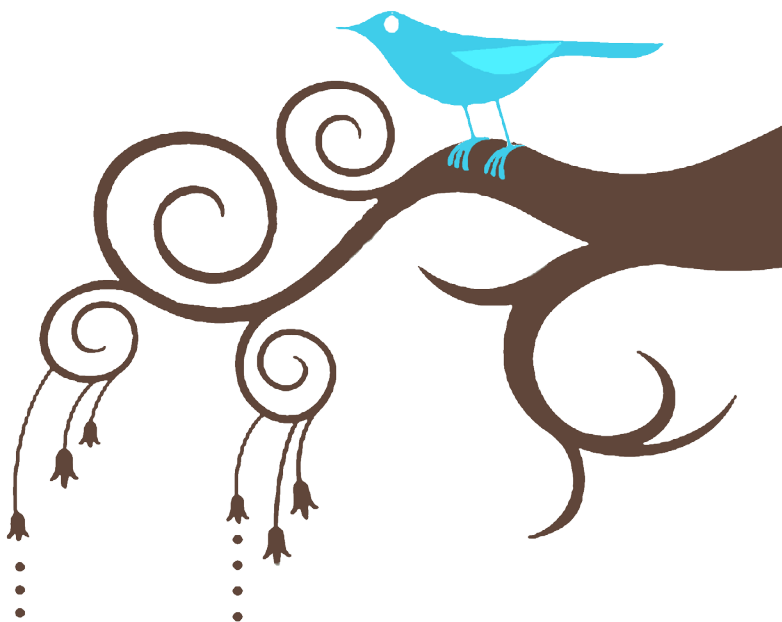


Teaching & Learning Center



Quick Guide: Making Your Online Courses Better



Supporting Continuous Improvement
of Instructional Practices and Offerings

The Course

Students will find it easier to navigate and learn online if they know what to find where. Courses should be well organized and provide consistency across all offerings.



Clear & Consistent Navigation

Well planned navigation schemes across a department or college increases usability and reduces ambiguity & learner stress. These factors all contribute to extraneous cognitive load and affect learner success or failure. In addition providing a well designed course presents both you and the institution in a professional manner.

Communication

Synchronous - Research shows that it is best used for real-time, one-on-one help in which the instructor and student agree on a time to be online. In the case of Sakai, synchronous tools can be used to discuss problems, tutor individual students, or further explain concepts that are difficult for learners to wrap their minds around. Be careful of using synchronous methods (e.g. chat, video chat) for online lectures as not all students may be available at the same time nor be in the same time zone.

Asynchronous - Although as instructors we are used to and comfortable with synchronous communication, research is clear that the online medium is best utilized using asynchronous methods. Most students taking online courses are nontraditional and expect the learning to fit into “their” schedule (after work, in between family/other obligations). They want to learn where and when it is convenient for them. This is the main reason they signed up for an online class.

There are a number of products that can be used to produce video/audio files and there are many effective tools to use to create an environment of collaboration, self-exploration, and deep-thinking/learning.

- **Lectures** - Video/audio (podcasts, vcasts)
- **Information Assimilation** - Interactive learning experience for reinforcement, review, & self-testing
- **Web resources** - Other materials on the web for extended learning or research.
- **Web 2.0** - Expand learning and promote Inter-Human connections, Collaboration, and Social Networking using tools like: Google Docs, ZOHIO, Second Life, Flickr, del.icio.us, Blogs, Forums, Mashups, Wikis, iTunes, YouTube, Skype, Mapquest, Google Maps, etc. (Technologies include: Folksonomies, Microformats, REST/XML/JSON based Application Programming Interface - API's, Ajax based Rich Internet apps, RSS or Atom feeds)

Interactivity

Effective online courses must include active discussions and collaborations. Discussions build a sense of community. and can assist in building critical thinking and writing skills.

Materials

Coursepacks are great resources for classes but should not be the only thing used. Nor should an online course just be text based. A variety of targeted and appropriate resources and multimedia should be included to assist students in grasping concepts and assimilating content into permanent memory. At the very least, enhance the PowerPoints that may included by adding audio voice-overs/explanations.

Reusable Learning Objects

Best-case would be to add reusable learning objects such as short (15-20 minute max) audio/video (podcast/videocast) information/lectures with chapter markers, and interactive learning experiences (web, animation, etc.) for a very rich learning experience that meets a wide variety of learning styles.

The Instructor

You are the subject matter expert – Be there to “Guide and Provide” information. The sage on the stage model is not effective in online classes. Apply pedagogies appropriate to the medium and think outside of the classroom box. Use tools and techniques that encourage collaboration, self-exploration, and deep thinking/learning. The online venue is an exciting and wonderful place to utilize your expertise in your field, and expand on your abilities as an instructor to create a rich learning experience for your students.

- **Be Present**

Discussions and the instructor’s presence helps provide direction and help build the learning community. *Suggestion* - At the beginning of the term provide an introduction of yourself (who you are) and the course (where to find materials and resources, what is required of the students and what is expected of the instructor [i.e., response/feedback/grading times], and state objectives and intended outcomes), preferably a short video or a picture of yourself and an audio clip. (Remember to provide a transcript of the intro (508 compliance) and to better meet all learning styles.) The instructor should follow the online faculty handbook plan to make sure they establish and maintain a presence, and respond in a timely manner to students questions and postings. This should be explicitly stated in the syllabus.

- **Be Clear**

As an instructor you know exactly what is expected, so eliminate ambiguity to increase student success. Provide detailed explanations using the discussion board, syllabus, course agenda, and rubrics for assignments to lay out a clear path for learners to follow.

- **Be Dependable**

Instructors should be able to be counted upon to; grade assignments by certain dates and respond to e-mails in 24 hours whenever possible. This should also be explicitly stated in the syllabus.

- **Provide Rich Learning Experiences**

Real-world, hands-on, collaborative and interactive experiences allow learners to get more from a course. Use tools appropriate for the medium and learners experience and abilities.

- **Start Simply**

Whether you’re new to online instruction or have been doing it for a while, your course doesn’t have to go from text based/coursepack to an exemplary model course in just a term/semester. Make a plan and take small steps to continuously improve your course using the proper tools for the medium. Think about creating reusable learning objects – smaller components like video/audio/web-based/interactive media that is easily updated and can be used again and again. You may already have resources that can be modified to work online.

You are not expected to be a technology expert. For more difficult projects consult with the Teaching and Learning Center. They can assist in the creation of more complex instructional media objects. Remember, the process should be fun and interesting, help you build your technology skills, and create a learning experience for students that is full and rich.

- **Continuous Improvement**

Be a leader in online learning. Keep abreast of new methods and tools that have been researched and demonstrate effectiveness in helping students assimilate and apply new knowledge. Take advantage of what NWSCC has to offer in terms of sessions, workshops, tutorials, and faculty learning communities. Doing so will allow you to stay current with new and emerging technologies and their application to teaching and learning online.

