

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

**Online Course Design Guidelines for Faculty**

## DEFINITION

An online course is fully online with no physical classroom time with the instructor.

## EXPECTATIONS

1. Criteria for student success in online courses should be as rigorous and comprehensive as those used in face-to-face courses. These criteria should be communicated with students clearly and by the first course start date;
2. Online courses must meet the same clock hour requirements as traditional (lecture) courses. See OU clock hour requirements published by enrollment services, under Clock Hour Requirement);
3. Faculty should follow the same academic policies and procedures regarding cheating, plagiarism, and appropriate behavior applicable to students attending face-to-face courses;
4. Preparing and teaching an effective online course takes at least as much time as a face-to-face course. For this reason, laying sound groundwork especially with a thorough and detailed syllabus will go a long way in dealing with potential stressors for both faculty and students.

## CONTENT- *Design & Organize*

### 1. Course Syllabus

- Any course that uses online instruction should indicate so in the course syllabus;
  - Consistent course pacing helps retain online students. If an online course does not follow traditional course pacing such as a module per week or if Monday is not the start date of a week, faculty should clearly indicate it in the syllabus;
  - An online syllabus typically includes more details about course content and procedures than might have traditionally been stated verbally in a face-to-face classroom. In addition to OU course syllabi requirement, the following information is usually included in an online syllabus.
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- Communication Plan (e.g., a regularly scheduled virtual office hour, Skype name, web chat, telephone, timeframe to reply e-mails, faculty availability on weekends and holidays, any face-to-face meetings if applicable, etc.)
  - Participation Expectations (e.g., weekly time commitment, participation in discussion board, posting, frequency of web access, online tests, assignments, etc.)
  - Course Format (e.g., course pacing such as a module per week or two weeks, etc.)
  - Netiquette Guidelines (e.g., rules for different opinions, appropriate writing styles and languages,
  - Technical Requirement (e.g., required and recommended computer system components such as Adobe Reader, browser, video player, Internet speed, etc.)
  - Student Resources and Support (e.g., who to contact in case of technical problems, support services for] students with disabilities, library reserve, etc.)

## **2. Overall Course Structure and Format**

- Faculty should organize materials to provide students a clear global view of the course. Methods include, but are not limited to, by week, topic, module, era, and project. Pay attention to group the course materials for clarity and readability;
- Make sure that the chunking of the course materials is consistent throughout the site, enabling students to quickly locate course materials;
- Terminology should be consistent throughout course (e.g., assignment names).

## **3. Course Materials**

- Align course materials with course goals, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies;
- To accommodate different learning styles, faculty should present course materials in different formats such as texts, videos, audio, hyperlinks, slides, screen casts, static pictures, 3D images, and embedded annotations;
- Break video and audio lectures into chunks to better retain students' attention; often, segments on the order of six minutes in length are optimal;
- Avoid dating materials and locking course materials into a particular sequence in order to facilitate updates in the future;
- Seek out and integrate relevant online resources into the course;
- Design assignments and assessment strategies that are clear and more likely to work well in the online environment such as online quizzes, small online group discussions, online peer review, collaborative wikis, and reflective blogs.

## **4. Student Accessibility**

- All course materials should adhere to ADA requirements, which contains equivalent alternatives to auditory/visual/video materials; follow OU's Electronic and Information Technology (EIT) and Multimedia Accessibility Policy;
- The course site should adhere to ADA requirements; follow OU's Electronic and Information Technology (EIT) and Multimedia Accessibility Policy;
- Provide clear links or information in the syllabus and/or course site regarding student accessibility, if necessary. Link to OU's accessibility guidelines (The WebAIM Web Accessibility Principles Quick Reference is probably most helpful).

## **1. TEACHING**

- Teaching an online course is not the same as teaching a correspondence course. In the Final Audit of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods by Department of Education (page 3, 18-20), some helpful distinctions are made between correspondence and online courses. In an online course, a majority of assignments should not be due at end of semester to avoid course being considered “self-paced.” Additionally, discussions should be primarily instructor initiated and required;
- Online instructional time needs to equate to that of the traditional classroom in terms of lecturing, monitoring student learning, providing feedback, and grading.

