TEACHING ONLINE
A Quick Reference for Online Instructors

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IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
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Table of Contents

Foreword 1
Introduction 2
Designing an Online Course 3
Understanding Adult Learners 3
Learner Analysis 4
Six Questions to Ask When Designing a Course 5
Seven Teaching Strategies to Use on Adult Learners 6
Creating the Course Syllabus 8
Selecting Technical Resources 10
Resources on Course Design 11

Developing the Course Content 12
Providing Learner-Content Interaction 12
Presenting Course Content 13
A) Presentation Formats 15
Resources on Content Presentation and Development 16

Creating an Online Community 17
Getting to Know Your Students 17
Facilitating Interaction 19

A) Learner-Instructor Interaction 20
B) Learner-Learner Interaction 21
C) Learner-Self Interaction 23
Online Discussions as a Strategy for Interaction 24
Creating Effective Online Class Discussions 25
Resources on Online Communities 28

Assessing the Learner 30
Designing Learner Assessment 30
Analyzing Traditional Testing Methods 32
Creating Alternative Forms of Assessment 33
A) Open Book Examinations 34
B) Electronic Portfolios 36
C) Discussions and Chat 37
Selecting an Assessment Method 38
Important Issues on Assessment 39
Resources on Learner Assessment 41

The Future of Online Learning and Teaching 44

For Further Information 45
Foreword

This reference is filled with practical wisdom for people teaching and learning via distance technology. Dr. Ana-Paula Correia and her colleague Dr. Farrah Dina Yusop concisely and artfully guide educators on how to develop and gear the course to the unique needs and motivations of the distance learners. Their work provided great value to the Iowa State University’s Seed Science Center in designing, monitoring and improving the global on-line curriculum on “seed technology and business” practices to feed the world. They have shared a number of those insights in this valuable resource that will empower educators at all levels to meet the changing needs of adult learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Online teaching is not much different from teaching face-to-face in that they both require careful planning and implementation. Even though online students generally are more self-directed as learners, many times they lose motivation and connection from the content, instructor, and their peers. On the other hand, instructors do not receive continuous feedback on their performance as teachers as they are no longer able to see their students’ faces and read their body language. These are some reasons that make teaching online challenging and rewarding as these obstacles are systematically overcome. This quick reference book provides simple teaching strategies and shares good practices on creating an online course, supporting a learning community and assessing the students. At the end of each section additional resources are offered. While the information presented here is useful, please consider its appropriateness for your course and your goals as an online instructor at Iowa State University. We welcome your feedback to improve this reference book, please address your feedback to Ana-Paula Correia (accoreia@iastate.edu).

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Designing an Online Course

Understanding Adult Learners

The first step on designing effective online instruction is to understand adult learners. There are several general points about your learners’ characteristics that you ought to know. Below are six characteristics of adult learners (Knowles, 1996):

1. Adults want to know why they should learn something. Just to say this is good for them to learn is not enough. A reason for learning something needs to be offered.

2. Adults have many life and professional experiences that they have accumulated (e.g., work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education). While teaching, instructors need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base and use it whenever it is relevant to the topic. On a different note, these experiences may also cause learners to have biases towards some topics and be less open to new ideas.

3. Adults are autonomous and self-directed. Instructors need to handle these learners as being capable of taking responsibility of their own learning by involving them in the learning process. Instructors take more of a facilitator role than of the driving force behind the learning process.

4. Adults are task-oriented; therefore they learn content that is directly applicable to their work or other responsibilities. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake, so instructors need to be explicit about how the course will be useful to them on the job.

5. Adults are goal-oriented. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show earlier in the course students how the class will help them attain their goals.
Designing an Online Course

Learner Analysis

Conducting an analysis of your learners’ needs is also an important step to be able to match their expectations with your course. Course development should be shaped by the results of these analysis. You can identify and assess students’ needs in such areas as (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2004):

- Technical/computer skills
- Learning styles
- Available resources
- Desired outcomes
- Prior learning and working experiences

You can also assess the students’ online course experience by asking why they chose an online course, whether it is their first online course, and expectations from online course.

Information about your learners can be collected through CVs or resumes, documentation on educational background, entry surveys, self-diagnostic tests, observation of other online classes, learners’ reflections, case studies, course evaluations and by requesting student feedback throughout the course (an anonymous forum can be set up on the learning management system you use to elicit constant input from the students).

As you collect this information you will be able to improve the design of your course and revise your course objectives, activities, examples, assignments, discussion and communication strategies.

Tip: You can use last years’ observations and course evaluation results to assess students’ needs and expectations. A careful analysis of your class roster reveals important information (e.g., professional activity, geographical location, age).
Six Questions to Ask When Designing a Course

While planning your course for adult learners, there are six questions you need to ask yourself (Knowles, 1996):

1. What procedures should I use with this group of learners to create a learning climate consisting of mutual respect, mutual trust, collaboration rather than competition, support instead of judgment, and create a people-focused environment?

