Building an Online Course - Basic Steps

This worksheet lays out some basic steps you can perform to prepare an online or partly-online course. These are general guidelines that require time and attention. Moreover, this represents the beginning stages in teaching hybrid or online courses; a professor should expect to iterate, improve, and further develop their course over semesters. For example, asynchronous discussions and short quizzes are great for your first several semesters teaching a course. But you should consider how to modify these, and try other activities altogether each time you teach the course.

Identify Learning Goals and Supporting Objectives

This will help you plan the lesson structure. 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? 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.

Under each of these basic goals, what specific objectives support each goal? These may be specific concepts or procedures that make are the basis for each lesson or week of the course. Developing these might be iterative, as you work through the process below.

Develop a Lesson Structure

You may wish to start by focusing focus on assessments - assignments, quizzes, graded activities, etc. - since they represent the end state, within the course, of course objectives. Or, you may start by sketching in your learning objectives alongside the semester calendar.

How will you divide up learning objectives chronologically throughout the course? This is often dictated by a textbook structure or generally common practices in your discipline. But this can be an iterative process, as you consider the other steps below.

Develop a Documentation Plan and Guidelines

Since you cannot make (as many) verbal announcements in class, asynchronous online and hybrid courses require more careful documentation. The syllabus and supplemental documents - course instructions, assignment directions, schedules or itineraries - must be easy to find and read.

Have a simple, consistent framework for course procedural instructions, assignments, and schedules. Students should quickly be able to figure out where to find these.

Format documents consistently so students can efficiently read them, and revisit them to answer particular questions or refresh their memory.

Use a few - and only a few - reliable means of communication. D2L is usually the best way to “pass out” course directions, and collect student work. Email is never as reliable as you hope it will be, and scales poorly when exchanging things with students.

Learn to use the online gradebook. That takes effort early on, but is worth it once your gradebook is built and operating. This avoids student confusion and a lot of resulting emails.

If you are using screencast software to capture lecture or demonstrations, why not use it for weekly reminder videos and other procedural communication?

While this is a priority for online education, good documentation is part of any quality face-to-face course as well.

Course Content

Capturing Lecture

Powerpoint has a Video Export feature. If you record narratives, animations and slide timing as you lecture at your computer, you can create a common format video file (.mp4) for posting or sharing via the web.

Screencast-O-Matic allows you to capture your voice, screen actions, or even webcam as a video. This is useful for content outside PowerPoint, such as in MS Excel.

A Webcam, with a variety of software, can capture anything for digital video. For example, this can be you using a whiteboard, a traditional graphic calculator, or a scale model to describe a process.

Interactive Web Resources

Google Sites is a simple website builder that’s great for building multi-page interactive lessons incorporating text, video, audio, or even clickable diagrams.

Use quiz tools or course surveys to create “lean-forward” activities that help keep students engaged while watching or listening.

Pre- and post-quizzes so students can gauge their own learning.

Surveys so students can get a sense of where they lean on a controversial topic. (This might be followed by discussion.)

Short writing assignments that are easily gradable, but foster student engagement.

CATs are always welcome on the internet.

Metacognitive, or reflective writing.

Activities and Assessments
Asynchronous Discussions

Student-to-student interaction is a vital element in any course, and asynchronous discussions are the most common means in online courses.

D2L's Discussions toolset provides message board or "discussion forum" functions specifically for classes. Professors often use this for weekly discussions, with basic deadlines for students' initial posts, and a round of replies. But there are many more ways to use discussion topics. See COLI Guide, Module 4 or this article for just some variations.

You needn't write instructions from scratch! COLI has sample text.

Online Quizzes

D2L's quizzes engine is useful for quiz- and exam-style assessment at any scale.

Short quizzes, even acting as worksheets, can encourage reading. D2L can grade multiple-choice or true/false questions, so you don't need to.

Lots of low-stakes assessments are a good thing, and these quizzes can give students low-pressure incentive to invest in reading and watching what you assign.

Student-Generated Video

Your students need not simply submit text to you, or post text in asynchronous discussions. In either case, they can respond to assignment or discussion prompts with video. Even if they do not own recording hardware, they can borrow it from the Canisius College Media Center.

3-5 minute "explainer" videos are great for having students demonstrate their comprehension of procedure or concepts. If they can explain it, they have learned it.

Student Projects

Some, such as traditional research projects can probably be imported directly from F2F

Can you create student collaborative projects - group work?

Can you create projects where students present to each other? (Videos, websites.) Then, as a follow-on assignment, students can use, comment on, evaluate, other students' projects?

Beyond a Single Class

Journal Your Efforts

Have some way of recording your experiences as you teach, to help you improve you classes over time.

Speak With Colleagues

No faculty development officer or instructional designer can help you as much as colleagues in your field, who have successfully taught online. Take every opportunity to learn what they do, and from their experiences.

Gradual Iteration

Developing a new online or hybrid course necessarily is a lot of work. But after you've run it the first time, make improvements in measured, targeted ways, instead of attempting radical changes between semesters. That way you keep your preparatory workload under control, and have a better sense of how any change influences the class.

Never Stop Iterating

As with face-to-face teaching, new developments in your field, new methods for teaching, and new technology means that you should spend at least some time exploring possibilities for change in your classes. Here, that "speak with colleagues” advice is particularly important, and don't hesitate to pass on something you've discovered that can help them, too.