Teaching Online at UD Best Practices Guide

Version 1.0 – April 14, 2009, Updated January 26, 2015

Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center
UDit – Curriculum Innovation and E-Learning

Delivering Quality Online

In "A Vision of Excellence", the faculty, staff and students of the University of Dayton are called to create transformative learning experiences in our academic programs that align with our Catholic and Marianist tradition while maintaining a high level of excellence.

At many institutions of higher education, online courses and programs are managed within administrative structures that are outside the more traditional academic units. At the University of Dayton, our credit-based courses are delivered within and by the traditional academic units, and as such must meet the quality standards defined by the academic units, at the department level and by the various accreditation bodies.

It is therefore the responsibility of faculty teaching online to build a virtual learning community that provides transformational learning experiences while maintaining rigor and academic standards. This guide can provide an overview of the best practices to create and deliver an online course.

See: http://president.udayton.edu/digitalAssets/20062_VisionExcellence9-9-05.pdf

Audience for this Guide

This guide is aimed at faculty delivering individual "free-standing" online courses or sections. For those faculty teaching in courses or sections that have higher levels of integration (such as within the School of Education and Allied Professions), there may be constraints imposed on the structure and pedagogies used in a course to ensure consistency across an academic program.

For this edition of the guide, we are assuming that the online courses are primarily asynchronous and delivered through the Web. Because Isidore is the new learning management system for UD, we will be describing how best to use Isidore.

Best Practices Teaching Online

The following suggestions and best practices can help you develop and deliver an online course. Remember to ask the E-Learning Lab of the LTC for further information of if you have questions.

1. **Planning and Development**
    a. Give yourself time for planning and developing the structure of your online course. Rushed and poorly organized courses can be very confusing to students online, since there may be few signals to help them understand what is happening.
    b. Research and consider the best pedagogical approaches (see details below). One of the better frameworks for thinking about higher education (undergraduate and graduate) is the seven principles outlined by Chickering and Gamson (see Appendix A).
    c. Take the necessary time to develop a complete syllabus (see details below).
    d. Consult with the staff of the Office of Curriculum Innovation and E-Learning in the LTC to become familiar with the tools and approaches used in delivering the course.
    e. Be familiar with the UD mission and importance of quality. Are there other expectations that your department articulate for online courses? Check with the department chair.

2. **Comparing Traditional and Online Courses**
    a. Recognize that online classes are different from traditional face-to-face courses.
    b. The two most common reasons for students to perform poorly in an online course is that they do not fully engage in the class, or the instructor fails to provide sufficient mechanisms for the students to communicate and remain engaged.
    c. Taking a course online means that it has to be designed with a greater level of attention to proving students with engaging learning activities and for the instructor to also remain fully engaged in delivering and managing the class.
    d. In most cases the curriculum for an online course should not and need not differ from a traditional face-to-face course. However, traditional face-to-face classes that relied on lecture-based delivery of content will need significant development in going online.
    e. Many instructors report that the practices they use in creating an online class have helped to inform them in improving their face-to-face classes.
    f. For more information see: http://www.cjlt.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/179/177

3. **Design with Accessibility in Mind from the Very Beginning**
    a. In a process called "Universal Design," the instructor should consciously design and then deliver the course using approaches that are "accessible" to students of all abilities, including those students that may have various forms of disabilities or impediments.

Since the Web is delivery medium, we need to adapt our materials and practices so that all students can participate. See Appendix B.

b. For more details see: http://www.webaim.org/intro/#principles

4. Create an Accessible Learner-Centered Syllabus

a. The syllabus should clearly articulate the expectations for students, the methods of interaction, the course objectives/outcomes and an outline of the topics covered. Use encouraging language that helps inform and motivate the learner.

b. Make sure the syllabus is accessible for all students, by using clear large fonts (e.g. Arial 12 point) with subsections identified with predefined headings (Heading 1, Heading 2 etc.) to help screen readers for students with visual impairments. Wherever graphics or pictures are used, there needs to be text-based explanations as well.

c. The syllabus needs to include a statement about accommodations and services for students with special learner needs. See Appendix C.

d. Ensure students get the syllabus early – even before the course begins. Consider emailing the file, or posting it on your Isidore site.

e. Ensure the syllabus remains available throughout the course.

f. Do not change the syllabus during the course.

