4

Creating an Effective Online Syllabus

The syllabus is an important part of any course, whether delivered online or face to face. Defining *syllabus* broadly here, we assume the traditional syllabus should include not only a schedule of topics, readings, activities, and assignments, but also such elements as goals, objectives, or expected outcomes for the course, grading policies, procedures, and any other information necessary for students to succeed.

Some instructors separate these various elements and call them "Course Information," "Course Requirements," "Grading," "Schedule," and so on. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we'll cover all these essentials with the term *syllabus*.

Although the details of course requirements, expected outcomes, schedule, grading, and procedures are staple elements of any course syllabus, they are perhaps even more important for an online class. Students tend to feel somewhat disoriented without the familiar first-day speeches from the instructor, and they may wonder if any of the same old rules will apply in this new online territory.

It's typical for first-time online instructors to include too little detail in their syllabi. One instructor we know changed nothing in his regular on-the-ground course syllabus except to add the words "This course is delivered completely online." Unfortunately, students had a hard time even finding his syllabus, as he posted no welcome at the "entrance" to his online course, and then they were puzzled by his schedule, which still listed "class sessions" as once a week. Some students reasonably thought this phrase referred to online, real-time chat. Others wondered

if the phrase meant that their asynchronous communications should be posted only once a week, on the particular day named in the schedule. As a result of this lack of clarity, the first week's discussion forum was dominated entirely by questions about where, when, and how to do the assignments, and the main topics for that week were nearly forgotten in the confusion.

Even after the instructor's hurried explanations, students continued to experience confusion about dates and times, procedures and grading. They could refer back to the first week's forum and search through the various discussion threads in which these questions had been raised, but they had no clear reference document to which they could turn. One student even had a grade dispute with the instructor that arose from an ambiguity in the syllabus. In the syllabus, the instructor had declared that all late assignments would be penalized at the rate of one-quarter grade point each day, but hadn't clearly specified that the due dates for assignments were based on the instructor's time zone, not the student's. Thus the student claimed that, when he posted an assignment at 11:00 P.M., Pacific time, on the due date, he was unfairly penalized because the server on which the course was housed, located (like the instructor) on the East Coast of the United States, had recorded the time as 2:00 A.M. the following day. These examples, both serious and trivial, illustrate some of the problems that can ensue if online syllabi (and, naturally, subsequent directions) aren't thorough and detailed.

Even in hybrid courses—those that are taught face to face with an online component—clear directions are vital. It's important, for instance, to explain to students how the mixture of different venues will be integrated. Which course activities will take place in the on-campus classroom, which in the online classroom, and what's the sequence of procedures students should follow each week? Imagine that, before the live class meeting on Wednesday, you want students to read the online lecture and post a preliminary report, but you want them to wait until after the class meeting to take part in that week's online discussion. In many cases, they won't understand that sequence unless it's carefully explained to them.

There are three aspects of an online syllabus we want to emphasize in particular: the contract, the map, and the schedule.

The Contract

Increasingly, the syllabus has come to be the contract between students and instructor, laying out the terms of the class interaction—the expected responsibilities and duties, the grading criteria, the musts and don'ts of behavior. Let's look at some features of the contract that are especially important for an online course.

Class Participation and Grading Criteria

What's meant by "participation" in the online setting won't be obvious to students. Participation should be defined. For example, is it posting, that is, sending messages to the classroom discussion board? Or is it just logging on and reading (an activity revealed to an instructor only when course management software has the capacity to track students' movements online)? Perhaps participation includes taking part in an online group presentation or showing up for a real-time chat?

Important! ***Whatever kind of participation you expect in your course, you should make that explicit in the syllabus.***

If you're going to count participation toward the final grade, you should define how that will be calculated. We recommend, in fact, that you always give a grade for active participation in the class, that is, for contributing to discussions and asking or answering questions. The plain fact is that, if students aren't graded, the great majority won't actively participate. Besides judging the quality of students' contributions, you may want to set a minimum level for quantity of participation. (We'll return to this subject in Chapter 10.)

Another consideration in asynchronous discussion is the degree of self-pacing allowed. Must students follow a chronological order of topics in their participation, or can they go back and respond to previous weeks' topics? Can they do assignments at different times during the course? The answers really depend on the nature of your course. For example, if your course has a set number of tasks, which can be completed at any time within the

ten weeks of the session, then you may not be concerned about students' skipping about or restarting conversations about previous weeks' topics.

