COLI Guide: Basic Course Design

Within Each Course

Assemble a collection of content and concepts into a successful course.

Begin with the End in Mind

Learning goals

What are the high-level, basic concepts you wish students to learn in your course?

What is it you hope students can do, after they successfully complete your course?

From these, develop course objectives, or subheadings that describe in greater detail the learning goals of the course. You might do this right away, but it’s often practical to do this in an iterative process, as you move through the following steps. The best learning outcomes include action verbs such as construct, design, evaluate, assess, classify, or describe instead of behavior that is less observable such as understand, learn, or appreciate.

Sketch the Outline

With a semester or session calendar handy, lay out the learning objectives into modules, units, or timeframes. Weeks are a common unit for courses (Week one we learn this, week two we learn that, and so on) but there are many other time frames by which to outline a course. Connect these time frames to course objectives, and begin roughing in lessons.

Within lessons, decide how will you convey content to students. How will they explore and apply concepts, ideas, controversies, or processes? How can they learn in dialog with you, and with each other? In this phase, consider the following:

Routine and Documentation

As far as possible, craft a repetitive structure. By week 3 or 4, students should be able to roughly but helpfully predict the workload, rigor, deadlines, and course procedure each subsequent week.

Provide plenty of direction through clear, consistent messaging. Have information such as course content and procedures (such as deadlines) in consistent places each week. Provide plenty of advanced warning for special activities and assessments outside course routine.

Choose a few methods for communication and content delivery. For example, use the news tool in D2L, email, or both, to post or send weekly summaries and reminder lists. You may use D2L’s quiz tool or perhaps Google Forms for short reading comprehension quizzes. But whichever tools you choose, consistently use them throughout the semester so students know where to look, and what to expect. You may use various toolsets within or outside D2L, but limit these to a sensible variety. Unless your course specifically has students exploring a variety of different web technologies (such as an educational or business technology course), you want to avoid students becoming confused when there are seemingly different tools, each requiring their own login credentials, each week.

Three Forms of Interaction

Great college courses typically have three ways that students encounter, interact, and learn within the class:

- Instructor - Student: Students should feel their Professor is invested in their learning. Frequent, authentic communication from the Professor is key.
- Student - Content: Students should know exactly which content is mandatory or relevant in the class. Critical reading skills are obviously important, but audio, video, graphic, or even live performance are all excellent content possibilities for any course.
- Student - Student: At very least students should communicate with one another in class discussions. Small-group discussion, group projects, and students teaching each other are other possibilities.

Lots of Low-Stakes Assessments

Give students plenty of opportunities to influence their future, final grade. Incorporate small, frequent assignments or assessments such as quizzes, short reflection writing exercises, graded problem-solving activities, discussion posts, explainer videos, and so on. These compel students to engage with the course content while reducing stress that might otherwise be caused by big exams or projects that, by themselves, make or break a student’s grade. You’ll need to balance this practice, though, so you aren’t overwhelmed with grading, and you don’t pester
students with too much work, too frequently. (Recall that your students may have other classes, jobs, and families to look after.) For example, short, low-stakes, multiple-choice quizzes, are a great choice since they help students quickly check their reading comprehension, and D2L can auto-grade these.

A Goal: Explicit Design

Ideally, an instructor should feel comfortable - excited? - to explain the rationale for each and every part of a course to students. This means that every week, every lesson or assessment is crafted to help students engage with and apply the concepts, ideas and perspectives that make the course worthwhile for their life and professional activities. Can you make clear to students how each piece of content, activity, or assessment supports one or more course objective?

But let's be honest: most faculty are not 100% happy with their courses. We generally feel that some of our lessons, activities, or assessments are more effective than others, and we often struggle to teach toward certain learning objectives or goals. That's okay; so long as we continue to try new things, we are probably improving our courses and our students' experiences.

Thinking on a bigger scale, consider the following:

General Design Practices

Considerations for teaching development

Iterative process

Continually Explore Possibilities

Budget time and energy to experiment with new things. If you are coming from traditional pedagogy (lectures and exams), try to develop alternative forms of content delivery, and active or collaborative learning activities. Try to get students creating things, such as small websites or short explainer videos.

When you evaluate new methods, bear in mind the following:

Is it accessible? For example, can it be read by screen readers for the visually impaired, or do videos have transcripts attached for those who cannot listen to a narration?

Simple and reliable is better than lots of features. For example, students can get lost in irrelevant details with complicated website building tools that offer lots of different features.

Can students take away their project in a durable format? An example is a video in .mp4 format. This near-universal file type enables students to host a streaming video in a variety of places, and link it in a portfolio or even a job application. However they made the file, they own it and can keep it after they graduate.

You'll Probably Fail (Occasionally)

Expect failures large and small. Continual improvements to your courses and your students learning necessarily involves risk. Through reflective assessment (writing or discussion, for example) students can learn even from "failed" course activities or exercises. That said,...

Gradual Changes are Enough

Don't overwhelm yourself with too much change to a course in a single semester. Obviously, transitioning a face-to-face course to online (or vise-versa) involves a lot of work, and you should plan accordingly. But lesser changes can and should be done gradually, over semesters. Even if you succeed in making lots of major changes to a course in a single semester, you may struggle to meaningfully reflect on how well it all worked.

Journal It

Keep a brief log of your decisions and results as you design and implement new course content. This can seem tedious or time-wasting, but it can make your process more systematic. Plus, as our colleagues teaching in writing disciplines often say, writing is a powerful part of thinking.

Faculty teaching faculty

The above guidelines can help you plan a course but the best reference is usually your colleagues or specialized resources within your field. Often, people teaching in the same discipline as you at your institution or another have already come up with innovative ways to do it. In journals, at conferences, and at web resources you can discover great ideas for your classroom or online course space.
Take advantage of on-campus development opportunities. They are often short, involve learning with and alongside your colleagues, and more convenient than travel to distant conferences or struggling to learn solely through self-paced training.