2. What procedures should I use to involve the learners in the course planning?

3. What procedures should I use to allow learners to assess their own learning needs (a learning need is not a learning need unless learners perceive they need it)?

4. What procedures should I use to help learners to translate their learning needs into learning objectives?

5. What procedures should I use to involve learners in the design and development of the online learning experience (e.g., identify resources and strategies to fulfill the learning objectives)?

6. What procedures should I use to allow learners to responsibly evaluate their accomplishment in the course?

In sum, adult learners should be actively involved in the process of learning online.
Seven Teaching Strategies to Use on Adult Learners

Leonard & DeLacey (2002) identify seven essential design principles to consider when developing learning programs with an online component. They are:

1. **Recognize that learning is largely a social activity**: small group and community building activities support learning experiences since it builds on the fact that humans are social beings.

2. **Integrate learning into life**: making connections to a student’s work or life outside the course is critical because it provides a context in which the acquired knowledge can be used. One of the needs for professional education today is a link to daily work, which results in immediate positive reinforcement from enhanced job performance.

3. **Enable learning by doing**: practice is the best way for a student to truly gain the mastery of a subject, skill or concept.

4. **Encourage learning by discovery**: research (Auble, Franks & Soraci, 1979) indicates that people retain information longer when they are given the opportunity to realize ideas and solutions from their own understanding. Even though it is easier to structure teaching as a set of clear steps detailing exactly what is to be taught, capturing enough of the messiness of real life problems in one’s teaching stimulates discovery.
Designing an Online Course

Seven Teaching Strategies to Use on Adult Learners (cont.)

5. *Remember that individuals have different mental receptors for material:* one important challenge for the online instructor is to assess how much of the course content the student may already know from different life experiences. On one hand instructors can presume a certain level of knowledge and do not have to spend time on remedial materials, but on the other hand these students require more sophisticated and context-rich material, which may be harder to deliver online.

6. *Make learning fun:* students who are engaged and involved are obviously more open to the learning experiences. A playful non-threatening environment helps anyone, including adult learners to benefit from an online course.

7. *Build in assessment, but do not delude yourself into thinking you can measure learning:* quantitative assessment becomes more difficult when content complexity increases. However, look at the program goals and measure progress against specific goals. Progress can be translated not only in terms of outcomes, but also as improvement of processes. Use alternative forms of assessment as peer feedback and individual reflections (for more on assessment check pages 30-41).

Tip

Create activities that allow students to share their experiences and learn from each other. Leverage your students’ pre-existing knowledge when it comes to giving practical examples and making links to the field.
Designing an Online Course

Creating the Course Syllabus

A syllabus represents a learning contract between you and your learners. It allows the learner to have an understanding of the course as a whole and the instructor to state personal philosophies about teaching, learning, and the content area. According to Parkes & Harris (2002) a syllabus should include the following information:

• Title and dates of course
• Department offering the course
• Credit hours earned
• Title and rank of instructor(s)
• Availability of instructor(s)
• Pre- or co-requisites

Even though your policies may be carefully stated on the course syllabus, students often need clarification on certain points. Discussing the course syllabus with your students allows for initial trust development.

- Clear and accurate course calendar
- Required texts and other materials
- Course objectives, linked to professional standards
- Description of course content
  - Description of assessment procedures
  - Grading policies: components and weights
  - Attendance policy
  - Late assignment policy
  - Make-up exam policy
- Policies on incompletes and revisions
- Academic dishonesty policy
- Academic freedom policy
Designing an Online Course

Creating the Course Syllabus (cont.)

- Accommodation of disabilities policy
- Planning and self-management skills
- Time to spend outside of class
- Tips on how to do well on assessments
- Common misconceptions or mistakes
- Specific study strategies
- Campus resources for assistance
- Offices that aid students with disabilities
- A model of high-quality work (this is particularly important when you teach online)

Additional considerations for your online course syllabus are: directions on accessing the course materials online; expectations of students’ participation; an explanation of course procedures: how the online classroom is organized; how students should proceed each week for class activities; how to label assignments sent by e-mail; where to post materials in the classroom; dates for the synchronous (i.e. live) sessions, if any.

Courses should provide students with clear, complete and timely information on the curriculum and course requirements, nature of faculty/learner interaction, prerequisite technology competencies, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support service (Leiblein, 2001).

Tip

Go over the syllabus in detail on the first day of class, allowing time for questions. Students will not necessarily read the syllabus word for word unless you underline its importance.
Designing an Online Course

Selecting Technical Resources

- Be comfortable when using the online tools/system available to deliver the course. Learners are going to model your use of the tools/system, so you want to demonstrate how they can be used effectively (Kearsley, 2009).

- Off-campus learners with modems are provided with low-bandwidth alternatives for downloading media or compact disks with course content can be mailed to them.

- Technology is used to engage students in learning, not just for viewing but also for interacting with other learners, the course instructor(s) and the course content.

