

Recommended Practices in Online Course Design and Delivery

By Online Services

Table of Contents

Introduction 2
Getting Started 2
Detailed Syllabus 2
Course Content 3
  Technology 3
  Organization 5
Opportunities for Interaction 5
  Interaction with Course Content 5
  Interaction with One Another 6
  Interaction with the Instructor 8
Opportunities for Feedback 8
  Instructor Feedback 8
  Student Feedback 10
Assessment 10
  Recommendations 10
  Techniques 10
  Alternative Assessments 11
  Authentication of Online Students 11
Accessibility 12
Student Resources 12
References 13

Adapted from “Best Practices in Online Course Design and Delivery”
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Introduction

Lone Star College (LSC) is committed to providing high-quality online educational experiences to our students. The following sections provide recommended practices in online course design and delivery.

Getting Started

Faculty who are new to teaching online or who wish to explore new technologies for enhancing an existing online course are encouraged to contact Online Services[1] to schedule a meeting with an instructional designer. For more information on the support resources that are available to faculty, please visit the Virtual Teaching Assistance Center (VTAC) at vtac.lonestar.edu.

While no two courses are the same, there are important elements that should be a part of every online course:

- Detailed syllabus
- Course content
- Opportunities for Interaction
- Opportunities for Feedback
- Assessment
- Accessibility

Detailed Syllabus

A syllabus represents a **formal academic agreement** between an instructor and students. Rather than a schedule of events, a syllabus serves as an *academic contract* defining how students can successfully meet the objectives of the course. All instructors are required to provide their students a detailed syllabus at the start of each semester in every class. Changes to a syllabus after the course has begun are not recommended and should only be made in the case of unusual and extenuating circumstances.

The syllabus provides a basis upon which to resolve academic misunderstandings: it is the official document of record regarding all classroom activities and policies. The distribution of a detailed syllabus at the start of the course ensures that each student has received a written statement of policy. Without such a record, misunderstandings between students and faculty can occur. Students should be encouraged to consult the syllabus throughout the course and to ask questions about the course or the syllabus.

[1] http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/article/link/vtac-support

The elements of a syllabus for an online course are no different than the elements of a syllabus for a face-to-face course. LSC provides faculty with a syllabus template to assist with the creation of a well-developed, comprehensive document to serve faculty and students. The template identifies the following elements to be included in a syllabus:

1. Course title and identification
2. Instructor contact information
3. Course description
4. Course goals or outcomes
5. Required texts and materials
6. Recommended texts and readings
7. Class format or outline
8. Assignments and expectations
9. Attendance policy
10. Grading policy
11. Student support information, including VLAC and OTS[2]
12. Academic honesty statement
13. Academic support/ADA statement
14. Other policies as needed

Course Content

Technology

Technology provides a variety of tools for delivering content to students. It is up to each instructor to choose appropriate tools and design content delivery to maximize student learning. For instance, breaking course materials into small, manageable units or modules increases student awareness of the conceptual structure of each unit and also allows for greater flexibility in pacing their learning (Johnson, 2003). Before developing an online course, consider:

1. When teaching in a traditional classroom, how do you deliver content to students?
2. When teaching in a traditional classroom, what interactions do you use with your students?

Answering these questions will be helpful in selecting tools and techniques to deliver course content to students. The *Online Instructional Method and Tools Matrix* (Table 1) provides suggestions for techniques and tools based on preferred instructional methods. Online Services can help identify ways to adapt preferred teaching methods to the online environment.

[2] See Student Resources section on page 12

Table 1 - *Online Instructional Method and Tools Matrix*

The tools listed below are just examples. For a list of tools that are officially supported by Online Services, please visit VTAC.[3]