5. Design the Course with a Modular Structure

a. To help guide students through manageable "chunks" of materials and activities, it is important to have a clearly-defined course structure by using a modular layout. Each module acts as the repository of course materials, activities, assignments etc. This is rather like the way a chapter represents a logical chunk of material in a textbook – but modules frequently span book chapters.

b. Each module can begin with a "Learning Guide" document that provides instructions and information that guides the students through the module. Where possible, make all updateable information (such as page numbers for a specific edition of the textbook) available in the Learning Guide – so you do not have additional files that need to be updated when book editions change.

c. Each module should have roughly the same structure so students can better manage their time appropriately. Modules can be unveiled throughout the semester, but do not produce surprises by changing the modules.

d. For more information see Smith, 2008 (*Conquering the Content*; Jossey-Bass).

6. Delivering Content

a. There are two ways to connect with students across the Web… synchronously (all at the same time) and asynchronously (at different times). Tools like Blackboard Collaborate (a.k.a. Collaborate Classroom) can be used if the instructor wants to deliver a lecture-like experience to the students, but this is a demanding technology and requires everyone to be available at the same time without any hindering technical problems. Check with the E-Learning Lab if you would like to use synchronous delivery.

b. Asynchronous tools are usually preferred by students because it gives them greater scheduling flexibility. Our main asynchronous tools are Web sites maintained within Isidore, and stand-alone sites created using or Expression Web.

c. It's relatively straight forward to publish lecture notes and reading guides to your course Web site. As with all materials on the site, they need to be made as accessible as possible (see notes about the syllabus above).

d. For faculty that use PowerPoint presentations, you can export the slides as PDF's or leave them as PPT files if you wish. It is possible to create narrated recordings, either within PowerPoint (under SlideShow – Record Narration) or by using separate programs like Camtasia or Snag It that can save the files as Flash videos for playback across the Web. Camtasia and Snag It are also very useful in recording anything on your computer screen, such as demonstrations of activities conducted within Excel or other programs.

e. The E-Learning Lab can help you utilize the tools described above. For Isidore, see Appendix D and https://www.udayton.edu/udit/communications_collaboration/e-learning/isidore.php; For Camtasia or Snag it training, see: https://www.udayton.edu/udit/tech_skill_enhance/camtasia_recording_studio.php;

f. To help students know a little bit more about you as a person, you may want to consider having a video recording made by our Media Arcade. We can digitize the video so that students can view your personal introduction to the course, and thereby have a visual reference to who you are as an instructor and as a real person.

g. Remember to respect the copyrights of media you use in your class by including copyright citations and restricting your usage to Fair Use provisions of federal copyright laws (see: http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright_and_Fair_Use_Overview/). You can also include your own copyright notice as a footnote in your own materials (e.g. Copyright ©2009, first-name last-name). In some cases a faculty member may be compensated by a department to create course content for others to use – so it's important to ask for clarification from a department chair on who owns the right to the created work.

7. Creating Engagement and Understanding

a. Remember that learning is a social process, and students would seriously struggle if an instructor only relies on delivery of static content, devoid of social interactions. Indeed,

social interaction is such a necessary step to comprehension that a significant part of the course grade should be earned through participation. This helps students to recognize how important it is to keep up with the course (e.g. login frequently and follow through with activities).

b. Build pedagogical approaches into the course that allows students to learn through different methods, and can then apply what they are learning through social interactions.

c. A common approach is to require students (i.e. for credit) to post messages to a discussion board (e.g. the Forum tool within Isidore). These discussions have to be framed with appropriate prompts, and with consistent and frequent moderations from the instructor.