- Online learners must have access to the learning resources normally available to on-campus students. These include: registration services, libraries, technology support, bookstores, etc. You should provide students with links to these resources and to any other instructional materials necessary for the class.

- Check the technical support available on-campus and work closely with the staff of these offices in order to select the best tools/systems that meet your needs as an instructor as well as your students’ needs as online learners.

Tip
Rely on the technical support available on-campus and on students with technical expertise. These students may be interested in having teaching experience, and working as your teaching assistant will fulfill this ambition.
Designing an Online Course

Resources on Course Design

- Practical tips for creating effective online environments
  http://www.onlineteachingtips.org
- Best practices and publications on practical applications
  http://www.sloanconsortium.org
- Exemplary online course rubrics for WebCT
  http://www.csuchico.edu/celt/roi/eoi_campus.shtml

References


DuCharme-Hansen, B.A. & Dupin-Bryant, P.A. (2004). Distance Education Plans: Course Planning for Online Adult Learners. TechTrends, 49(2), 31-39


Developing the Course Content

Providing Learner-Content Interaction

Learner-content interaction happens when the students examine or study the course content and participate in the class activities (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Continuous interaction with content improves learning online. Listed below are some strategies to improve learner-content interaction:

- Course materials should provide a cognitive interaction with the content. You should design your materials in such a way that your learner engages “in reflective, mental conversation about the material” (Parker, 1999, p. 14). To accomplish this you need to provide plenty of examples, thinking activities and reflective approaches to help learners to link their experiences with the content.

- For each content area or topic you need to use similar templates and formats. Simplicity, consistency and repetition of important parts are very helpful to increase learner-content interaction.

- Since adult learners often are full-time professionals, they have very limited time to work on their online course-related activities. Therefore you may consider providing alternative options, such as, ready-to-print content, downloadable video and audio content that are compatible with MP3 players and/or other mobile devices.

Tip

Divide your course content into pieces and create separate sub-pages. Make internal connections among the sub-pages and add external links to expand on the topics addressed.
Developing the Course Content

Presenting Course Content

- Here are some recommendations for instructors who use PowerPoint with voice-over: (1) be aware of the length of the presentations, try to keep your presentations short; (2) it is very difficult for students to stare at the computer screen, looking at one slide for more than 30 minutes! They will easily get distracted and demotivated to relate to the content. Try to limit 2 to 3 minutes per slide if possible; (3) graphics and text should complement one another, provide meaningful captions to steer the discussion to your purpose. Be wary of inserting graphics just for graphics’ sake.

- Consider alternative ways to present course content, such as video clips, audio segments or combine your lectures with Interactive whiteboard functions.

- Generally use simple and informal writing: use shorter sentences and write directly and informally to the online students to help reduce the psychological distance of an online course. This increases the perceived “instructor immediacy.”

- Get straight to your point when possible. Apply the “inverted pyramid style,” in which the introduction and conclusions are presented first, followed by details and background information.

Tip

PowerPoint presentations should not be longer than 5 to 10 minutes. In this manner the content is presented in smaller, more manageable segments.
Developing the Course Content

Presenting Course Content (cont.)

- Research (Nielsen, 2009) found that reading from computer screens is about 25% slower than reading from paper. Therefore, writing 50% less text in online materials is recommended.

- When inserting page numbers on slides, .pdf documents or web pages, it helps making the content structure explicit by writing “page 2 of 6: island ecosystems” rather than “page 2 of 6.”

- Use italics for quotations, foreign words or for inconspicuous stressing. Avoid large blocks of italics as they are less readable than normal text on-screen.

- Use boldface type to highlight keywords that are important to the subject of the text. Avoid large blocks of boldface text because they will lose their effectiveness.

- Use underline to indicate hyperlinks on web pages. Avoid using underline for non-linked text to avoid confusion.

- Use color in headings and avoid it within regular text. Also, text on a colored background should be used sparingly.

- Confine capitals to headings, warnings and titles. Avoid large blocks of text in upper-case because it significantly slows the reading process.

- Use white (or negative) spaces to highlight a paragraph or words in the midst of a dense text.

- Do not use a PowerPoint presentation unless an audio track is scripted and/or detailed slide notes are included to help describe the content within the PowerPoint.

Tip

Do not run presentations automatically and always provide learner control. If students do not have control on the presentations, they may experience anxiety due to unexpected situations.
Developing the Course Content

A) Presentation Formats

• Make printing an option and consider providing printable versions of key content optimized for print. Printable versions may take the form of .pdf or .doc files.

• Consider handouts (2 or 3 slides per page) for PowerPoint presentations. This will help reduce printing costs as well as allowing space for students to take notes.

• Consider inserting relevant video clips on concepts and processes to help present the course materials more effectively.

• If the course content involves logical procedures such as statistical steps, consider: (1) presenting one step at a time until completed; or, (2) providing example-driven presentations.

