DOTS
DEPAUL ONLINE TEACHING SERIES

Module 3
Structuring the Online Experience and Managing Expectations

1. Overview & Objectives

Estimated time to complete Module 3: ~8 hours

Video Overview of Module 3 [Duration: 1'37"]

Transcript

"As you delve into online teaching, you will find that the process has the potential to be far more time consuming for you, more confusing to your students, and more frustrating for everyone involved than you might have initially anticipated. Unless, that is, certain important steps are taken, some in advance and some during an online course.
We will spend this module exploring what you can do in the course-design stage to support a clear, satisfying, and successful student experience and to most effectively and efficiently use your time.

Everything we'll do in this module can be summarized in the following statement:
'Reflect on and recognize the assumptions underlying communication in your face-to-face courses, organize them in logical categories, and communicate them to your online students explicitly and in the appropriate context.'
A shorter way to say the same thing would be:
'Assume nothing, deliberately structure most things, and explicitly communicate everything.'

DOTS models such an approach, as do, to some extent, the sample courses it introduces. Let's work together in this module to create the types of guiding resources that will help structure your students' experience, manage their expectations, and improve their success and satisfaction, while saving you precious time.

As you know, the wrap-up meeting for this module will take place online. For details, see the appropriate section in the module's materials."

Topics

- Creating effective online-course syllabi
- Creating orientation, technical-support, interaction, communication, and other guiding resources, and incorporating them to online courses
- Structuring the online student experience: establishing frequent graded milestones and a clear sense of course progression
- Managing instructor time and student expectations and satisfaction in the online learning environment

Objectives

- Compose an online-course syllabus and recognize the components that make it effective and may distinguish it from a face-to-face course syllabus
- Compose a course-orientation document (e.g. a Start Here page) and recognize its relationship to the course syllabus
- Compose technical-support, interaction, communication, and other guiding resources and recognize when/where/how to present them to your online students
- Recognize the importance of creating and clearly communicating to your online students a milestone-driven course progression
- Recognize how accomplishing the previous objectives supports more effective and efficient use of your time and higher student understanding of and satisfaction with an online course; consult the Quality Matters standards for course overview and learner engagement and support
- Participate in synchronous and asynchronous online interactions, in low- and high-stakes contexts

2. Assignments and Resources

Assignment 1

Compose a welcome letter for your prospective online course and use this letter and your webcam to create a video introduction. Post the video on *Viddler*, and embed it into your personal DOTS Blackboard course (you should already have a *Viddler* account).

Use your own menu-design judgment to create an appropriate area to enter this information. The facilitators will be looking through your course and sending you their suggestions during a later module.

Resources

- "Building an Online Course Community, Part 2"
- *Viddler* Handout (from Module 2)
- http://viddler.com
- Webcam
- Your personal DOTS Blackboard course

Timeline

- **Start:** Saturday, 5/9
- **End:** Tuesday, 5/12, 11:59 p.m.

Assignment 2

Use the assignment resources to draft Syllabus, Orientation, and Schedule documents for your prospective online course. You may modify your existing course materials and/or create new ones. Feel free to use the samples provided in this module as needed. Enter the information in your personal DOTS Blackboard course. You will keep building this course throughout DOTS and will be fine-tuning it for presentation during Module 6.

Resources

- Module 3 Lecture Notes: Part 1
- Your personal DOTS Blackboard course

Timeline

- **Start:** Monday, 5/11
- **End:** Thursday, 5/14, noon

Assignment 3

Use the assignment resources to draft assignment and discussion rubrics (i.e. evaluation and grading criteria) for your prospective online course. You may modify your existing course materials and/or create new ones. Feel free to use the samples provided in this module as needed. Tailor your Assignment rubrics to the course objectives and assignments you created during Module 2.
Enter the information in your personal DOTS Blackboard course. You will keep building this course throughout DOTS and will be fine-tuning it for presentation during Module 6.

Resources

- Module 3 Lecture Notes: Part 2
- Your personal DOTS Blackboard course

  Rubric resources from Module 1
- Collaboration Instructions for Group Assignments in DOTS
- What Makes a Good Discussion Post?
- Feedback Guidelines (by *Quality Matters*) and Tips (by IDD)

Timeline

- **Start:** Tuesday, 5/12
- **End:** Friday, 5/15, 11:59 p.m.

Building an Online Course Community
Part 2: Welcoming Students – Managing Time & Expectations

[*Part 1 was presented in Module 1*]

A. Welcoming your Students – Setting the Tone

Formal but inviting

Online learning involves a kind of writing that is simultaneously inviting and systematic. As online instructors, you will ideally develop a voice and tone that manage to communicate your classroom teaching persona, while refraining from including unnecessary details, from being as wordy as in casual conversation, or from contributing to information pollution [http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030811.html].
The need for some degree of formality is dictated by the fact that almost everything in an online course is written or recorded, available for everyone to see even after a "conversation" has ended. This may scare some students away from conversation, preventing them from truly engaging in the course community. Instructors can address such negative side effects of formal interaction by also providing opportunities for informal communications where students feel less threatened (e.g. one-on-one chats and phone conversations).