If you're going to allow some measure of self-paced activity, then you must make this clear to students in your syllabus. The danger in this sort of arrangement is that students may get confused about the progress of the course, and they may feel that they must continually look back at earlier weeks to see if some new discussion has been posted. However, there are course management platforms and standalone forms of discussion software that alert students entering the classroom to the fact that they have new, unread messages in a particular discussion forum. In this case, students will easily discover that there are discussions going on in any of the various units of the course. If students don't have this sort of alert, you should remind them via announcements or in your syllabus instructions to check the previous weeks' discussions.

Defining Participation and Grading Criteria: Examples from Online Syllabi

Here's an excerpt from the syllabus for Chris Moggia's Advanced Microcomputers class for UCLA Extension's teacher education program. Note that Moggia discusses both quality and quantity of participation and the application to grades:

> I have created a grading policy which basically rewards two things: the **quality** and **timeliness** of your responses and assignments.
>
> In terms of quality my expectations are simple. Responses should be well written (please spell-check!) and clearly address the issues being discussed. When responding to a question about gender equity in technology access, please don't talk about baseball, for example. Though it is the national pastime and one of my favorite subjects it is off topic and not relevant (especially when the Dodgers are in last place . . .). Also please submit assignments within the week assigned. I will accept discussion responses and written assignments up to FOUR DAYS after the week ends, however. . . .
>
> **A note on attendance and class participation:** Regular and active participation is an essential, unmistakably important aspect of this online

(cont.)

course. The expectation of the instructor is that students will log on a minimum of three times every seven days. It is critical that you read all of the lecture and assignment materials as well as all of the public discussion materials. Your full participation ON A WEEKLY BASIS is not only a requirement, it is an essential aspect of the online course process. All students are expected to do the work assigned, notify the instructor when emergencies arise, and make up missing assignments no later than four days after they are due.

Nancy Shepherdson, who teaches Nonfiction Writing for UCLA Extension's online writing program, addresses these needs for definition equally well but in a manner appropriate for the different nature of her course.

Since it is difficult to mandate writing improvement, your grade in this class will depend heavily on your participation. Seventy-five percent of your grade will be based on completing assignments and participating in discussion. That is, you could receive a B simply for turning in all of the assignments and participating regularly, as long as your contributions demonstrate that you tried your best. (Last-minute schlock will be recognized and penalized.) The other twenty-five percent of the grade will depend on the quality of your work and your participation. How well have you understood the elements of a particular nonfiction form, and how well have you executed them? Does your writing show publishable flair? Has your writing improved since you began the course?

Managing Student Expectations

The task of managing student expectations is very important in the online classroom. Some students enroll in an online course expecting it to be much easier than a regular course. Others imagine that the course will be something like independent study. Still others think the instructor should be available for twenty-four real-time hours a day. Your syllabus as well as your introductory comments can help manage such expectations, correct false impressions, and set the stage for the smooth unfolding of your course.

It's also helpful if your institution has a general student orientation (or at least a student handbook) that explains how the online course will work, how much student-instructor interaction

can be expected, and so forth. If your institution doesn't have such an orientation, you may need to supply some of this information in your own syllabus.

A continuing education instructor we know, who has a busy professional practice, complained after a few weeks of her online class that students had "unrealistic expectations." When pressed to explain this remark, she commented that, if she didn't reply to each and every student comment in the discussion forum or if she appeared not to be in the online classroom every day, she would receive plaintive e-mail queries or even classroom postings inquiring about whether she had read a particular message. She further explained that she had expected students to work on their own during the first part of each week and only then to post their thoughts in the discussion forum. Unfortunately, neither her syllabus nor her introductory comments ever mentioned these teacher expectations.

This case shows that managing student expectations can also require an instructor to communicate his or her expectations of the students. This type of problem can be handled by a simple statement in the syllabus to the effect that the instructor will look in frequently during the week but may not be in the classroom every day, or that students should work on the week's assignments during the first part of the week (say, Monday through Wednesday) and then post their responses later in the week (Thursday through Sunday).