• If the course content involves demonstrations such as using certain software or even navigating through Blackboard Learn, consider using Flash-based screen-recording software such as Camtasia Studio to improve the presentation of the materials.

Tip

Before you present your course content try it on several monitors or laptops, or change your screen resolution to align your presentation to be properly viewed in each setting.
Developing the Course Content

Resources on Content Presentation and Development

- Creating your online presentations
  http://show.zoho.com/login.do
- Multimedia educational resource for learning and online teaching
  http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm
- Principles of online design
  http://www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign
- The inverted pyramid style
  http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/copywriting/writing-for-the-web.php#inverted_pyramid

References


Creating an Online Community

Getting to Know Your Students

There are multiple ways to get to know your students online. Some of the strategies to be considered are:

- Use a discussion board in Blackboard Learn (or any other learning management system) to create a discussion thread titled “Class Introductions.”
- Ask each student to briefly introduce themselves in the discussion board by stating their name, gender, current job or working experience, country (for international students), and expectations from the course – what do they want to learn about and why? This information will give you some ideas on which contents may be of particular interest to students, as well as providing topics for discussions. Ask students to post photos of themselves, their families, pets and/or place where they live. Most international students will be proud to share information about their countries and customs.
- Another option would be to ask students to upload one PowerPoint slide about themselves with their picture and a caption. These slides should accompany their brief introduction.
- Remember to introduce yourself (and co-instructor, if applicable). Share as much information about yourself as you are requesting from your students.

Tip

Do not hesitate to reveal details about your life, within a comfortable limit. This helps students to realize that there are things in common between you and them - adults with somewhat similar life stresses and challenges.
Creating an Online Community

Getting to Know Your Learner (cont.)

- If you plan to have synchronous (i.e. live) interaction with the students:
  
  1. Set up an Adobe Connect account with ISU Extension at http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ or contact the office at extensiononline@iastate.edu
  
  2. Learn to use Adobe Connect in advance (i.e. before classes begin).
  
  3. Ask students to upload their presentations about themselves to the system.
  
  4. In order that students get to know each other better, you may want to try this idea: (1) assign students to 2-member teams; (2) for each team ask students to introduce their team member to the rest of the class. This strategy helps to create initial bonds amongst the students.

- Limit the size of discussion groups. Rather than having an entire class interacting in one large group, break the class into smaller discussion groups of 4 or 5 students. This facilitates learners in getting to know each other more intimately. This can be done either using Blackboard Learn discussion board (asynchronously) or using Adobe Connect (synchronously).

Tip

Let your students understand that an online course can be more difficult than a traditional one because students have more responsibilities regarding their learning. Your role is more as of a facilitator rather than a director.
Creating an Online Community

Facilitating Interaction

Interaction is viewed as an important element in instruction, both in traditional face-to-face instruction as well as in online education (Hirumi, 2002).

Generally, interactions in an online environment can be categorized into four main categories:

A) Learner-Instructor interaction: meaning the interaction between the instructor and a learner or learners.

B) Learner-Learner interaction: as the interaction among the learners.

C) Learner–Self interaction: described as the “learner’s reflections on the content, learning process, and new understanding” (Soo & Bonk, 1998, p.3).

D) Learner-Content interaction: since the content can “be said to influence and likewise be influenced through people’s creation, action upon, and cognitive interpretation of that phenomenon” (Scheel & Branch, 1993, p. 9).

Learner-Content interaction has already been discussed in the “Developing the Course Content” section. The following pages focus on the other categories of interaction.
Creating an Online Community

A) Learner-Instructor Interaction

In online education, the instructor is expected to guide learners’ work and provide feedback. Following are some strategies to increase learner-instructor interaction (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004):

- Timely feedback is important to hold students’ motivations at an optimum level. When you give individual feedback to a student, he or she develops a sense of being connected to the course and concern on the part of the instructor. Feedback is also an indicator of instructor presence in the virtual environment.

- Instructor’s participation in online discussions increases perceived learning. When you participate in the conversations the quality of posts increases because learners feel more accountable for producing good responses and comments.

- In addition to asynchronous instructor’s presence, you can also increase your presence by arranging synchronous activities, such as: (1) set up periodical Question and Answer sessions using Blackboard Learn chat system (or any other chat system); (2) invite experts in the area or even textbook authors to give a talk about certain topics using audio tools in Blackboard Learn or Adobe Connect; or (3) have students presenting their professional projects related to the class.
Creating an Online Community

B) Learner-Learner Interaction

Learner-learner interaction is the most important factor to create a sense of community. Without it learners can feel alienated and isolated from the learning environment. To increase learner-learner interaction, you can:

- Offer students a space to get to know each other by encouraging them to chat or post in a more informal space such as “lounge”, “virtual café,” etc.
- Discuss thought-provoking topics or real-life cases related to the course content (e.g., found in YouTube.com). Provide some questions to guide students’ discussions and require them to defend their positions on the issues at hand.
- Have students debate a certain product (e.g. website, photo, journal article, poster etc.) posted to the Blackboard Learn discussion — have the students work in small groups to critique the artifact and post the main points of their critique.
- Celebrate the community’s professional (e.g., someone in class gets an article published) or personal (e.g., birth of a child) accomplishments. Be sensitive to the personal challenges of each member of the community, including yours. Being vulnerable is just another way to connect to your students and build a sense of camaraderie.