Setting the tone in your online course

- **Address everyone; neglect no one**
  Welcome all students to the online classroom and reinforce early attempts to communicate. Send individual messages to students commenting on their contributions to the course, suggesting connections with other students, or recommending resources. Assuming a coaching role is key to easing the students' transition to computer-mediated communication.
- **Reveal your persona**
  Use audio-visual means of communication and share professional or personal stories when relevant and appropriate
- **Be flexible**
  Assume that students have good intentions and give second chances. (Given the challenges of the online medium, you too may need some second chances.)
- **Have a sense of humor**
  Occasional lightheartedness can relieve tensions and be reviving
- **Provide specific constructive feedback, not general comments**
  Broad generic feedback is interpreted by students as lazy or even insulting; as much as possible, provide detailed constructive criticism
- **Provide a lot of encouragement, particularly at the beginning of a course**

"Welcome" messages and video introductions

Composing a "Welcome" message that is well thought out and representative of who you are as a teacher is at the heart of setting the tone for your online courses. Receiving such a message is also an expectation of online students. See a sample "Welcome" message [http://pages.iddresources.org-a.googlepages.com/welcomeletter].

In addition to a text-based welcome note, you may create video introductions that allow you to use your body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions to communicate meaning.
We've seen examples of general video introductions in "Building an Online Course Community, Part 1" (Module 1) and of course-topic video introductions in the preface to each DOTS module. You will be creating your own video introduction using *Viddler* in one of the current module's assignments. Below is an additional example: an audio-enhanced slideshow created using *VoiceThread*. We will be exploring this tool in Module 4.

Introductory slideshow with audio created with *VoiceThread*
http://voicethread.com/book.swf?b=27525
Use the arrows at the bottom of the slideshow screen to move
forward (rewind) to the next (previous) slide (13 slides - Duration: ~ 7':00")
Dr. Kelly Tzoumis (Public Policy, DePaul University)

[no transcript available]

B. Student Reflections and Audio/Video "Think Alouds"

Online audio/video-creation and -sharing tools can contribute to course community building and to student learning in several ways beyond simply allowing all course participants to create short video introductions. For example, you may
a) send to the students multimedia-rich feedback on their work or
b) you may ask your students to produce and post audio or video "think alouds" addressing a specific resource/problem related to the course materials.

"Think alouds" were originally introduced by cognitive psychologists as a data collection tool in the study of problem-solving strategies. The basic idea is that thinking aloud permits the recording and analysis of thought process, assuming of course that thoughts and vocalized thoughts match isomorphically.
In education, think alouds are used most successfully not as evidence of understanding (*i.e.* in assessment) but as means to accomplish understanding. Asking students to externalize their thoughts on a given topic and explain them through language forces them to enter into an iterative and explicit analysis/synthesis loop, reflecting on thoughts *and* on thought reflections. This process supports the development not only of understanding but also of critical thinking and communication skills. In other words, think alouds are less a means of gaining insight into a student's thinking and problem-solving capacities and more a means of developing them.

C. Managing your Time and Student Expectations

A good way to prepare students for the type and amount of work involved in online courses and for the ways such work differs from traditional, face-to-face coursework, is through online-learning aptitude tests. There are numerous such tests available online, but not all of them are well designed and useful. Good aptitude tests base their selection and organization of test questions on relevant research and include feedback that is customized to the students' responses. They also highlight the need for self-directed learning and time-management and collaboration skills.

One such test is available through Education Connection, a free service that helps students assess their aptitude for online learning and match their personality type to specific occupations. Present this or other similar tests to your students at the beginning of your online courses to set their expectations regarding workload type and management. When combined with clear and detailed guidelines of a course's demands on and expectations from the students, it has the potential to increase student performance and satisfaction.

http://www.educationconnection.com/assessment/aptitudeProfile.aspx

Refer to Ko and Rossen (2000: 214-217) [http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/KoAndRossen2000_EffectiveOnlineSyllabus.pdf].for additional student-expectation-management strategies regarding e-mail and other communication in online courses. Attending to these issues in a systematic and clear manner at the beginning of a course will not only increase student satisfaction but will also help you effectively manage your time. Failure to do so will put you at risk of spending too much of your already taxed time and energy on course activities that have little impact on student learning.
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/time_estimates_online_work_uwm.pdf]

Motivating students by setting expectations and time-management strategies are the topics of the following two short videos by Dr. D. Opitz.
(1':30" each; filmed by IDD Video Services and posted on *Vimeo.com*)

Motivating students	Time-management strategies
http://vimeo.com/420229	http://vimeo.com/420238
[*no transcript available*]	[*no transcript available*]

Dr. J.V. Boettche has compiled an annotated list of “what not to do when communicating with students on the Internet” that will help you avoid some common and potentially disruptive communication errors.
[http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/comm.htm]

> *Sample Tip*: "Don't structure the communication flow in a course so that you are the gateway for all communications. This will save you time and create a better learning environment."

