Best Practices in Online Courses

This document was compiled to provide a flexible set of practical ideas that can be applied when designing or revising an online course. This list can also be used by faculty when peer reviewing an online course, in conjunction with the Online Course Review Form. The intention is to support giving specific, tangible, constructive feedback. The list is not intended to be exhaustive. A quality online course might include many components and features that are not included in this list. It can be used as menu from which faculty pick and choose. A single course would not be expected to incorporate all best practices.

Introduction and Orientation

- The instructor has sent or posted a welcome message or announcement to start the course.
- On the home screen/landing page of the course, it is clear what students are supposed to do to get started (e.g., “Do This First” or “Getting Started” information/link).
- The instructor introduces him/herself, preferable with live or recorded video.
- If there are other members of the teaching team (e.g., teaching assistant, undergraduate learning assistant), each member is introduced, along with information about their role.
- Contact information for all members of the teaching team is easy to find.
- Students are informed who on the teaching team to contact for different types of questions (e.g., content/concepts, assignment clarification, grades, technical difficulties).
- Information on virtual office hours is available, including the time, technology/tool, and procedure for participating.
- Students can easily find and access a printable course syllabus.
- Information is provided to orient students to the structure of the course and how to navigate to course components.
- The course provides information about or access to learner support resources (e.g., technical support, learning center, writing center, how to be a successful online learner).
- Minimum technology requirements are listed (e.g., microphone, webcam, browser, mobile app).
- Students are informed about anything they must purchase, such as books, subscriptions, software, or online proctoring services.
- Prerequisite knowledge and skills are clearly defined.
- Information or links to relevant institutional policies and procedures are provided, such as academic integrity and support for students with disabilities.
- Students are informed about course policies and procedures, such as late policies, expectations for turnaround time for feedback and grades, and grade dispute procedures.
- Students can easily find major assignments, due dates, and the overall grading scheme.
- Learners are invited to introduce themselves to the class.
Learning Outcomes (Objectives)

- Course-level learning outcomes (objectives) are measurable and stated in terms of what students will be able to do as a result of learning.
- Course learning outcomes are easy to find.
- Module/unit-level outcomes (if any) are clearly stated, measurable, and aligned with course-level outcomes.
- The learning outcomes are appropriate for subject matter and for the level of the course.

Assessment

- Assessments of student learning are clearly aligned with course goals and learning outcomes.
- The types of assessments used are suited to the content and learning outcomes.
- Assessments are well-distributed throughout the course and appropriate in number.
- Assessments or self-assessments promote a high degree of active learning.
- Multiple methods of assessment are incorporated into the course.
- The course includes opportunities for formative assessment (aimed at providing feedback to improve student performance) as well as summative assessment (to determine if the student achieved the desired learning outcomes, to assign a grade).
- The course grading scheme is clear and readily available.
- Evaluation criteria or a grading rubric is provided for each graded assignment.
- Assignments are logically sequenced and appropriate to the level of the course.
- Instructions, procedures, and deadlines for assessments are clear and readily available.
- Expectations are clearly set for what would be considered a violation of academic integrity.
- Assessments are designed to uphold academic integrity.
- Assessment parameters (e.g., time limit, number of attempts, or consequences of late submissions) are clearly defined.
- Relevant, constructive feedback and assignment grades are provided in a timely manner.
- Students can access timely and accurate information on their grades to track their progress.
- The procedure and time constraints for disputing a grade are clearly stated.
- If applicable, extra credit opportunities are described.

Course Structure and Wayfinding

NOTE: The Modules feature in Canvas is an excellent way to organize the sequence of content and assignments, and to enforce completion of requirements and prerequisites.

- Course content and assignments are organized in a logical format and sequence.
- Content and learning activities have been broken into appropriately-sized units.
- It is easy for students to find instructional content, assignments, and due dates.
- A consistent and meaningful naming scheme is used for all course elements.
• The course provides “signposts” to help students know where they should be in the sequence of instruction and what to do next.
• Resources needed to complete learning activities are easy to find and access.
• Unused Canvas features are hidden in the left navigation panel to simplify the interface.
• The course has no broken links.

Instructional Materials
• The tools and technology are used effectively to support active learning and promote learner engagement.
• Instructional content is clearly aligned with the level and intent of the learning outcomes.
• The course incorporates a variety of resources that facilitate learning and engagement.
• The course models professionalism and academic integrity, including adherence to copyright and fair use standards.
• Course content is accurate, up-to-date, and free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.
• A variety of instructional media is used (e.g., text, images, audio, video, web links)
• Supplemental or extension content is available.

Learning Activities
• Learning activities and assignments are clearly aligned with the level and intent of the learning outcomes.
• The purpose of each learning activity is clearly explained.
• Directions for how to complete each learning activity are provided at the time of need.
• The course incorporates authentic learning activities that emulate real world applications of the discipline, such as experiential learning, case studies, or problem-based activities.
• Learning activities provide opportunities for students to communicate and interact with each other (e.g., discussions, web conferences, collaborative editing, group project)

Communication and Interaction
• Expectations for respectful, professional communication, collaboration, and interaction are clearly set and modeled.
• Interaction between the instructor and students is regular, timely, substantive, and relevant.
• The teaching team regularly posts announcements with relevant information, assignment reminders, and global feedback.
• The teaching team invites students to initiate communication and interaction by asking questions or offering suggestions.
• The teaching team is available through more than one means of communication (e.g., email, phone, web conference, online discussion).
• The teaching team is available at designated times (e.g., virtual office hours) using appropriate tools that support privacy.

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● The course includes opportunities for students to communicate and constructively collaborate with each other.
● The course provides opportunities for students to share knowledge, information, tips, and resources.
● The course includes resources and activities intended to build a sense of community, establish trust, and encourage open communication.

Learner Support
● The course provides information about how students with disabilities can access support services and request accommodations.
● The course provides information about how students can obtain technical support (e.g., Canvas technical support, Moody College Technology Services).
● The course provides information about academic support services and resources, such as the Sanger Learning Center, the University Writing Support Center, and the Moody College Writing Support Program.
● The course provides information about services and resources to support students’ physical and mental health (e.g., UT Counseling and Mental Health Services, UT MindBody Labs, Thrive at UT Mobile app).

Usability and Accessibility
● The course is easy to navigate.
● The course design facilitates readability (high-contrast between text and background, sans-serif font, uncluttered layout, appropriate titles and headings, tables have titles and headings, images are captioned)
● Images, audio, and video are good quality.
● Tables are used for data only, not for formatting.
● Data tables have appropriate headings and alt text.
● All text material is readable by assistive technologies.
  o Word Docs use proper headings styles.
  o PDFs are not scanned from books or paper articles.
● A text equivalent is provided for all non-text elements.
  o Images have alt text and captions.
  o A transcript is provided for audio.
  o Videos are captioned or a transcript is provided.
● Hyperlink text is descriptive and makes sense when out of context. In other words, the link text names what it is linking to.
● Course multimedia are easy to use.

Course Evaluation
● The instructor invites students to provide feedback on the course both during the course and at the conclusion.
● The instructor emphasizes that student feedback is important because it is used to evaluate and improve teaching.
● The instructor sends multiple reminders about the eCIS, including a link to the survey.
● Students are allowed to submit feedback anonymously.
● Student feedback is used to update and improve the course.

Acknowledgements
This list represents a synthesis of best practices and online course evaluation criteria from the following sources.


Open SUNY Course Quality Review Scorecard, Online Learning Consortium https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/oscqrcourse-design-review/