Tip

Try to recognize subversive hostility or emotional stress within a student’s post. Sometimes an email from the instructor probing the reasons behind the emotions can help overcome the issues.
Creating an Online Community

B) Learner-Learner Interaction (cont.)

- Assign students to work on a case study or project as a virtual team. Another option is to have students working to create a specific product (e.g. report, analysis, software, etc.).

- Instead of you leading the online session, request volunteers from among your student to work in pairs or small groups to present certain topics related to their interests. Reward the students’ initiative and performance (e.g., extra credits).

- Single topics addressed in the course should be brief in scope (or divided into different sub-topics) in order that students can discuss and relate them to their everyday working experiences.

  - Assign a student to summarize class reading and share with other students in the class.

  - Have one student each week provide some key questions related to particular course readings. During the first weeks of the course, you can model this activity and then invite students to participate. Students are able to bring their life and professional experiences into the course readings and engage in authentic conversations among them.

Tip
Structure your online class so that activities build on one another and promote collaboration. Do not assume that your students will know how to be effective in virtual teams. Be ready to support/guide the collaboration.
Creating an Online Community

C) Learner-Self Interaction

Self interaction is important to reveal learners’ critical thinking and reflective skills. To provide learner-self interaction, you can:

- Have students work individually to produce a summary of a pre-selected reading and/or case. This summary can be shared with others or be kept between the student and the instructor.
- Have students write a reflection on the class’ most important activities (be clear on how long this reflection should be).
- Have students respond to a poll or survey asking for their opinions (and/or rationale for the responses) on a subject, issue, or professional dilemma.

- If you invite a guest speaker to the class, have students prepare some “interview” questions to be addressed by the speaker during his or her talk.
- Have each student contributed to a course “encyclopedia” or “glossary” – such as definitions of specific terms, key concepts, exemplary cases, etc., in their own words. This “encyclopedia” can then be shared with the whole class in a wiki format (wiki is a website that allows the easy creation and editing of any number of inter-linked web pages via a web browser—e.g., Wikispaces.com).
Creating an Online Community

Online Discussions as a Strategy for Interaction

Online discussion is one of the means many instructors use to engage students in their learning and develop a sense of community. Discussions need careful thought and organization. As Poe & Stassen (2002) explain, below are some strategies you can use:

- Motivate learners to participate.
- Encourage substantive and relevant responses.
- Determine your role in guiding, moderating, and evaluating the quality of learner participation.

• Design discussions so that they are meaningful to learners.

To engage your learners during online discussions use topics that include:

- Reactions to a controversial reading.
- Feedback from an exercise performed and/or a pre-selected product.
- A debate.
- A case study.

Tip

Discussions in which students are simply expected to reproduce the course material become repetitive and irrelevant to the adult learner. Link the discussions to the students’ life and professional experiences.
Creating an Online Community

Creating Effective Online Class Discussions

- Define roles of each person involved, including the instructor, the facilitator (if any) and the discussants. These roles should be explained as clearly as possible to students ahead of time to assist in their planning.

- For example, assign learners a date by which to post a paper online, have other members read it and provide feedback; have one learner lead a discussion, another record and summarize the process, and another act as observer and commentator of group process (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

- Give learners control. Invite interested learners to moderate aspects of the course discussion. Volunteers then take on the role of initiating discussion, interacting with participants, and providing weaving or summary remarks. This could be made an extra credit activity. The instructor should provide appropriate training, support, and intervention if needed (Baran & Correia, 2009).

- Limit the number of messages to a reasonable amount. Students like this number to be set based upon class size so that they do not receive an enormous number of messages. When class sizes are large, separate discussion lists can be set up for subsections of the class to keep the number of messages reasonable and the conversations more open and risk-free.
Creating Effective Online Class Discussions (cont.)

Dunlap (2009a, 2009b) offers the following guidelines for launching and structuring discussions:

- Tie discussions to course events: projects, readings, preparing for an assessment/test, etc. Consider alternatives to the question-answer format such as role-playing, debates, case studies and games.

- Use high-level questions that are thought provoking, hypothetical, and controversial.

- Ask follow-up questions to stimulate conversation (e.g., “What reasons did you have for saying this?” “Can you please elaborate?” “What do you think might be the implications of your previous statement?”)

- Allow learners to choose which topics/questions on which to focus.

- Use provocative subject lines: “Three reasons why the author is dead wrong,” “Computers program children,” “All we need to know about teaching we can learn from skateboarders,” or “Why I love the Raiders.”

- As an instructor do not jump into the discussion right away. As soon as you start contributing to the discussion, students are less like to share alternative viewpoints.