Module 3
Lecture Notes – Part 1

Syllabus, Orientation Materials, Schedule, & Technology Help

A. Online Versus Face-to-Face Syllabus Design

Online-course syllabi are not simply digital versions of syllabi designed for traditional, face-to-face courses.

Traditional syllabi are designed under the assumptions that

i) relevant questions will be answered, misunderstandings will be cleared up, and details will be filled in during the class meetings and

ii) the document will have a general reference function and will include all non-course-content materials.

None of these assumptions truly apply to online courses.

On one hand, the absence of face-to-face meetings places extensive demands for clarity and detail on the online syllabus, which must anticipate and prevent potential misunderstandings.
On the other hand, the need for the contents of this document to actually be fully read and closely followed from the outset of a course means that it has to be succinct and to-the-point.
To satisfy both requirements, the online version of a course syllabus can and often does consist of several distinct, well-organized, and interrelated documents that collectively assume the role of the traditional syllabus.

In other words, an online "syllabus" does not have to be a single, long document but may be a collection of documents that includes:

i) a Syllabus, focusing on course description, learning goals, overall structure, and general expectations (including grading scale, components, and weights),

ii) a Schedule, outlining module-level topics, objectives, assignments, and deadlines), and

iii) a Course Orientation document, focusing on the course Web site's structure and technology requirements, pointing students to technical and other support resources, and in general easing students into the online-course environment.

Tip: To ensure the documents are read, you may include a relevant quiz or some other activity that requires access to the materials. Here is an example:
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/sample_syllabus_quiz.pdf]

In such design, detailed assignment descriptions, instructions, and grading criteria are reserved for presentation within the context of each module's learning-assessment activities, while technical and other support information are presented in separate documents and/or dedicated course-menu items.

B. Online Syllabus, Orientation, and Schedule Design: Practical Guides

Overview

For DOTS, we chose to present you with a set of course-introduction documents rather than a single, long syllabus. Information was separated and organized into the Syllabus, Schedule, and Orientation documents based on information-type and focus. Whether you chose to present this information in a single or multiple documents, information must always be organized based on type and focus. Given the fact that these different types of information will likely also be accessed at different times and for different reasons, offering them as separate documents with their own access points represents an increasingly common practice in online course design.
Do you find this organization effective?

The University of Washington provides access to the syllabi and orientation materials of seven beginner, intermediate, and advanced online courses in Communication.
After you visit the page, click on a course title and then on the "view course introduction" link.
These course introductions are, in their majority, well designed and, along with the DOTS introductory materials, provide you with good models for your courses.

http://www.onlinelearning.washington.edu/ol/courses/com/

Syllabus

You may save these ten sample syllabi for future reference.
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/10_sample_syllabi.zip]
Note: *The syllabi have been packaged into a single .zip file. Save this file on your computer and unzip it to access the ten syllabi (.pdf files).*

The sample syllabi span a variety of topics (from nursing to education), modalities (online and blended), lengths (from six to thirty-one pages long), formats (similar to or different from DOTS), and writing styles (prose or bulleted-list based).

What features best appeal to you?
How about designing a syllabus as a flowchart?
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/sample_syllabus_flowchart.pdf]

Regardless of the format and style you pick for your syllabi, you need to ensure they are clear and at-once detailed and succinct.

"As much as any research monograph, the syllabus is a site where our professional integrity is tested and where our professional identity is formed."
Terry Collins, Director of Academic Affairs, General College, University. of Minnesota.

Syllabus-Design Checklist (long syllabus format)
(*modified from IDEAL, Bowling Green State University*
http://ideal.bgsu.edu/pdf_docs/IDEALOnlineSyllabusChklstJuly2007.pdf)

- Course title and information (*e.g.* modality, prerequisites, number of credits, etc.)
- Instructor's name, contact information, and availability (*e.g.* weekends?)
- Course description
- Course goals
- Technical requirements and contact information for technical and any other support resources, whether text or Web based (*this section can be standardized, department-wide*)
- List of quizzes, exams, and other graded assignments and discussions, including assigned grade percentages or points; general criteria for a passing grade; policies on late submission of assignments
- Participation standards, discussion rubrics, and group-work expectations
- Explanation of how the online classroom is organized and how students will proceed with each module's class activities
- Special instructions, including file-naming conventions for e-submission of assignments etc.
- Any relevant institutional policies, procedures, or resources (*e.g.* academic-integrity statement, office for students with disabilities, writing center, etc.)
- Module-by-module schedule, including topics, assignments, readings and other resources, and dates associated with each module (*this information may be reserved for a separate Schedule document*)

