formatting.
- Deliver multimedia content in an easy-to-use format that is scalable across all platforms. Audio and video quality needs to be crisp and clear. Segment video and audio into clips no longer than 15-20 minutes each.

The above strategies, best practices, and tips were developed using the Quality Matters™ Rubric Standards, Fifth Edition, 2014. For more detailed information about Quality Matters, please contact canvas@unthsc.edu.