- Post a weekly closure summary of the class discussion from the prior week. The discussion has run its course and participants have expressed their views independent of those of the course facilitator (Rossman, 1999).
Some discussion group online etiquette statements as given by Hansen (2009), is as follows:

- Do not post your emails in ALL CAPS. Capitalization is used for emphasis in email discussion groups, and all caps is the equivalent to shouting.
- Do write and edit your emails to the group carefully, especially when you are new to the group and trying to build a trustworthy relationship.
- Do not jump into heated discussions (and many of the discussions are often heated) until you are an accepted member of the group.

- Do keep your messages as concise and relevant to the group as possible.
- Do be respectful and tolerant of others' ideas and opinions.
- Avoid sarcasm as much as possible (to avoid being misunderstood).
- Do build a relationship with individual members (or the entire group). Once you have established a relationship, do begin strengthening and nurturing it.
Creating an Online Community

Resources on Online Communities

- Maximizing Classroom Collaboration Using Web 2.0 Technology
  http://www.slideshare.net/tcc07/maximizing-classroom-collaboration-using-web-20-technology
- Managing—and Motivating!—Distance Learning Group Activities
  http://www.tltgroup.org/gilbert/millis.htm
- Facilitating Every Student in an Online Course
  http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2001_03/ionpointers0301.pdf

References


Creating an Online Community

References (cont.)


Assessing the Learner

Designing Learner Assessment

Assessments are an important part of evaluating students’ understanding of the course. While selecting an assessment, consider the following:

- Create your assignments in reasonable quantity and scope.
- Provide samples to show your quality expectations.
- Provide rubrics and grading scales for each assessment.
- Provide detailed descriptions on each assignment.
- Provide due dates for each assessment and remind students frequently of due dates.
- Break down assignments into small chunks. This helps students to keep up with their work and to come back to the course website often.
- Provide rich, rapid and substantial feedback.
- Whenever possible, provide options among assignments in accordance with students’ interests, backgrounds and learning styles.
- Give students credit for the substantive learning that students provide for each other through online discussions. In many online courses, these discussions are essential for advancing the course goals.

Tip

Course assignments define the nature of the contract in an online course. You should create the assignments first, and then add the other course components (e.g., readings, study notes, overviews, resources).
Assessing the Learner

Designing Learner Assessment (cont.)

Assess students on writing assignments, standard test formats, and class participation. The online course format offers a number of opportunities for graded written assignments, including threaded discussions, papers, web research, and online exercises. Multiple assessment formats encourage students to become involved in several activities and keep them participating in class.

Adult learners prefer forms of authentic assessments as they are better related with their life and professional experiences. According to McLoughlin & Luca (2001), these are some of the elements of authentic assessment for online courses:

1. Assessments should require quality product and/or performance and justification — assess whether the student can explain, apply, self-adjust, or justify answers, not just the correctness of answers using facts and algorithms.

2. Assessments should be known as much as possible in advance—the tasks, criteria, and standards by which work will be judged.

3. Assessments should require real-world use of knowledge—a set of constraints that are likely to be encountered by professionals is added to the task.

4. Assessment should be iterative—contain recurring essential tasks, and learning processes.

Tip

Go over the exams that you created. Ask students to identify test items or questions that they had or would have more difficulty in addressing. This would provide information on how to improve your exams.
Assessing the Learner

Analyzing Traditional Testing Methods

Traditional testing methods can be considered exams that take place in a short period of time and have a specific structure - for instance, multiple choice, true and false, fill in the blank, multiple answer, ordering, matching, and short-answer essay.

- This type of assessment can be very useful for self-assessment. For example, provide a set of multiple choices questions (with answers) at the end of each topic discussed.

- Traditional testing methods are not recommended to be used as a large component of your all assessment strategies, especially if you are trying to assess functioning knowledge (e.g., practical knowledge).

- Today there are many tools that you can use to create exams. These allow for immediate feedback as soon as the students finish the exam. One example is the Respondus software, which can be downloaded at http://www.celt.iastate.edu/elearning/?page_id=273

- Offer your students some practice typical tests (with no impact on their final grade) so that they can get familiar with the ways of responding and submitting quizzes and avoid any inadvertent assessment of learners on their technical competence rather than on the course content.
Assessing the Learner

Creating Alternative Forms of Assessment

Bonk & Dennen (n.d.) propose the following online forms of assessments:

- **Online self-assessments:**
  1. **Self-tests:** use test tool to create self-tests (multiple choice, true false).

- **Online peer-assessments:**
  1. **Feedback groups:** assign students in groups to provide formative feedback on projects and papers.
  2. **Conference presentations:** have students “present” (synchronously or asynchronously) their work and ask questions/provide feedback to others.

- **Online term papers:** the process — (1) have students each start their own thread and post topic of interest, (2) peers and instructors give feedback, (3) students post thesis statements, research sources, etc., with iterations of feedback, and (4) final paper is posted.