Detailed syllabus-design checklist compiled by IDD staff (long syllabus format):
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/syllabus_checklist_draft.pdf]

For an extensive practical guide to online-syllabus design you may consult Chapter 4 from Ko and Rossen (2008).
[http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/KoAndRossen2000_EffectiveOnlineSyllabus.pdf]
(reprint of the 2000 edition)

Orientation and Schedule

It is highly recommended for online courses to include an Orientation page, organized in distinct, progressive steps that

- outline the course Web site's structure, navigation features, and content,
- introduce students to the technology and other resources necessary to efficiently and effectively participate in the course,
- lay down the basic rules for course-related communication, synchronous and asynchronous, and
- clearly communicate a sense of progression within the course's overall structure.

Such information is particularly useful to online students, who cannot take advantage of the structuring and support benefits associated with traditional courses' regular face-to-face meetings. It therefore makes good sense to bring it to the surface rather than bury it into a long syllabus, permitting both the syllabus and orientation resources to better fulfill their distinct functions.

Schedule pages offer a module-by-module outline of a course, including topics, assignments, quizzes, activities, Web resources, and dates associated with each module. As mentioned previously, detailed assignment descriptions, instructions, and grading criteria are reserved for presentation within the context of each module's learning-assessment activities.

Orientation and Schedule Samples (Syllabi included for cross-reference)

- *DOTS*: Orientation, Schedule, and Syllabus (see the materials from Module 1)
- *Values-Centered Leadership*:
  Orientation: http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/mps520_orientation.pdf
  Schedule: http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/mps520_schedule.pdf
  Syllabus: http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/mps520_syllabus.pdf

C. Technology Requirements, Instructions, and Support

Overview

Online courses must include explicit and clear information on what technologies will be necessary, at what degree of skill, and under what type and degree of support. Assuming that the course design is technically sound and free of errors, technology expectations need to be communicated to the students at the course's outset, transferring responsibility to them. Nonetheless, all online courses must also include

i) a technology help section that anticipates commonly-encountered problems,
ii) a discussion forum where technical questions can be posted and addressed as they arise, and
iii) a student survey collecting information on technology and course-content preparedness that will help you better address the specific needs of your students.

Can you identify these features in DOTS?

Technical Help sample pages

- DOTS Technical Help (*i.e.* anticipated technical issues)
  [http://sites.google.com/a/iddresources.org/mps-help/] and
  Orientation (*i.e.* technology requirements and preparedness tests)

- School of Music Technology Troubleshooting resource
  [http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/troubleshooting_for_students.pdf]

- Harper College, Palatine, IL Student Service Desk (technical division dedicated to the support of all online students in the College)
  [http://goforward.harpercollege.edu/page.cfm?p=3629]

The Department of Instructional Design and Development can help you create Technical Help pages for your online courses. [http://www.idd.depaul.edu/]

Dealing with misunderstandings and student anxiety

As you gain more experience in online teaching, you will be able to produce increasingly clear and succinct syllabus, orientation, schedule, and technical help materials. However, even the clearest and most succinct instructions will not completely alleviate student misunderstandings and anxiety, which will reach you in the form of e-mails during the first days of class. This problem is usually due to students not carefully reading your instructions and to a combination of a desire to do well in the course and the uneasiness induced by the new and unfamiliar learning environment.

How not to address such problems

- Resist the temptation to use all caps, different colored text, underlined text, or other formatting features to extensively highlight important instructions. This will have no effect on students who, like me, tend to make quick decisions, it may insult more deliberate students, and will give an unprofessional look to your materials.
- Resist the temptation to create lengthy guidelines that attempt to anticipate all potential problems. In doing so, you run the risk of turning your instructions into information "noise" that students will be likely to dismiss.

How to address such problems

- Acknowledge any errors or lack of clarity in your instructions.
- Acknowledge that misunderstandings and panic are not unusual.
- Commend students for engaging with the course.
- Kindly ask students to change the way they read instructions in order to address the special communication needs of this new learning environment.
- Lead by example (*i.e.* address student materials as carefully as you want students to address course materials and demonstrate this in your feedback).

D. Quality Matters Standards

Standard #1 (Course Overview) - Standard #7 (Learner Support)

Standard 1: Course Overview
"The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course."

Standard 1.1: Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components
Standard 1.2: A statement introduces the student to the purpose of the course and to its components; in the case of a hybrid course, the statement clarifies the relationship between the face-to-face and online components
Standard 1.3: Etiquette expectations (sometimes called “netiquette”) for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly
Standard 1.4: The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online
Standard 1.5: Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class
Standard 1.6: Minimum student preparation, and, if applicable, prerequisite knowledge in the discipline are clearly stated
Standard 1.7: Minimum technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated

Standard 7: Learner Support
"The course facilitates student access to institutional services essential to student success."