Other information of a "contractual" nature that you might want to incorporate in your syllabus includes the following:

- Your policy on late assignments
- Whether due dates are calculated by your time zone or the student's (or the server's, as that might actually be in a third time zone)
- Your availability for real-time chat appointments (which some call "virtual office hours")
- Specifications for writing assignments (formal essay? informal journal? of how many total words?)
- Your institution's policy on plagiarism and cheating

The Map

In this new territory of the online classroom, students will seize upon your syllabus as if it were a map. Students will want to know how to proceed and where everything is located. So, one of the first things you must do, whether through the syllabus or in an introductory message, is to explain the geography of the course.

In fact, if the syllabus isn't visible on the first level of the course, but instead can be arrived at only by one or two clicks of the mouse, then this introductory set of directions must be given in an announcement area or even delivered prior to the course, by e-mail. Figure 4.1 shows an example of an announcement area with explicit directions to the syllabus.

What else does "explaining the geography" mean? If your course consists of various web pages plus a discussion forum, you'll need to let the students know where to find the component parts of the course and under what headings: "Lectures will be on the page whose link says 'Lectures,' and these are arranged by weeks." If the discussion forum is hosted on an outside site, students need to be told that this link will take them off the university server, that they must use a password given to them, and so on. If you've created a discussion forum dedicated to casual communications and socializing for students, let them know that the area you have imaginatively labeled "Café Luna" is intended to be the online equivalent of a student lounge.

This is particularly important when using course management software that has its own unique and not customizable category headings. Students will need to know what you have stored behind each of these generic headings. For example, to students taking courses within the course management system Web Course in a Box, it may not be obvious that the main page heading "Learning Links" is where they will find the threaded discussion forum. Similarly, the "Water-Cooler" forum created by the instructor in Blackboard CourseInfo, to which students are guided in Figure 4.1, might remain a mystery without explicit directions.

In a hybrid course that combines face-to-face and online components, it's essential that you specify where to do each

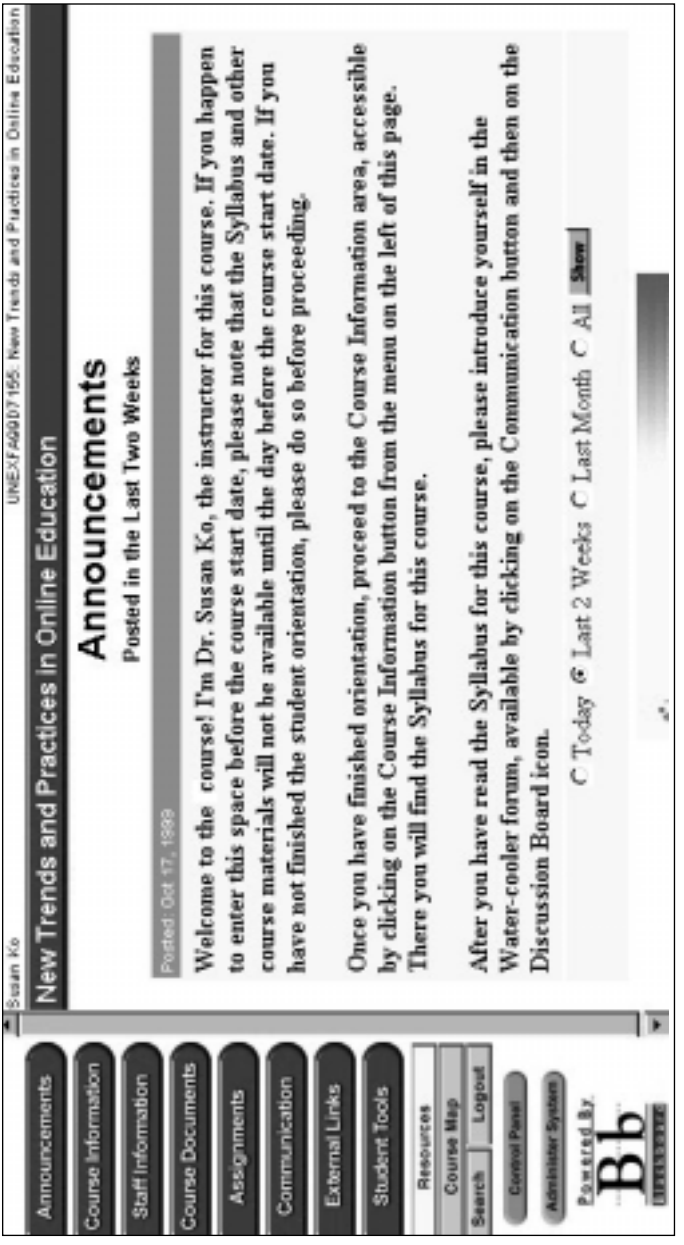

Figure 4.1 Announcement Area of an Online Course, with Directions for Accessing the Course Syllabus. In this instance, the course management software was Blackboard CourseInfo 3.0.