- **Online term papers:** the evaluation— (1) the paper as the final product, (2) the quality and timeliness of student work from time when paper is assigned, (3) the quality and timeliness of feedback provided to peers, and (4) the responsiveness to feedback received from instructor and peers.

- **Other alternative forms of assessment** are open book examinations, electronic portfolios and discussions and chats.

Tip

Use assessment as advanced organizers to the students to indicate which aspects of the content is important and to suggest ways it may be applicable in the workplace or “real world.”
Assessing the Learner

A) Open Book Examinations

In an online environment learners are most often alone and when you give an examination they may use all resources available. One strategy to overcome this challenge is to use open book exams. They reduce dishonest behaviors and provide learning opportunities. The National University of Singapore (2009) recommends these strategies when conducting an open book exam:

- Prepare your students by clarifying course objectives, providing practical guidelines and mock examinations.
- Think of possible questions while preparing the course and refine them alongside with your teaching.

- Review the questions and get one or two of your colleagues to react to them critically. Are they open-ended or merely vague? Are your expectations realistic? Are there any technical or typographical errors?
- As in other forms of non-objective tests, reducing or eliminating the choice of questions improves validity. It is difficult to construct questions which are all of equal levels of difficulty, and students may be guided by different reasons for their selection. Hence, a good student may, ironically, be disadvantaged by choosing a more difficult and challenging question while a weaker student may end up doing better by choosing easier questions.
Assessing the Learner

A) Open Book Examinations (cont.)

• Give students enough time for thoughtful answers. If necessary, reduce the number of questions that students are required to answer.

• Be creative. Using standard ‘textbook’ questions prompts ‘textbook’ answers derived directly from the books. Presenting a novel scenario demands a response reflecting a higher level of mastery. However, be careful not to go overboard and lose sight of the objectives for which the questions were written.

• Ask “why” and “how” rather than “what” type of questions. Avoid using action verbs as: list, describe, outline, and explain which invite simple description and replication. Instead use action verbs, such as: assess, explain, create, summarize, relate, predict, etc.

• Questions which allow room for development of ideas and demonstration of higher mental processes are recommended. In contrast, there is the danger that they may be too general. In practice, some delimitation is necessary to guide response. Students should not confuse ‘many possible solutions’ with ‘any answer will do’. — Some strategies are: (1) limit the problem to be addressed in the exam to a real-world scenario with its own constraints, and 2) provide the students with the criteria to be used to grade their essay.
Assessing the Learner

B) Electronic Portfolios

An electronic portfolio provides a comprehensive assessment for students in online courses to show their development in the class. Here are some suggestions on how to use this form of assessment:

- Decide whether portfolio assessment is consistent with your approach to instruction and assessment.
- Decide the areas in which you are going to implement portfolio assessment and the types of materials (artifacts) you and the learners will collect.
- Decide on a schedule for developing the portfolio.
- Develop criteria and a process for assessing portfolios.
- Provide guidelines and examples of good electronic portfolios (e.g., select 3 to 5 artifacts created in courses and/or related activities that demonstrate an applied understanding; pre-defined performance indicators such as, Technological Applications, Social, Ethical, Legal, and Human Issues in the Use of Technology, etc.).
- Another useful strategy is to request students for a synthesis of their thoughts and understandings on how the artifacts contribute to their overall educational growth and development in the course/program.

Tip

Portfolio assessment can contribute to students’ sense of control when they have the major role in portfolio creation.
Assessing the Learner

C) Discussions and Chat

Discussions and chat sessions are excellent ways to assess your students as well as a strategy to create a community. Without grading it you may not provide motivation for your learners to participate in discussion and chat. To show your expectations for discussion create and share discussion and chat guidelines:

- When engaging in discussion, it is important to foster a sense of freedom to express thoughts while at the same time providing a safe atmosphere for diverse opinions and expressions.

- Encourage your students to maintain a professional attitude and manner of discussion.

- Be explicit on the criteria that will be used to determine a student’s grade on participation. One way is to define different levels of participation. You may want to use Stinson’s (2004) criteria to determine students’ participation grade in your course discussions. In accordance with these criteria, participation is assessed at four levels:
  1. comments based on prior experience.
  2. reporting the results of some type of research (content).
  3. advancing the discussion by building on other’s contributions.
  4. synthesizing the discussion and providing an overall response to the question.

Tip

Consider collaboratively developing a rubric with your learners to be used to grade online discussion. You can also modify any available rubric together. Thus learners can easily understand the level of quality of their postings.
Assessing the Learner

Selecting an Assessment Method

In selecting an assessment method, you should ask yourself (these questions will guide you in shaping your assessment methods and schedule):

- What is it you want your students to learn? What do they already know? Is a pre-test needed to measure prior knowledge?
- Which assessment methods match your teaching style?
- What assessment method will best test what your students learned?
- Will your assessment be based on memorization or performance?

