Best Practices in Instructional Design for Online Learning

These tips offer a framework for determining what a quality online course might contain. Items listed below can provide a road map for developing a new course or for modifying an existing course. Not all points need to be addressed, but care should be taken to address many of them to ensure quality.

Category 1 – Learner Support and Resources
a. Information About Being an Online Learner
   This information is accessed via the Online Student Resources tool in all Sakai classes.

b. Resources Supporting Course Content
   - Links to websites with supporting information relevant to course content
   - Links to websites of organizations or associations related to course content
   - Always list software required for course other than Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat
   - Information/tutorials on how to use software required by class assignments
   - Links to definitions of new vocabulary or glossary of terms
   - Links for instructions for how to conduct online research
   - Links for instructions on how to write a research paper
   - Link to netiquette rules and regulations

Category 2 – Online Organization and Design
a. Syllabus and/or Welcome Letter Includes
   - Syllabus is easily located under the “Syllabus” tool
   - Contact information for the instructor
   - Faculty member’s introductory information
   - Pre-requisites of course check for 508 compliance
   - Course objectives
   - Course completion requirements
   - Expectations of students’ participation, honesty, etc.
   - Timeline for student participation is clear
   - Estimated amount of time needed for completing course requirements
   - Expectations of availability of, and turnaround time for contact with, instructor
   - Course schedule is summarized in more than one place
   - Office hours and preferred contact method
   - Instructional design is made clear (e.g., is self-paced, or group-paced)
   - Expectations for synchronous vs. asynchronous activities are clearly spelled out
   - Acceptable methods for completing assignments are identified (group work, open book, etc.)
   - Consequences of cheating and plagiarism are clearly defined
   - A clear criterion is established for grading policy and grading scale

b. Course Navigation and Organization
   - Course is hosted online and ready on or before the first day of class
   - Course navigation procedures are clear, simple, and user-friendly
   - Required instruction materials are easily located
   - Course content is segmented for more manageable learning (e.g., in learning modules)
   - Course content is organized in a logical format: topics and subtopics are clearly identified
   - Course schedule is available in a printer-friendly format
   - Resources are separated into “required” and “optional” categories
   - Links to other parts of the course or external sources are accurate and up-to-date

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c. Aesthetic Design and ADA Compliance
   - Typeface is easy to read (e.g., Arial or Times New Roman)
   - Sufficient contrast between text and background makes information easy to read, especially does not disadvantage those with color blindness
   - Appropriate images supporting course content add visual interest
   - Universal accessibility concerns are addressed throughout the course, including captions of any non-text objects
   - Images are optimized for speedy display and include alternative text
   - Alternative formats of materials provided, when possible (e.g., optional print packet of extensive reading materials, CD of audio clips used in course, media captions, etc.)

d. Consistency in Course
   - Spelling and grammar are consistent and accurate
   - Written material is concise
   - Language of written material is friendly and supportive
   - Clear directions are given for each task or assignment
   - Sentences and paragraphs are brief

Category 3 – Instructional Design and Delivery
a. Promote Interaction and Communication
   - Instructor introduces himself/herself to model interaction
   - Students introduce themselves
   - Students are encouraged to respond to classmate introductions
   - "Ice-breaker" activity to get acquainted
   - Opinions are respected
   - Student participation is tracked and each student is drawn into the discussions
   - Students may be assigned to facilitate discussion

b. Appropriate Tools to Facilitate Communication
   - Discussion boards
   - Synchronous chat
   - Email, messaging, announcements
   - Videoconferencing
   - Group discussion areas, when appropriate for group activities
   - Office hours when instructor is available to talk with students through a variety of methods, e.g.: chat, video conferencing, or telephone.

c. Learning Objectives and Activities are Integrated
   - Activities to learn desired concepts are consistent with student abilities and course unit load
   - Tasks and activities are designated as synchronous or asynchronous, sequential or may be completed in any order
   - Instructional material may be viewed repeatedly (built-in redundancy)
   - Summary and review activities are provided frequently, particularly at the end of topics, to reinforce learning

d. Activities to Develop Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills
   - May include but are not limited to:
     - Discussion questions designed to prompt communication and interaction
     - Address multiple learning styles
     - Enhance recall and application
     - Linked to conceptual frameworks
     - Compare-and-contrast exercises
     - Case studies
     - Critiques of classmates’ assignments
     - Collaborative exercises
     - Portfolios to share/peer review

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Category 4 – Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning

a. Assessment Activities and Feedback

- Course assessments are aligned to learning objectives
- Course assignments have detailed instructions and established due dates (built-in redundancy)
- Activities are designed to determine students’ current understanding
- Multiple assessment methods are used in the course
- Clear criteria are used to assess student work
- Students receive frequent, specific, and timely feedback on coursework
- Clear criterion is established and communicated in advance of assessments

Modified from Instructional Design Tips for Online Learning developed by Joan Van Duzer of Humboldt State University and Rubric for Online Instruction developed by California State University, Chico, 2002.