Standard 7.1: The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered
Standard 7.2: Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution’s academic support system can assist the student in effectively using the resources provided
Standard 7.3: Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution’s student support services can help students reach their educational goals
Standard 7.4: Course instructions answer basic questions related to research, writing, technology, etc., or link to tutorials or other resources that provide the information

Course Overview Elements by "*Quality Matters*"

***Standard 1*: The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course.**

1.1. Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.

Instructions provide a general course overview, present the schedule for activities, guide the new student to explore the course website, and indicate what to do first, rather than or in addition to listing detailed navigational instructions for the whole course.
Instructors may choose to incorporate some of this information in the course syllabus. In this case, students should be directed to the syllabus at the beginning of the course. A useful idea is a "Read Me First" or "Start Here" button or icon on the course home page, linking students to start-up information.

Examples:
1. A course "tour"
2. Clear statements about how to get started in the course
3. A "scavenger hunt" assignment that leads students through an exploration of the different areas of the course
4. A graphical table or diagram that depicts the relationship between the online and face-to-face portions of a hybrid course

Hybrid Courses: Instructions in the online classroom make it apparent to students that the course is a hybrid course with both online and face-to-face components and activities. Instructions specify the requirements for participation in both the online and face-to-face portions of the course. The introductory information clearly states when and where students should participate each week, and a structured set of topics and schedule is provided for each face-to-face meeting.

1.2. A statement introduces the student to the purpose of the course and to its components; in the case of a hybrid course, the statement clarifies the relationship between the face-to-face and online components.

The instructor's statement gives the new student an idea of how the learning process is structured--including schedule, communication modes, and types of activities--and how student performance will be evaluated. These features are often included in the course syllabus, but they may also be included in an introductory or welcome document.

Look for some or all of the following:
1. The course schedule (self-paced or following a set calendar, etc.)
2. Course sequencing, such as a linear or random order
3. Types of activities the student will be required to complete (written assignments, online self-tests, participation in the discussion board, group work, etc.)
4. Fully developed course calendar with assignment, activity, and test due dates. In the case of a hybrid course, the calendar should fully cover both the online and face-to-face portions of the course and specify the dates and times when face-to-face class meetings will be held.
5. Preferred mode of communication with the instructor (email, discussion board, etc.)

6. Preferred mode of communication with other students
7. Testing procedures (online, proctored, etc.)
8. Procedure for submission of electronic assignments

Hybrid Courses: Instructors should explain the purpose of both the online and face-to-face portions of the course, and how they complement and reinforce each other. The instructor explains how and why both formats are important to the learning process.

1.3. Etiquette expectations (sometimes called "netiquette") for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly.

Expectations for student conduct online and in the classroom are clearly stated. The substance of these expectations is not to be evaluated.

Examples:
1. Rules of conduct for participating in the discussion board
2. Rules of conduct for email content
3. "Speaking style" requirements (e.g., use of correct English required as opposed to popular abbreviations used online)
4. Spelling and grammar expectations, if any
5. Rules of conduct for classroom participation
6. Expectations for the tone and civility used in communicating with fellow students and the faculty member, whether the communication be via electronic means or telephone or face-to-face
7. A link or reference to the school's student handbook or code of conduct

1.4. The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online.

The initial introduction creates a sense of connection between the instructor and the students. It should present the instructor as professional as well as approachable, and include the essentials, such as the instructor's name, title, field of expertise, email address, phone number, and times when the instructor is typically online or may be reached by phone.

The self-introduction helps students get to know the instructor and should extend beyond the essentials. It could include
1. Information on teaching philosophy
2. Past experience with teaching online classes
3. Personal information such as hobbies, family, travel experiences, etc.
4. A photograph

Hybrid Courses: The instructor's self-introduction should be available electronically for students who missed early face-to-face meetings.

1.5. Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class.

The student introduction helps to create a supportive learning environment and a sense of community. Students are asked to introduce themselves and given guidance on where and how they should do so. Student introductions themselves are not evaluated.

Instructors may ask students to answer specific questions (such as why they are taking the course, what concerns they have, what they expect to learn, etc.) or may choose to let the student decide what to include. Instructors may provide an example of an introduction and/or start the process by introducing themselves.

Hybrid Courses: The opportunity for introductions should be available electronically for students who may have missed the opportunity during early face-to-face meetings. Ideally, student introductions are posted online, for future reference, even if students have introduced themselves in a face-to-face meeting.

1.6. Minimum student preparation, and, if applicable, prerequisite knowledge in the discipline are clearly stated.

Information about prerequisite knowledge and competencies is found within the course, in documents linked to the course, or in supporting material not on the course site. Look for a link to that content and/or a reminder of it for the entering student.