- Will the assessment be low or high stakes? (what portion of final grade)
- How many assessments are sufficient? How many assignments should you request?
  - How many quizzes and exams will be enough?
  - Will the number of students be affected by the type of assessment you choose?
- How quickly will students receive feedback?
- How much time will you spend correcting or commenting on assessments?
- How much grading support will you have?

Tip

One or two large assessments in an online course may cause pressure on learners and lead to dishonest activities. If you provide several assessments that build on each other, the pressure can be reduced considerably.
Assessing the Learner

Important Issues on Assessment

It is important to:

• Consider students’ limitations such as schedule conflicts, time limitations and professional obligations when planning the assessments.

• Communicate to students when the assessments will take place. Insert the dates in your learning management system calendar and remind the students of the dates using the announcement feature.

• Offer different assessment formats and moments to your students. However, only a certain number of assessments will be considered for the final grade. For instance, students can complete all ten assessments, but only eight assessments will be counted towards the final grade and count the highest marks among the assessments for grading.

• Remember that the objectives of the assessments are to assess students’ understanding and to help re-design the content delivery if necessary. Therefore select types of assessments that will best achieve these objectives.

• Getting feedback from instructors is crucial for the distance learner to self-assess their understanding, especially if they are individually assessed. Therefore, it would be helpful for them if you can provide feedback or answers key to each assessment from which they can learn. Automated answers could be a good solution to achieve this goal.
Assessing the Learner

Important Issues on Assessment (cont.)

- Consider providing study aids consisting of key points of each online session to assist students in preparing for the exams. It would be even better if the students take part in producing the study aids as it would increase students’ interactions and ownership to the relevance of the assessment.

- Consider students’ limitations as part-time distance learners by trying to balance the amount of homework, assignments, projects and/or assessments. If the instructor choose to have weekly quizzes (i.e. assignments), perhaps the instructor can lessen the amount of homework or readings, and vice versa.

- True/False questions are often confusing because most of the time students will apply their own understanding based on their familiar contexts to answer the questions. Thus this type of assessment is always tricky, especially for international students who may not be familiar with U.S. contexts.

- As with the case of adult learners’ learning style, it is best if the assessments relate with their practical knowledge. Therefore it is suggested that instructors consider problem-solving, practical, industry-related, thought-provoking questions or issues in assessments, homework and/or assignments.

Tip

Keep the assessments as simple as it can be while being as beneficial as it can be to help student’s understanding of the subject matter.
Assessing the Learner

Resources on Learner Assessment

- Methods of Assessing Learning Outcomes

- The Art of Assessing: A toolkit of techniques (provides information on various types of testing, e.g. open-book exams, multiple-choice, essays, etc., with tips on how to set exam questions, and discussions on advantages and disadvantages).

- Assessment Strategies and Definitions (include ideas such as Book Response Journals, Graffiti Walls, etc. Mainly for K-12 education, but still practical for adult learners.).

- Short Answer
  [http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/effective_questions/short_answer](http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/effective_questions/short_answer)

- Classroom Assessment Techniques: Portfolios

- Changing Assessment to Improve Learning (about some ways to provide feedback to students in regard to their assessments).
  [http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/keynote.cfm](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/keynote.cfm)
Resources on Learner Assessment (cont.)

- A Method for Grading Essays in Any Course
  http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Fall_1996/TC_Fall_1996_Caraco.htm
- Core Curriculum Grading Rubrics for Written Essays
- Constructing Assessment Criteria
- Grading
- Online Rubric Builder
  http://landmark-project.com/rubric_builder/index.php
- Respondus© (software that can help the instructor provide automated answers for different types of assessments - multiple choice, short answer and essay).
  http://www.celt.iastate.edu/elearning/?page_id=273
- Respondus© interactive demos
  http://www.respondus.com/products/demos.shtml
Assessing the Learner

References


The Future of Online Teaching and Learning

Kim & Bonk* (2006) survey study on the future of online learning and teaching in higher education shows that:

- Blended learning would have greater significance in higher education in the future.
- Collaboration, case learning, and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) are likely to be the preferred methods of online instruction.
- An increase of learner-learner interaction associated to emergent technologies (e.g., social networking tools) is expected.
- A growth in online certification and recertification programs and in associate’s and master’s degree programs is forecasted.
- Increasing interest among online instructors in wireless technologies, simulations, digital libraries, and reusable content objects is foreseen.
- As bandwidth increases with the next-generation internet technologies and capabilities, simulation and gaming tasks that online students engage in will be more realistic and authentic.

For Further Information

American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC)
http://www.adec.edu

International Centre for Distance Learning
http://icdl.open.ac.uk/

Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C)
http://www.aln.org

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA)
http://www.usdla.org

Illinois Online Networks (ION)
http://www.ion.illinois.edu/resources

The Distance Education Clearinghouse
http://www.uwex.edu/disted/index.cfm

Distance Educator
http://www.distance-educator.com

Western Education Telecommunication Cooperative
http://wcet.wiche.edu/
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