Instructional Method	Techniques	Online Tools/Resources
Cooperative Learning	Multimedia Presentations	PowerPoint, Camtasia, Audacity,
	Research Project	Blogs, Wikis, Group Pages
	Student-Led Instruction	Discussion Forum
Demonstration	Video Clips	YuJa, YouTube, Vimeo
	Text and Images	PowerPoint Presentations
Discovery	Research Projects	Wikis, Mind Maps,
	Web Quests	Internet/Library Searches
Discussion	Asynchronous Discussion	Discussion Forum, Blogs, Course Email
	Synchronous Discussion	Webex, Zoom
Drills	Exercises featuring multiple choice, fill in the blank, crosswords, matching/ordering, short answer	Respondus StudyMate, SoftChalk, Creator+
	Self-Tests	Quizzes
Presentation or Lecture	Narrated Slides/Images Podcasts	PowerPoint, Camtasia, Streaming Audio/Video Files
	Video Clips	YuJa, YouTube, Vimeo
	Written Lectures/Lecture Notes	Word/PDF/Rich Text/HTML Files
Problem-Solving	Problem-Based Learning	Word/PDF/Rich Text/HTML Files Group Pages, Mind Maps
Simulations and Tutorials	Animations	HTML Files
	Self-Paced Modules Video Clips	MERLOT, WikiMedia, Wisc-Online, MIT Online, YouTube

[3] http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/a114

Organization

Quality online courses are well-organized and easy to navigate. D2L course content can be organized into weekly or topical modules. Each module can be labeled with the name of the unit and the dates of completion for all work within the unit. Modules should include all reading assignments, lecture materials, supporting websites or activities, discussion topics, etc. for the week or unit it represents. This practice helps students easily locate all the materials necessary to complete all the tasks for a given unit.

Aesthetic appeal is another aspect of designing and delivering course materials. While the determination of whether something is aesthetically appealing is often a matter of personal preference, there are some general practices that should be considered when designing course materials and course sites.

- Link and file naming systems should be consistent so that students always recognize when a link or file is a lecture, supplemental reading, assignment, etc. Including the unit/module number in the file name helps students stay organized.
- Font colors and styles should be consistent.
- White space is important. Lines and lines of text are boring and often difficult to read on a computer screen. Break up lecture content into small paragraphs or multiple slides.
- Text should be broken up by using brief, concise sentences; bullets and numbers are best for lists. Images can be inserted to help students visualize concepts. Sometimes text does not explain a concept as well as a simple image.

Opportunities for Interaction

In online courses, interaction can occur in three ways:

- Students interacting with course content;
- Students interacting with one another; and
- Students interacting with the instructor.

It is a good practice to intentionally design for all three of these types of interactions to occur in online courses. Following are some tips to accomplish that goal.

Interaction with Course Content

Provide students with the opportunity to learn to use and interact with the resources provided.

Think beyond the standard assignments of reading a textbook and writing a paper. The Internet is a rich reservoir from which to draw materials and activities for students. It is easy to find audio and video files, journal articles, news reports, interactive tutorials, simulations, and more with a few clicks. To locate academically relevant materials on the web, visit:

- LSC Library Faculty Services
  http://www.lonestar.edu/library/services-faculty.htm
- Open Education Resources (OER) Commons
  http://www.oercommons.org/
- OpenLearn Courseware from Open University
  https://www.open.edu/openlearn/
- Wisc-Online
  http://www.wisc-online.com/
- New York Times Video Library
  https://www.nytimes.com/video

For additional support locating and integrating online resources into a course, contact Online Services or an LSC library.

Interaction with One Another

The most common way to include interaction in an online course is with online discussions. There are two types of online discussions:

1. Synchronous – discussion occurs when everyone participates at the same time.
2. Asynchronous – participants need not be present at the same time. The discussion occurs in a series of postings (threads) that can be read and responded to at any time.

While both formats are appropriate in an online environment, asynchronous discussion occurs most often in online courses, primarily because of the flexibility it provides for everyone to participate at any time, from any place. Discussion topics in D2L can be used to facilitate asynchronous online discussion.

- If discussion is an important part of assessing student learning and if meaningful contributions are desired, discussions should represent a significant portion of the overall grade.

- Rubrics for grading online discussions encourage high-quality postings on the discussion board. Communicate the minimum number of postings required of each student for each discussion and hold students to the criteria listed in the rubric.

- Due dates for original and reply postings on the discussion topic can be staggered so that discussion is deep and meaningful. For example, require that all original posts by students be due by Thursday of each week, while all replies are due by Saturday. This technique also helps students manage their workload for the class.

LSC faculty have access to Webex, a web-conferencing system that allows for synchronous discussion with visual aids. Visit VTAC[4] to learn more about using synchronous discussion in online courses.