activity. For example, in Lonnie Yandell's Cognitive Psychology class for Belmont University, his syllabus gave clear instructions for combining face-to-face and online procedures. Here's an excerpt from the "Course Requirements" section of his syllabus:

> This course will include a major computer Internet component. Assignments, lectures, practice tests, simulations, and discussion will be held online. Time spent in class will be on computer lab simulations, in-class discussion, group work, and textbook chapter tests.

And this excerpt from his assignment schedule explains the procedures:

> The course is divided into 24 modules. Each chapter has from 2 to 4 modules. Each module has a related textbook reading, online lecture, online discussion question, and online self-test.
>
> You should read the textbook section first, then review the online lecture. The lectures will be summaries, elaborations of the textbook material, and links to related information on the Web. To get to a lecture, click on it in the schedule on this page.
>
> After you have completed reviewing the lecture, you should then log into "TopClass" and post answers to the lecture discussion question. You can also read other students' posts and respond to them if you like. You can receive extra credit for the discussion grade by making appropriate responses to others' posts. Discussion posts must be made by the date on the schedule to receive full credit.
>
> You should also complete the short self-test. The self-tests are designed to help you make sure you understand the material.

Other procedural and geographical issues you might want to cover in the syllabus include these:

- The URL for your home page
- How e-mailed assignments are to be labeled in the subject line
- Which file formats you'll accept for attached documents (for instance, Microsoft Word, Rich Text Format, PowerPoint, Excel)
- Any contact information for technical and administrative support

- The proper sequence for accomplishing weekly activities and assignments (for example, do the exercises before taking the quiz, post a message in discussion before e-mailing the assignment)

The Schedule

The course should be laid out by weeks for students, because this is commonly the unit by which students gauge their own participation and work. If your class starts on a Wednesday, then Tuesday will become the last day of your week unless you state otherwise.

We recommend that you think in terms of subdivisions of two- or three-day spreads. For example, if you post your lecture on Monday, allow students through Wednesday to read and comment on it, rather than asking them to do so by Tuesday. Students can be told to log on every single day, but it is perhaps wiser to take advantage of the asynchronous flexibility of the online environment. Assume that some students will log on and read on Monday night, some on Tuesday morning, and others at midnight. The Monday reader may return on Tuesday night to reread and post. The Tuesday reader may respond with comments at once. This scheduling flexibility is even more important for those who have students in different time zones or in foreign countries.

It's also good to gauge your students' access to computers and their probable work schedules. This goes back to what we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. If your students are accessing the course web site from a campus lab, the dorms, or branch campus libraries, then they'll follow a different pattern than will continuing education students, who may want to use the weekends to do most of the time-intensive assignments. A Monday or Tuesday due date for assignments will allow working adults to make the most of their study time out of the office.

Using Specific Dates

Instead of simply listing the course schedule for "Week One" and "Week Two," your schedule should include the specific

A Checklist for Your Online Syllabus

Here, in summary form, is a checklist for creating your online syllabus. You needn't include all of these items (some may be more appropriate for your class than others), nor do you have to include them all in one document called a "syllabus." You can distribute this information among several documents if desired.