## **2. INTERACTION STRATEGIES**

To engage and connect students in an online course, faculty should create opportunities for students to interact at three levels indicated below.

- Student interaction with course materials: Faculty can diversify the presentation of course materials to accommodate different learning styles, provide self-assessment quizzes for students, and create rubrics to help students understand expectations of assignments, and so on;
- Student interaction with faculty: Faculty can facilitate online discussions, provide immediate feedback and grades to projects, respond to e-mails, send out notifications, set up Q&A forums, check on student progress, encourage students who fall behind, and so on;
- Student interaction with students: Faculty can have students participate in online discussion forums, do peer review, engage in collaborative projects, help answer Q&A, chat in informal forums, and so on;
- In a face-to-face class, the physical presence of the instructor allows for immediate communication to clarify any ambiguous information, and students may ask and receive answers more readily. In an online course, the immediate communication is blocked by the asynchronous communication and exacerbated by the absence of social cues. For this reason, it is very important for faculty to respond to students’ e-mails, facilitate online discussions, provides feedback to projects, post grades and notifications, among other course needs, in a timely manner (e.g., respond to e-mails in 48 hours, participate in online discussions weekly, and provide feedback to projects in one or two weeks.)

## **1. STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION**

Student-to-student interaction is essential to building a learning community and reducing online students' sense of isolation. Online discussion is the foundation of student interaction.

- In addition to discussion forums in a course management system, discussion groups can be facilitated in Wikis, Twitter, Facebook, and Google Hangout. Keep in mind, however, the issues with hosting discussions on these sites might be: data mining of student information, poor discussion format (e.g., not threaded), retention of learning records, possible FERPA violations, and so on;
- Faculty mediation of discussion groups is required in an online course. To balance the vitality of faculty versus student interaction in the discussion groups and also be able to manage large amounts of posts, some best practices for faculty include, but are not limited to, explaining detailed online discussion process in the syllabus, having small discussion groups, assigning roles and responsibilities to student facilitators, and providing rubrics for accessing quality and quantity of posts;
- Faculty should require their students to reply to one another in discussion forums with overall expectations quantity and quality of posts in the syllabus. A rubric should be provided to students if a discussion forum is evaluated;
- Faculty should plan well-structured discussion questions, debate scenarios, case studies, and other peer-interaction activities;
- It is suggested not to just have one online discussion group for the whole class if the class size is bigger than 19. Putting students in small groups can enhance peer interaction. Faculty can form small discussion groups for students or inform students that they can self-select team members (e.g. in the syllabus or notification).

## **2. INFORMAL PEER INTERACTION**

- In addition to an academic discussion board, faculty can set up an informal forum to hold off-topic conversation and to foster and strengthen the student community;
- Faculty should inform students to use academic and non-academic forums for different purposes.

## **1. STRATEGIES**

- Similar to presenting course materials in multiple forms to accommodate online students' different learning styles, faculty should use different assessment strategies to assess online students' success, such as discussion participation, individual assignments, collaborative projects, peer review, case study, among other strategies. In doing so, faculty can assess a broader range of skills, motivate students, and can help deter online plagiarism;
- If auto-graded tests are used in an online course, faculty can use various forms of testing such as true or false questions, filling in the blank, matching, and sequencing in addition to multiple-choice tests. Faculty can also build a bank of test items so that students do not always get the same test items, but are still assessed as to their learning of course materials;
- Think about the parameters of online test conditions such as time limits, amount of attempts, due dates, and proctoring services.

## **2. FEEDBACK**

- Since online students do not have immediate access to the instructor, faculty should provide feedback to students early and often;
- To help students make progress, link feedback to the objectives of the assignment and assessment criteria;
- Do not use online quizzes as the only way to provide feedback. Students can receive feedback via graded projects, informal peer feedback in discussions, ungraded self-check study tools, and so on;
- Turnitin, a built-in plagiarism prevention tool in OU course management system, can provide useful feedback to both faculty and students.

## **3. STUDENT INPUT FOR COURSE IMPROVEMENT**

- Faculty should provide opportunities to gather input from students on an ongoing basis in order to inform course improvements.

\* Your college may have additional requirements and/or processes regarding online course design.