Student-to-student interaction can also be developed in the following ways:

- Promote student-to-student interaction in the first week of an online class by using an icebreaker activity. An icebreaker establishes individual presence, opens the lines of communication between students, and allows students an opportunity to practice using tools within the course management system (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). It is during this first exercise that faculty can help students build a learning community in which they feel accepted and supported.
- Offer a variety of communication options for students: email, discussion forums, chat, web-conferencing, and telephone are most common.
- Engage students with collaborative learning assignments. Break the larger class into small online groups and have them
    - Give and receive feedback on individual papers
    - Locate, share, and critique resources and report group findings to the entire class
    - Work through a case study online
    - Debate a topic
    - Discuss ways they would apply theories or concepts to real-world situations
    - Complete a research project and write a paper together
- Create a “Help” or “Assistance” discussion topic and encourage students to post questions or problems for their classmates to answer. Let students help one another.
- Create a social discussion topic for students to use for discussions not directly related to the assigned course discussion. Label this area “The Coffee Shop,”

[4] http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/a088

"The Water Cooler," "Just for Fun," or a catchy title that relates to the course discipline. Make it a place where casual conversation and sharing can occur.

Interaction with the Instructor

Many of the techniques used to engage students with the content and with one another will ultimately lead to communication with the instructor.

- Instructors should make time to periodically communicate with students on an individual basis via email. Some exchanges with students may also take place via telephone.
- Faculty should be explicit in how they expect students to communicate with them and state how and when they will communicate with students.
- Create a "Course Questions" discussion topic for student questions about course content and expectations. Every student can see the questions and answers, reducing duplication of effort and overall email load.

An extensive list of interactive techniques[5] is available to download and print.

Opportunities for Feedback

One of the challenges associated with teaching and learning online is that the participants lose the physical cues that confirm when someone is following the concepts and materials related to the course (Johnson, 2003). To compensate for the lack of physical cues, faculty must intentionally design online courses to include opportunities for giving and receiving feedback. Feedback can be creative; it does not always have to be in the form of formal, written messages to each student.

Instructor Feedback

- Provide clear feedback to each student periodically using video, email, or in comments attached to digital assignments and discussions.
- Inform students of the method(s) to be used for providing individualized feedback and state how often they can expect to hear from you.
- Track student progress weekly to identify and assist at-risk students promptly.
- Use the Gradebook to record student progress and encourage students to refer to the Gradebook to track their own progress.

[5] https://bit.ly/interactive_techniques

- Allow students to see their current grade by releasing the Final Calculated Grade column.[6]

- When possible, return quizzes and assignments within one week of submission.

- Respond to students' emails within 24 hours during weekdays, and within one working day on holidays and weekends.

- Respond to students' discussion board postings in a timely manner. It is not necessary to respond to every single posting, but it is appropriate to acknowledge when students have posted exemplary work, are headed in the wrong direction, or are having an interesting discussion about course content. Acknowledging students' posts demonstrates teaching presence.

- Use Assignment Folders so that students can confirm successful submission of their assignments and easily receive files and comments from the instructor. Assignment Folders also improve efficiency by reducing email messages from students and providing persistent links to student work and instructor feedback.

- When practical, if students submit assignments via email, reply to each student to confirm receipt of the assignment. When possible, also let students know when they can expect to receive a grade on the assignment. This reduces student anxiety about whether their work has been received and creates a realistic timeframe for when students can expect to receive a grade and feedback (Johnson, 2003).

- Consider offering online office hours using a web-based conferencing tool such as Webex. Visit VTAC or contact the Office of Technology Services (OTS) for information and training on tools available.

- Create open book review quizzes that are automatically graded so that students receive immediate feedback. Consider allowing students to complete the quizzes two or three times, with the highest score recorded as a small portion of the overall grade.

- Post a weekly summary message to the class to clarify any areas perceived as problematic for students and to acknowledge their work in the course for that week.

- Provide options for peer review and feedback. Consider grouping students to exchange papers/assignments with their group members.

[6] http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/a183

Student Feedback

- Create a discussion forum where students can post questions related to course materials, content, or assignments. These questions can pinpoint problem areas and identify where further explanation may be necessary.
- Conduct periodic anonymous surveys of students so that improvements can be made to the course in the coming weeks and in coming terms.

Assessment

Assessment serves multiple purposes in the online environment. It provides an opportunity to monitor student progress and performance throughout the term. It also provides an indicator of progress for students, which enables them to take on greater responsibility for their own learning.