- ❑ Course title, authors' and instructor's names, registration number, and term information; syllabus web pages should bear creation or "last revised" dates if the term date isn't included at the top
- ❑ Course instructor's contact information, plus contact information for technical support
- ❑ Course description, perhaps the same as the description used for a course catalog listing, but probably more detailed; should list any prerequisites or special technical requirements for the course
- ❑ Course objectives or expected outcomes; what students can expect to learn by completion of the course
- ❑ Required texts or materials: any books or other materials, such as software, not made available in the course but required for the course
- ❑ Explanation of grading criteria and components of total grade: a list of all quizzes, exams, graded assignments, and forms of class participation, with grade percentages or points; criteria for a passing grade; policies on late assignments
- ❑ Participation standard: minimum number of postings per week in discussion and any standards for quality of participation
- ❑ Explanation of course geography and 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; any special instructions
- ❑ Week-by-week schedule: topics, assignments, readings, quizzes, activities, and web resources for each week, with specific dates
- ❑ Any relevant institutional policies, procedures, or resources not mentioned above

Sometimes it's difficult to anticipate every issue that may arise during the class and to include that in your syllabus. There's obviously a bal-

(cont.)

ance between readable brevity and a syllabus so voluminous as to be intimidating. Whatever you don't include in your initial documents may still be introduced by means of announcement areas, weekly e-mail sent to all students, or postings in an appropriate forum. You will also want to use these means to reinforce important elements of your syllabus as the course progresses.

dates for each unit, week, or topic area covered. This is particularly important for asynchronous courses in which students may be logging on at diverse times and days during the week. It's quite common for students to lose track of the weeks in the term when following an asynchronous online schedule.

If you don't want to include dates on the main syllabus web page because you want to reuse it for subsequent terms, then send students an e-mail version of the syllabus or post a downloadable document version with the relevant dates inserted. Some course management software includes a calendar feature that you may use to reinforce the dates for each segment of the course.

Supplying Information More Than Once

It's easy to lose track of where and when something was said in threaded discussions or via e-mail. When you give directions, it may not be possible for students to simply link back to them at a later date. For that reason, you should provide important instructions in more than one location.

Important! ***In an online environment, redundancy is often better than elegant succinctness.***

Although students in some course management platforms may be able to use a search function to find your instructions, in most cases students will have to waste energy and time to sift through materials before they can locate that one crucial sentence of direction. Therefore, even if you intend to explain assignments and procedures later in the course, it's best to state

them up front in the syllabus as well. Then, if your course is laid out entirely in web pages, make sure that each page permits students to link back easily to essential information in the syllabus.

Resources

Faculty Orientation Online Syllabus Checklist. **http://online.valencia.cc.fl.us/Faculty/VOfacultysyllabuscheck.htm**

Valencia Community College's guidelines for online course syllabi; the site is maintained by the college's Internet Development Center.

The Online Course Syllabus. **http://ollie.dcccd.edu/Faculty/InfoForFaculty/DistrictResources/secure/olsyll2.htm**

A syllabus template offered by Dallas TeleCollege of the Dallas County Community College District for the district's distance learning "telecourses."

Syllabus. **http://oit.idbsu.edu/fp/syllabus.htm**

Skip Knox at Boise State University Computing Services offers guidelines on the basic elements of an online syllabus and tips on how to use an online syllabus for a face-to-face class.

Appendix: A Sample Syllabus

The following is an excerpt from a syllabus used in a real course taught by Susan Ko. It was made available to students as a Rich Text Format document that could be easily downloaded and printed out. Key points of information contained within this syllabus were repeated during the course in other areas of the classroom. For example, an introductory message gave a general overview of the course and directed students to the main geographical areas of the classroom. Frequent announcements reminded students of upcoming deadlines or

reemphasized the requirements for assignments. Any e-mailed questions about the syllabus were redirected to the shared classroom space, so that all students could have the benefit of instructor responses.

Please note that web sites mentioned here are from a version of the course taught in 1999 and may no longer be active.

NEW TRENDS AND PRACTICES IN ONLINE EDUCATION

F1675, May 25–June 22

SYLLABUS

Instructor: Dr. Susan Ko
Class e-mail: Through internal e-mail, type in Susan Ko. Available for real-time chat by appointment through e-mail.

Course Description and Goals

As one of the advanced enrichment electives in the UCLA Extension Online Teaching Program, this course is designed for busy professional educators, administrators, distance learning coordinators, online instructors, and others who have already begun to involve themselves in the delivery, design, management, or teaching of online courses.

Although there are many ways that those of us involved in online education keep ourselves posted about recent developments—through word-of-mouth, conference, or listserv-derived information; web reports; and references—these seldom provide us with a coherent view of how we might apply these new developments to our own areas of interest. This course will provide a brief but focused exploration of trends and possibilities. Due to the nature of the subject matter, both topics and readings will change each term this course is offered.