Discipline knowledge prerequisites should specify courses that meet the requirements.

1.7. Minimum technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated.

General as well as course-specific technical skills students must have to succeed in the course are specified.

Examples of technical skills might include
1. The ability to use email with attachments
2. The ability to save files in commonly used word processing program formats
3. The ability to copy and paste
4. The ability to work on two browser windows simultaneously
5. The ability to use spreadsheet programs
6. The ability to use presentation and graphics programs

Learner Support Elements by "*Quality Matters*"

***Standard 7*: The course facilitates student access to institutional services essential to student success.**

7.1. The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered.

Technical support for learners differs from institution to institution. Technical support includes information about topics such as how to log in and how to use the tools and features of the learning management system; a browser testing tool; information on minimal software and hardware requirements; and links for downloading software. It does not include help with course content, assignments, or academic or student support services (see Standards 7.2 and 7.3).
Look for evidence that learners have access to technical support services from within the course or the learning management system. The purpose is not to review the adequacy of those services at an institutional level but rather to determine if technical support services are provided for learners.

Examples:
1. A clear description of the technical support services provided by the institution, including a link to a technical support website
2. An email link to the institution's technical support center or help desk
3. A phone number for the institution's technical support center or help desk
4. Clear directions for obtaining support for access to publisher-supplied materials (e.g., e-packs or course cartridges)
5. Links to tutorials or other resources providing instructions on how to use the tools and features of the learning management system
6. A link to "frequently asked questions"

7.2. Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support system can assist the student in effectively using the resources provided.

Academic support for students, and the scope of what "academic support" entails, differs from institution to institution. For the purposes of review, academic support includes an online orientation, access to library resources, a readiness assessment or survey, testing services, tutoring, writing and/or math centers, supplemental instruction programs, and teaching assistants.
Look for evidence that learners have access to academic support services from within the course or the learning management system. The purpose is not to review the adequacy of the services on an institutional level but rather to determine if academic support services are provided for learners.

Examples:
1. A link to the academic support website, along with a listing and definition of academic support services provided for learners
2. Links to institution-specific academic support services and how to access these services (e.g., location of testing center and/or proctored test sites, hours of operation, phone numbers and email addresses for key personnel)
3. Links to online orientations or a demo course

4. Link to the library, including information on how to obtain library access, request materials, access databases, and contact a librarian

7.3. Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's student support services can help students reach their educational goals.

Student support services, and the scope of what such support entails, differ from institution to institution. For the purposes of this review, student support services include ADA services, advising, registration, financial aid, student or campus life, counseling, career services, online workshops, and student organizations.

Look for evidence that learners have access to student support services from within the course or the learning management system. The purpose is not to review the adequacy of those services on an institutional level but rather to determine if student support services are provided for learners.

Examples:
1. A clear description of institution-specific student support services and how to access them (including email addresses and phone numbers for key personnel)
2. A link to the student support website, along with a listing and definition of student support services
3. Guidance on when and how students should access a particular support service

7.4. Course instructions answer basic questions related to research, writing, technology, etc., or link to tutorials or other resources that provide the information.

Tutorials and resources for learners differ from institution to institution. For the purpose of this review, academic resources include tutorials or other forms of guidance on conducting research, writing papers, citing sources, using an online writing lab, and using institution-specific technology.

Look for evidence that learners have access to tutorials or other resources from within the course or the learning management system. The purpose is not to review the adequacy of the resources on an institutional level but rather to determine if they are provided for learners. Standard 7.4 does not refer to course-specific tutorials and resources or services provided by individual employees or faculty.

Module 3
Lecture Notes – Part 2

Assignment, Grading, and Discussion Guidelines

Communicating clear and detailed guidelines of a course's demands on and expectations from the students directly correlates with student satisfaction and performance in an online course (Ko, 2004; Rivera *et al*., 2002; Palloff and Pratt, 2003). Additional contributing factors include course organization, instructor availability and empathy, and instructor motivation and enthusiasm. [Walvoord, B. (2007). "Enhancing student motivation," *Presentation at DePaul University's Teaching Learning and Assessment Seminar Series*.]

A. Assignment Instructions

Assignment instructions example

(*adapted from Peirce, 1998* http://academic.pgcc.edu/~wpeirce/MCCCTR/design.html)

Sample instructions that need revision
"Write a 15-20 page research paper (typed, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins). Your paper should discuss in depth a topic covered briefly in one of the assigned chapters. Cite at least five sources, using APA documentation format. The paper is due the last day of class and is worth 30 percent of the course grade."