d. There are many ways discussions can be lead online, and there are other active learning approaches that can be used. Research what works, and slowly adopt techniques that work best for you and your students. For more information see Conrad and Donaldson, 2004 (*Engaging the Online Learner*; Jossey-Bass). For information on how to use Isidore, see https://www.udayton.edu/udit/communications_collaboration/e-learning/isidore.php

e. For more information on the student perspective of learning online see: http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM07110.pdf

8. Assessment Methods

a. A hallmark of good teaching is the frequent use of assessments to provide feedback to guide students in improving their understanding. This is true of any course, but is especially true of an online course because the students can feel that they are less connected than in a face-to-face class.

b. Use a variety of methods, including written homework assignments, online discussions, and quizzes – each with a quick turnaround and with clear feedback to improve learning. When using less-frequently encountered assessment methods (such as grading a blog), make sure you provide sufficient explanation of the grading mechanism. Rubrics are especially helpful in such circumstances for both student and instructor. For more details on the variety of online assessment methods see: Palloff and Pratt, 2009 (*Assessing the Online Learner*; Jossey-Bass).

c. As with any class, the instructor must recognize that cheating is a distinct possibility – and online courses can suffer the same problems. Provide explicit instructions about your policies regarding cheating and reference the student honor code (https://www.udayton.edu/studev/dean/civility/index.php). Where possible search for plagiarism using Turnitin.com (see

https://www.udayton.edu/udit/communications_collaboration/e-learning/turnitin.php) and help students understand what plagiarism is. For more information see http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM0348.pdf

d. If you require a proctored exam, then you will need to coordinate such efforts with your own department, and communicate this process clearly with your students even before the start of the semester – since students may be geographically isolated and unable to travel to a site where proctoring is offered.

9. Student Teaming and Collaboration

a. Although students will probably be unable to physically meet together, it is still possible for instructors to assign problems that require team participation or collaboration amongst students. This helps to create the social context in which greater engagement and deeper learning can occur, while also reflecting UD's community-building mission.

b. It is very important to provide sufficient explanation and rationale for the collaboration, to provide instructions on how to connect online and to provide monitoring and guidance of the process to help prevent frustrations if problems arise. Students may be using collaborative tools in their social life, but they are going to be unfamiliar with your expectations.

c. The instructor should be an active participant in guiding and prompting the student to work together. The students usually do not come to the course with all the skills necessary to be up and running on their own. By moderating collaborative and team based activities the instructor can be modeling skills of a scholar or professional.

d. There are a variety of team-based and collaborative learning activities. For more details see: Palloff and Pratt, 2005 (*Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community*; Jossey-Bass).

10. Transparency, Evaluation and Improvement

a. Departments routinely use faculty-based peer observation and analysis of learning artifacts to help gauge quality of teaching. We anticipate online courses to increasingly use peer-based review mechanisms. Even if such approaches are not fully utilized in your department, instructors online should design and implement their courses with the knowledge that peer review will be used for both formative and summative purposes.

b. The rubric provided by Quality Matters can provide insights into course quality. See Appendix E. For more information see: http://qminstitute.org/home/Public%20Library/About%20QM/RubricStandards2008-2010.pdf

c. Where possible, you should ask colleagues to review and make suggestions to improve an online class. A hallmark of good teaching is openness to sharing practices and gaining the feedback necessary to continually improve.
d. As with traditional face-to-face courses, online courses must be evaluated using a student-teaching evaluation form. Towards the end of the semester, UD's E-Learning Lab will email the instructor regarding the details of this process.
e. At present the E-Learning Lab does not have a formal equivalent to the MID (Mid-Term Instructional Diagnosis), but we are looking to creating a mechanism in the future.

This document is a work in progress. If you have ideas to add or suggestions for changes, please let us know.

Attachments:

- Appendix A – Using Isidore with Chickering and Gamson's 'Seven Principles'
- Appendix B – Principles of Accessible Web Design
- Appendix C – Accessible Syllabus
- Appendix D – Introducing the Tools Available in Isidore
- Appendix E – Quality Matters Rubric