In a short but intensive four-week period, we will focus on new developments in online technologies, teaching and learning approaches, online course management, and miscellaneous issues related to online education, such as faculty training, property and copyright questions, accreditation, testing security, etc.

This course will emphasize real-life examples rather than theories. Visits to web sites, demonstrations, and guest speakers will offer concrete and varied perspectives. Participants will also benefit from sharing the experiences of others enrolled in the class in our seminarlike discussion forums.

Grading

100 points total:

- Participation, 40 points: reading, posting at least twice a week in class discussions. Note: Quality of contributions counts. You will not get extra points for simply posting beyond the number required. You can continue to contribute to previous weeks' discussions up until June 21 of the last week and still get credit.
- Journal 1 and 2 assignments, 30 points total. Journal assignment #1 due June 7 and #2 due June 14 in my e-mail box.
- Final assignment, 30 points, due June 21, in the classroom's final commentary area within the discussion forum. Participants may continue to read and comment on these final papers until June 25. Participation credit is given based on the quality of your comments on classmates' contributions.

The journal and final assignments are due by midnight PST of the date indicated; ½ point per day will be deducted for late assignments.

How to Send and Name Assignments

All assignments should bear the subject line as follows: First initial+last name+J1 or J2 or Fin (Example, SkoJ2). Also, if you are sending the first two assignments as attachments to e-mail, your name and the assignment number must be included in the text of the document attached. The final commentary should be pasted into the discussion forum, not attached.

Procedures

Each week, follow the instructions contained in the syllabus for activities and readings, read the materials I've posted in the "Topics" presentation area, then discuss the issues raised there and in your readings and activities by replying to the discussion topics established in the discussion forum for that week. . . .

WEEK THREE: Messages and Media, June 8–June 14

Topics:

New uses of technologies; networks and applications, standards, and their impact; Steve Rossen, guest, to discuss integrating RealPresenter.

Week Three Readings:

1. Kenneth Klingenstein's "The Technical Realities of Virtual Learning: An Overview for the Non-Technologist" at **http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/cem9815.html.** This article might be more technical than you might like, despite the title! However, it is worth reading for the perspective it gives us on issues that have an impact on the directions online education might take.
2. Read Steve Rossen's sample web page, "Web Resources," and then view his RealPresenter, both offered in the topics folder.
3. (Optional) Take part in *one* of the two real-time chats scheduled for this week on June 9 at 5:30 P.M. or June 12 at 9:30 A.M., U.S. Pacific Time. Each chat will be 45 minutes long, and transcripts will be logged in this week's presentation area for the benefit of those who cannot attend. The topic for each chat will be the promise of Internet2, and there will be 5–10 minutes reserved for open forum–style questions and comments about any aspect of the class.

Activities:

1. Internet2 Activities:
   a. Read a very brief introduction to Internet2 by visiting the Internet2 site at **http://www.internet2.edu/html/about-i2.html.**
   b. Visit the Internet2 applications page at **http://apps.internet2.edu/sept98/applications.htm.** Explore these pages on applications to get an idea of the range of activities that would be enabled by the greater power of the networks envisioned by Internet2.
   c. Listen to the audio or read the transcript of an interview "What's New with Internet2?" with Ted Hanss, at **http://seminars.cren.net/events/internet2.html** as well as the update from April 1999, "Update on Internet2," with Doug Van Houweling, at **http://seminars.cren.net/events/net2net.html.**

d. Optional: If you already have the G2 RealPlayer, you might want to watch the excellent seminar presentation on Internet2 by Judith Boettcher, entitled "Why Does Higher Education Need Internet2?" It's available at **http://seminars.cren.net/internet2.html.**

2. Visit the IMS standards site at **http://www.imsproject.org/** and read the links to Background **(http://www.imsproject.org/backround.html),** Scenarios **(http://www.imsproject.org/scenarios.html),** and FAQs for Providers **(http://www.ims.org/faqProviders.html).**

3. *Journal assignment #2:* Due in my e-mail box by June 14. Please write 150–200 words on *one* of the following questions:

   a. What are the most challenging technological developments or issues related to online education in your own professional life?

   b. Please comment on your own interest in any technological issues referred to in this week's reading and activities and what impact this (these) might have on you or your institution's work in online education.