Revision suggestions

- Make clear that the writing task requires thinking, not information reporting. Ask students to support a position on a debatable issue, to summarize opposing views, to explain where both sides agree and disagree, to evaluate evidence for a claim, to evaluate a procedure, etc. Use verbs like "evaluate," "support a claim," "argue," "defend," "compare," "interpret," "decide," "recommend," or "propose." Use the language of your discipline.
- Suggest how the final paper could be organized into sections; show students the customs of your discipline.
- Set up a schedule and provide peer and instructor feedback at important steps: selecting a research topic, searching for material, planning, reviewing drafts, etc.
- Consider abandoning the long research assignment. In its place, use a sequence of shorter graded assignments or informal small-group tasks.

Writing style, grammar, and structure expectations

Regardless of discipline, topic, or focus, all assignments must expect and support student development of writing skills. The best sources for instructions communicating writing-style expectations are academic libraries and scholarly journals' "instructions for authors."

Some suggestions:

- "Writing style and word usage," in *The ACS Style Guide: A Manual for Authors and Editors*, (2nd Ed.), edited by Janet S. Dodd.
  [http://www.oup.com/us/samplechapters/0841234620/?view=usa#STYLE]
- "Writing the academic paper," Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
  [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml]
- "Writing a research paper," bullet points by the University of Wisconsin, Madison
  [http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/PlanResearchPaper.html]
- "Grammar & mechanics," at The Owl, Purdue University, W. Lafayette, IN (select the appropriate link from the menu to the right of the page)
  [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/]
- "Guide to grammar and writing," Capital Community College, Hartford, CT
  [http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/]
- Journal of the Acoustical Society of America style guide
  [http://www.aip.org/pubservs/style/4thed/sec3.pdf]
- Taylor & Francis Journals (basic author instructions from over two-hundred Journals) [http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/ifa.asp]

Due dates and student time management

Self-paced? Not really.

Being self-paced is one of the principle attractions of online courses. However, this and other similar factors that draw students online often end up also being the factors that contribute to attrition (Carr, 2000, in Palloff and Pratt, 2003), as they require high degrees of self-motivation, dedication, and self-discipline that cannot always be assumed. Misunderstanding what "self-paced" means is a recipe for online-learning failure. Although online courses are self-paced in that they usually do not require students to participate in the course at pre-specified times and locations, good online courses structure and pace student learning.

Well-paced? Yes.

To effectively support learning, online courses must be structured around frequent and evenly spaced milestones (*i.e.* assignment-submission deadlines) that clearly communicate what needs to be done, by when, and at what reward/punishment. Each course module must include at least two deadline-driven, graded learning activities. Online-course pacing and student time management may be further assisted by also attaching a suggested start date to each learning activity. Collaborative student activities that are monitored by the instructor provide the best contexts for the observation of start dates and the creation of well-paced online courses. We will be discussing such contexts in Module 4.
Finally, breaking down large assignments into smaller, easily manageable tasks and including time-to-completion estimates can provide additional support towards well-paced and consequently effective student learning and assessment.

Technical and submission expectations

The following assignment information must be explicitly (even if tediously) communicated to the students:

- list of computer skills assumed by the assignment
- reminder that students should anticipate possible technical difficulties and never wait until the last minute to submit assignments or other coursework; nongraded practice assignments provide a good context for ironing out such issues
- submission mode (*e.g.* via e-mail, Blackboard's Assignment Manager, etc.) file format (*e.g.* .doc, .docx, .rtf, .ppt, etc.), and file naming conventions (*e.g.* having every student's assignment arrive as "assignment1.doc" would not be helpful)

Using Blackboard's Assignment Manager has several advantages, including
• direct link to Blackboard's gradebook,
• clear author and submission data, and
• easy student resubmission and retrieval of graded assignments.

Northern Illinois University has prepared a short guide to Blackboard's Assignment Manager.

http://www.blackboard.niu.edu/blackboard/assessments/assignments.shtml

B. Assignment and Discussion Rubrics

As illustrated by DOTS and the courses reviewed so far, meaningful class discussions are crucial to the success of an online course.

Common instructor errors with regards to online discussion

- Initiating discussions with questions that are too general and vague
- Providing minimal instructions and direction on how discussion should proceed
- Specifying minimal grading criteria or no grading criteria at all

Features of meaningful class discussions

- Like any other course assignment, discussions are tightly linked to course objectives and resources and are frequent and deadline driven
- They are supported by detailed and clear completion instructions
- They carry a grade component guided by detailed and clear grading criteria

Including appropriate grading criteria, or rubrics, significantly increases the number and depth of student discussion posts (Swan *et al.*, 2007).

Creating successful discussion rubrics appears to often be a challenging task, usually because of problems in the design (*i.e.* fist two of the above features) of discussions.

Features of meaningful discussion posts

(*adapted from Edelstein and Edwards, 2002*)

Meaningful discussion posts

- are prompt and show initiative,
- exhibit correct spelling and grammar,
- are relevant to the discussion prompts,
- clearly express and support opinions, and
- engage with the rest of the discussants.

