

Online Course Planning

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Abstract

This document presents a generic template or model the author uses to plan and implement online speech communication courses at Minnesota State University, Mankato. A course specific unit built with the template is included as an example. This paper is not intended as a persuasive argument for online education, it is simply a lesson planning tool which works for the author when planning online courses.

Introduction

Online teaching and learning environments are supported by many and decried by just as many. In this document, I explain the process I use to plan and implement online speech communication courses at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I also provide a model which works for me when planning and implementing online courses. I emphasize, this plan and model work for me. I am not generating a persuasive argument for online education, nor am I proposing a universal model for online course implementation. I am simply sharing what has been a successful process based on my experience. Moreover, the physical design of web pages will not be addressed. Once a course is planned, experts in web page design can be consulted.

Colleagues have told me they want to teach online, but they are afraid; they don't know where to start. Because so much of the literature is "theory heavy" and not entirely "user friendly" I applied for, and received, a Research Incentive Grant from Minnesota State University, Mankato, College of Arts and Humanities. This grant allowed me release time to prepare this document explaining how to plan an online course.

I have been an educator for 35 years having taught in public middle schools and high schools, a small private college, a private technical institute, and a public university. While my undergraduate and Master's degrees were earned in very traditional learning environments, I received my Ph. D. in education, specializing in teaching and learning, from Capella University; therefore, my Ph. D was earned completely online.

Based on these experiences I developed an online course planning "template." This model may or may not work for others. It simply provides a starting point for those who are struggling with a need or desire to plan an online course.

A Philosophy of Online Teaching & Learning

I adhere to four tenets about online teaching and learning:

1. Teaching and learning online are not better or worse than on campus, face-to-face (f2f) teaching and learning—they are just different.
2. Good course planning and good teaching are universal.
3. Course planning begins with course objectives and clear specific student outcomes.
4. Online discussion and/or online chatting are an integral part of the online environment because, “[T]he single most important element of successful online education is interaction among participants” (Kearsley, para 13, 1998).

Assumptions about Online Course Planning

I begin with several assumptions about online course planning:

1. A decision has been made to teach online (whether by choice or by requirement).
2. The designated course is deemed appropriate for online delivery.
3. Your department supports (or requires) this move to an online course environment.
4. There are students who want to take the course online.

My Experience with Online Course Planning

I planned my first online course for use during summer session of 2003. The first online course I planned was a speech communication course—Introduction to Interpersonal Communication. While the delivery method of a course dealing with this subject matter can be debated, research published in communication and pedagogy journals indicated the course was an appropriate course for online delivery and my department chair fully supported my work; therefore, the decision was made to plan and schedule this course for online delivery. The course has undergone revisions and changes each time I have taught the course. The iterations resulted from experience, student suggestions, self reflection, necessity, better materials, new activities, discussion, and sometimes a simple desire to change. Regardless, the basic principles and procedures I used to plan the course have remained the same.

After planning and implementing the first course, I have planned and implemented four other courses—all in the area of speech communication. The courses I have taught online include a graduate research methods course, two teacher licensure courses (teaching speech methods, and directing forensics activities), and an independent study version of a performance of literature course. The licensure courses were planned as a result of requests from students who needed licensure classes but were already working full time and could not attend the course on campus. Furthermore, an online course fulfilling requirements for an effective listening course and an introduction to public speaking course are in development. The public speaking course will be a hybrid with theory taught online and speeches presented on campus.

Planning an Online Course

In my opinion, when planning any course, the best place to start is with the official course description. How is the course described in the course catalogue? What can students expect as a result of the course? How can the course be summarized? Once the course description is reviewed, the instructor should review current syllabi and materials (either one’s own work or others’ work who are willing to share). It is important to understand the overall course level goals/objectives. Course level goals/objectives are often linked to departmental goals or department philosophy. These goals are generally very broad and general. They may often seem philosophical and ideal rather than user friendly. However, these goals can provide the

planner with a sense of the direction. The goals and description of the course may explain where the department feels the course should lead the learner and the teacher.

