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Online Course Design

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Course design in online learning juggles a range of factors to produce an effective learning environment. For instance, most of us who teach online must navigate the expectations of our institution. Maybe a requirement to adhere to some external standard, like Quality Matters, exists. Perhaps the learning management system defines what one might do. Some schools require the use of a design consultant, while others throw faculty into the deep end of course development without any support. And, then, of course, we always must account for the students.

I tend to boil online class structure down to the following: consistency matters, less is more, clarity in all things, and never lose the personal, and course design is never done.

Consistency matters speaks to the basic principle of setting the same pattern week in and week out. The freedom of asynchronous online learning (work on your own from anywhere, anytime) differs markedly from a student knowing to turn up on specific days, at a given time, and in a set location. Many undergraduates still need the discipline built in. Setting repetitive due dates, for instance, allows a learner to integrate the class into her or his calendar and to schedule other obligations (e.g., work, childcare, recreation) accordingly. Organizing the course materials via a weekly agenda in a fixed place enables the students to know where to look for readings/videos and how to determine what to turn in, where, and by when.

Less is more applies in several areas. Only the rare student will read every line of my syllabus, carefully parse my directions, or watch every video. I try to help here. Creating my syllabus using Moodle's "Book" for example, allows me to generate a Table of Contents.

Students then might skip to what they prioritize (like grading) and only refer to policies (academic integrity, disability accommodation, etc.) when needed. I also use this function for the weekly assignments. Students can bypass the learning goals the University wants posted and immediately access the readings/videos and the worksheets.

Similarly, in video presentations, if I can do 2-4 minutes rather than 10 or 15, I stand a better chance of a student listening all the way through. But even when I go long, I cannot waste their time. Good video production requires thinking through what is most important, planning out my commentary and visuals, and speaking at the pace of something like a Crash Course lesson. Students then tend to stick with it and even re-view when they need a second or third shot at an idea because it is not burdensome or scattered.

Clarity in all things means avoiding confusion by providing step-by-step instructions for every assignment, a rubric for how it will be assessed, links to technical support for what students might need to accomplish it (such as how to make a video), statements about when precisely to anticipate feedback, and a forum to pose their questions—again with response time being key. Online learning lacks the luxury of chatting face-to-face in class about what I want to see or how the grading is coming along. Instead, I must anticipate, as well as draw from experience, what kinds of questions students raise and plan accordingly to answer them at the outset.

Never lose the personal takes me back to when I first started out in online and most of my students brought with them the expectations of a face-to-face environment. They wanted to see my face and hear my voice. They wanted not automatically graded assignments, but my personal comments. I also learned the value of students hearing from me “live” every week, even when everything might be running like clockwork. A weekly note to the class or a quick video about the connection of a current event to what we are doing reminds them I am there and active and paying attention. Sending individual feedback on something as mundane as a discussion board post says I take their ideas seriously. I also, then, get more students making appointments with me to work through issues or to chat about their interests. These interactions make use of my expertise in more areas than content delivery and that is, as we all know, where most authentic learning happens.

Finally, **course design is never done**. Each iteration of a class teaches us something new about what works and what we can do better. Making the time to reflect on the specifics, or to learn new tricks by engaging with other faculty, brings pedagogy to the forefront and that, to my mind, always benefits the learning experience.

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