Recommendations

Simonson et al. (2000) provide the following recommendations for using assessments in online courses:

- Consider the use of ongoing, non-graded, and self-paced assessments to help students monitor their own progress.
- Align evaluation with learning objectives. Assessment should not be an afterthought. Rather, course materials and assessments should be developed to match course objectives.
- Develop assessments that not only measure a student's progress and understanding, but also the ability to transfer skills and knowledge beyond the learning environment.

Techniques

Many of the same techniques used to assess learning in the traditional classroom can be used in the online environment. Those techniques include:

- Essays
- Multiple-choice tests
- Research papers
- Short-answer tests

If these techniques are appropriate measures of achievement, continue to use them—with some adjustments to accommodate the online environment.

Alternative Assessments

Alternative assessments offer options for gauging student progress. Consider using some of the following assessment techniques in online courses:

- Blogging
- Case study discussion/writing
- Collaborative writing projects
- Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios)
- Reflective journaling
- Student-created podcasts or other multimedia
- Student-led discussions

All assessments should be appropriately aligned with learning objectives. Rubrics can help faculty and students evaluate learning on each assessment. For assistance with designing alternative assessments and rubrics, contact Online Services.

Authentication of Online Students

To meet student authentication requirements listed in the Higher Education Act, departments and programs are encouraged to periodically verify the identity of online students. A common method of student verification is to require proctored examinations. Departments or programs requiring proctored exams in online courses should set guidelines for qualified proctors and provide students with appropriate and timely information for arranging proctoring services.

Proctoring options[7] can be found in VTAC. They include

- Lone Star College Testing Centers (http://www.lonestar.edu/testing-centers.htm)
- Respondus Monitor (https://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/a188)
- Instructor Live Proctoring with Respondus LockDown Browser (https://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/instructor-live-proctoring-with-lockdown-browser)
- ProctorU (http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/proctoru)

[7] http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/proctoring-options-for-online-quizzes

Students may use alternate testing centers for completing proctored exams outside of LSC. Certified testing centers can be found on the National College Testing Association[8] website. When using alternate testing sites, students are required to complete the Proctor Agreement Form for Alternate Testing Sites and Proctors[9] and submit the completed form to their instructor for approval prior to the exam. Students are responsible for any fees incurred for proctoring services.

Accessibility

Lone Star College recognizes and supports the principles set forth in federal and state laws designed to eliminate discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities. The College believes in equal access to educational opportunities for all individuals and is committed to making reasonable accommodations, including providing auxiliary aids and services, for qualified individuals with disabilities as required by law.

For more information on disability accommodation

- Visit Disability Services (http://www.lonestar.edu/disability-services)
- Review Accessibility Section in VTAC (http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/accessibility)
- Contact your Online Services campus rep (http://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/a109)

Student Resources

Student support is found on the Virtual Learning Assistance Center (VLAC) site.[10] VLAC contains articles about D2L, tips on being a successful online student, as well as the contact information for the OTS Service Desk. Technical support is available from 6:00am to midnight by phone or live chat.

Students taking a fully online or hybrid course for the first time are required to complete the D2L Student Training[11] before gaining access to their courses. Students who have not successfully completed the orientation have a “hold” on their D2L account – the hold is released when the orientation quiz is completed with an 80% or better score.

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[8] http://www.ncta-testing.org/find-a-cctc-participant

[9] http://www.lonestar.edu/departments/lsconline/Alternate_Site_Proctor_Agreement_Form.pdf

[10] http://vlac.lonestar.edu

[11] https://vtac.lonestar.edu/help/d2l-student-training

Students should contact the instructor first if they are experiencing problems in a course site. Common difficulties that students encounter include course sites not being made available to them by the course start date and course links not working as expected. The OTS Service Desk should be contacted by the student for individual problems or by the instructor for problems that affect all the students in a course. Be sure to provide the course section number and any information about specific students affected. The more details provided, the more quickly the situation can be addressed.

Not all students are well-prepared to complete an online course successfully. Visit VLAC for information to share with students to help them prepare for online learning.

References

The following resources were consulted in the creation of this handbook:

Conrad, R.M. & Donaldson, J.A. (2004). *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, J. (2003). *Distance education: The complete guide to design, delivery, and improvement.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2008). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.