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Five Best Practices for Developing Online Courses

With the competitive nature of the distance learning market and the importance of institutional reputation, it is essential to provide students with quality courses and a positive experience in order to retain them. This can be accomplished through the strategic implementation of best practices at your institution. However, best practices at the institutional level often take some time to develop and implement, but instructors and course developers can take immediate steps in their own online or distance courses to enhance and augment the learning experiences for students.

The following outlines a few best practices to focus on during course development.

Best Practice #1: Incorporate a “Start Here” or “Getting Started” section in your online course.

This might take the form of a customized home page for your course that students see upon entering the class environment, or perhaps an asset placed in the first module of the course.

- Ensure that the syllabus is easily located and provide direction to students about where they can find it.
- Provide a self-introduction, including a welcome from the instructor. Also provide an opportunity for students to introduce themselves in the course itself (such as in a discussion board specifically for introductions).
- Clearly state the course objectives and learning outcomes for the course. These should also appear in the syllabus, but can be reiterated in the Start Here/Getting Started section of the course.

- Provide instructions or guidelines for course communication. This might include a statement describing how students are to communicate with one another, as well as response time for emails sent to the instructor and for feedback on graded assignments.
- Include a statement or description for office hours (virtual web conferencing tool, e-mail, phone; are they regularly scheduled or by appointment only, or a combination of the two?).
- Refer to and reiterate any important institutional or course-specific policies that appear in the syllabus.

Best Practice #2: Design and organize the course to reflect the structure and instructional strategies upon which the course is built.

- Ensure that navigation within the course is intuitive, making it easy for students to proceed through instructional content and learning activities. Many learning management systems provide instructors or course developers with a Student View of the course, which can be helpful since students are typically presented with a different interface than that which is presented to instructors or course developers.
- Establish a clear structure for the course, organizing content by modules or units that are logically sequenced in accordance with the course topics.
- Align content with course objectives and stated learning outcomes, and confirm that course activities meet credit hour standards. A useful rule of thumb is to treat one credit hour as equivalent to 15 contact hours of student engagement and 30 hours of student work over the duration of the semester.
- Incorporate communication and collaboration tools in the course, aligning their purposes and uses within the course with stated course objectives and learning outcomes.
- Attach rubrics with points and guidelines to each graded activity to provide students with direction in how they will be evaluated.

Best Practice #3: Incorporate a variety of ways for students to interact with instructional content and with the instructor, and to interact and collaborate with one another in the online environment.

Interaction and collaboration in this context refers to learning activities and events supporting and encouraging student-to-instructor, student-to-student, and student-to-content interactions.

- Clearly describe student participation requirements and expectations in the syllabus and activity prompts.
- Send weekly announcements and reminders to keep your students on track with their assignments and to orient them to the topics, concepts, and ideas presented in each module.
- Establish discussions as a central aspect of the course with prompts that are generative of debate. Refrain from using discussion prompts that have “correct” answers to encourage students to reflect on and incorporate their prior knowledge and experience in their discussion posts.
- Provide feedback relating to student performance in a timely manner.

Best Practice #4: Incorporate the use of technology into the course in manners that are effective and pedagogically appropriate.

Effective use of course technology refers to the successful integration of technology into the online course and its use in a variety of formats that help students to achieve course goals and objectives.

- Make effective use of online instructional tools and provide clear instructions for using the tools for completion of activities and assignments.
- Present primary course materials (like video presentations, readings, etc.) using appropriate formats that are compatible across computer platforms and devices (e.g., pdf, rtf, mp3, mp4, etc.). To the greatest extent possible, refrain from using proprietary formats that students might have difficulty accessing without specialized software.
- Provide transcripts to accompany audio materials (e.g., mp3, wav, streaming audio, etc.).
- Ensure that instructional videos (e.g., mp4s, linked videos, etc.) also include closed-captions.
- Test the tools that are incorporated into the course well in advance of the course start date, and develop alternative or contingency plans should the tools fail.

Best Practice #5: Ensure that appropriate security measures are enabled for online tests, quizzes, exams, or other assessment activities, configured to help students achieve the learning outcomes of the course.

This may include attending to the design of assessment activities, as well as leveraging features within the learning management system.

- Develop question pools to ensure students have equivalent but different online tests (e.g., select 25 questions from a pool of 100 questions).

- Utilize the configuration options for online tests, quizzes, and/or exams. These are often included in your institution's learning management system and might include options for randomization, how many quiz items appear at any one time, time limits, open and close dates, and mechanisms for preventing students from backtracking to previous items.
- Incorporate the use of proctoring solutions as appropriate or required by your institution. Check your institution's policies to make sure.

Finally, recognize the importance of an iterative approach to course development, that course development is an ongoing process. Upon conclusion of the course, gather feedback from students about their learning experiences, either formally through institutional evaluations or informally through a survey placed within the course, for example.

Additionally, reflect on your experiences in teaching the course. Feedback from students, in conjunction with your self-reflection as the instructor, can be used as critical information to further refine the design, structure, and content of the course to enhance the experience for students who might take the course in the future.

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