Discussion posts of the type "I agree" have none of these characteristics and should be explicitly discouraged. In addition, discussion rubrics should explicitly address student expectations regarding the instructor's degree of involvement in the discussions.
e.g. Will you respond to each post? Will you read all of the posts but only respond when there is a need to steer the discussion towards a different direction?

As we will see in Module 4, well-thought-out instructor involvement in online discussions plays a pivotal role in student learning.

Guidelines for effective rubrics

- Make all your expectations explicit
- Closely match grading criteria to the assignment instructions; assuming alignment between objectives and assignments, grading criteria should reference all learning objectives
- Clearly, succinctly, and consistently indicate what constitutes a good, an average, or a bad assignment
- Model good reasoning; encourage students to make their thinking "visible"
- Design criteria that support efficient grading and best use of your time

For the remainder of this section you will review a set of discussion rubrics to identify features to adopt or avoid. As is the case with all assignment rubrics, the main point to remember can be summarized in the following statement:
Be specific and consistent enough for students (or alternative graders) to be able to clearly understand what you are looking for and general enough to address all possibilities with as few tedious criteria as possible.

An example of a useful feature is the inclusion of "model" responses.

An example of a less useful feature is the widely spread, rather tedious, and largely ineffective practice of counting posts (*e.g.* "each student must submit at least two original posts and one response to a classmate's post"). Some discussion rubrics (such as the *Collaboration Instructions for Group Assignments in DOTS*) include no such stipulation, thanks to assignment design and management features that we will be addressing during Module 4.

Sample discussion rubrics

- Sample grading rubric for the collaborative assignments in DOTS
  (included on the next page)

- Collaboration rubric (San Diego State University - The *Cabrillo Tidepool Study*)
  [http://edweb.sdsu.edu/triton/tidepoolunit/Rubrics/collrubric.html]
  A succinct and well-designed rubric.

- Online-discussion rubrics (Worcester Polytechnic Inst., Worcester, MA)
  [http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/gradingdiscussions.html]

- Fourteen sample discussion rubrics (multiple sources)
  [http://iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/14_discussion_rubrics.zip]
  Download for current and future reference.
  Note: *The discussion rubrics have been packaged into a single .zip file. Save this file on your computer and unzip it to access the fourteen rubrics (in nine .pdf files).*

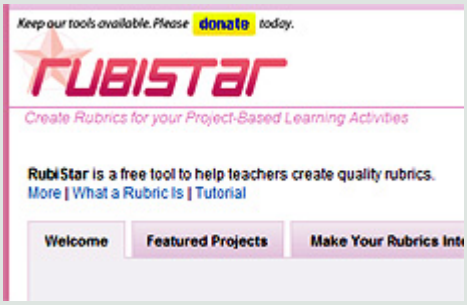
- Rubrics for the creation and evaluation of discussion questions by Burks Oakley, Professor Emeritus, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Illinois, Springfield.
  Creation: http://online.uis.edu/Fall2004/pac442b/StudentLedDiscussions.html
  Evaluation: http://online.uis.edu/oakley/sp06/pac442b/DQ_Evaluation.html

Sample Grading Rubric for Collaborative Assignments in DOTS

LEVEL / CRITERION	Fully (91-100)	Mostly (81-90)	Partially (71-80)	Inadequately (61-70)	No (0-60)
Did the responses directly and fully address the question? (30%)					
Were the responses based on the provided resources? (30%)					
Did the responses address input from other group members? (15%)					
Did the responses address the instructor's feedback? (15%)					
Were the responses well-written (*i.e.* clearly articulated and free of mechanical errors)? (10%)					

C. Course-Rubric-Creation Tool

Rubistar is one of several online-learning tools created by 4Teaches.org, a teaching-with-technology resource launched and maintained by ALTEC, University of Kansas.
You may use this tool to help you draft a variety of rubrics for your online courses.
http://rubistar.4teachers.org/



References and Additional Resources

Review these optional additional resources for more information on the module's topics:
[http://www.iddresources.org/dots1long/module3/module03_additional.html]

Module 3 *Wimba* Meeting Agenda

Date: Wednesday, May 13
Time: 10:00 AM – 11:15 AM
Location: *Wimba* Classroom
(*Wimba* menu item on the DOTS Blackboard site)

Time	Topic	Presenter(s)
10:00-10:15 AM	Reflections on the Online Portion of Module 3	**Pantelis Vassilakis**, Instructional Design Consultant, IDD and **DOTS participants**
10:15-11:00 AM	"Managing Instructor Time and Student Expectations" Live presentation over *Wimba*	**Larry Ragan**, Director, Instructional Design and Development, Penn State University
11:00-11:15 AM	Discussion on Dr. Ragan's Presentation	**Larry Ragan**, **Pantelis Vassilakis**, and **DOTS participants**