The next step, which is critical to both online and f2f planning, is to determine specific learning outcomes for the course based on general course goals. Learning outcomes provide the road map for lesson planning and explain desired “educational results” (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2001, p. 75). One can begin by making a list of the specific learning skills, values, or knowledge students must demonstrate or are responsible for at the end of the course. Outcomes need to be active, observable, measurable proficiencies. Often outcomes use words such as list, describe, write, speak, prepare, compare and contrast, etc. Anyone unfamiliar with writing learning outcomes can begin by doing a simple Google or Yahoo search using a course name and the term “outcomes.” For example, using the terms “interpersonal communication” and “learning outcomes” resulted in over 558,000 “hits.” The first three “hits” not only included specific, useable outcomes for an interpersonal course but also provided links to sites explaining in very simple terms how to write effective learning outcomes. Some possible links include:

<http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/outcomes.asp>,
http://xnet.rrc.mb.ca/glenh/new_page_29.htm
<http://www.k-state.edu/assessment/Learning/instructions.htm>

Often learning outcomes can be determined by asking: What does the successful graduate of this course look like? Specifically, what can he/she do? What knowledge or kinds of skills can be measured after completing this course? Be as specific as possible—brainstorm a list of the ideal outcomes a student in this course should accomplish. It is an excellent time to dream about the possibilities for successful completion of the specific course.

Using the course goals and course specific learning outcomes, one can now begin to break down the course into modules or sections or whatever terminology your online instructional management system (IMS) demands. Often times, especially for the beginning instructor, this parallels the chapters of a textbook. It is at this stage one should rely on a semester calendar. Lay out the days the course typically meets f2f including holidays, professional days when the instructor will be absent, etc. This step is essential for both online and f2f courses. Once the instructor knows exactly how much time is available to cover material, planning activities that fulfill the outcomes for the course can begin. Unfortunately, for the beginning instructor, some of this calendar work may be a “guesstimate.” However, after a couple semesters in the field, most instructors get a better feel for the amount of time needed for some activities versus others.

Complete a review of activities and assignments used for an equivalent f2f course. Keep in mind it is possible to use many of the same course activities, exercises, assignments, and materials used in f2f courses for online courses. Courses developed for online delivery do not have to be “all new;” instructors do not have to ‘reinvent the wheel.” Online educators simply offer students a different system to receive course material. The activities and materials do not need to change if they are good, credible, worthwhile, and lead students toward achievement of course outcomes. This is an opportunity to decide what background homework needs to be assigned. Reading material, online searches, conversations with others, viewing of video clips, etc. are often included as homework. Next, determine which assignments are critical to success. Based on the homework, what specific work will students submit to document their proficiency in the course? These can include worksheets, essays, research papers, reflections, transcripts of group chats, group projects, etc. Finally, based on the homework and the completed assignments, determine questions which can be posed in an online discussion or chat area that will lead the student from theory to practice.

In my classes, assignments must be done after the homework but before the discussion. The homework and assignments build the knowledge to answer the discussion questions. Students are not allowed to work out of sequence. Students move from point A to point B to point C in

sequence; missing or rearranging various pieces of the sequence is not an option for optimal skill development. I remind them that online courses are not "independent study" courses—they are interactive, peer collaborative efforts with homework, assignments, and class discussion which are monitored and must be done completely and in sequence for optimal learning. Setting up course work in a sequential, time specific manner works best for my teaching style. Sequencing helps students see the critical link between theory and practice; it also provides more structure for an instructor when grading papers, assignments, and discussions. It is at this point, where I begin to "fill in" the model I have developed for my online courses. This model is supported by the Desire to Learn (D2L) IMS platform used by the Minnesota State College and University system; however, the general principles can apply with most IMS platforms.
Generic Online Course Template (author annotations included)

Course name , Module (or Unit) #; Ch #; Title or Topic
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(Course description and course goals are included in the syllabus)

Module (or Unit) Outcomes

The student will be able to:

- Demonstrate knowledge
- Skills
- Dispositions/Attitudes

Homework to help study and prepare for assignments and discussion questions.

- Read...
- Do...
- Find... etc.

Assignments to submit to the online (D2L) drop box/assignment folder

Learning activities, teaching techniques, learning strategies are included here.

Asynchronous Discussion

Note to Students: Remember to answer and defend your answer. You must also respond to one other student in each question. The homework and assignments have prepared you to answer the questions posed in this discussion area.

- U#C#Q1
- U#C#Q2
- U#C#Q3

Online surveys

Surveys can allow instructors to get feedback both during and after a course including:

- Formative Classroom Assessment Techniques such as those suggested by Angelo and Cross.
- Summative student evaluation
- Mid-term evaluations
- End of the semester evaluation forms

Progress reports on group projects or individual semester/term assignments, etc.

Online Assessment (quizzes/exams, etc.)

Determine which outcomes are the most critical and which ones you want students to have mastered. It is these outcomes for which teachers can design assessment procedures.

Research indicates that online, open book tests can be just as discriminating and can result in as much learning as traditional exams; therefore online unmonitored exams are appropriate for the college classroom. As Burke stated, "Most educators agree that open-book tests are more challenging than traditional objective tests because they require high-order thinking skills rather than recall skills. The greatest benefit from open-book testing may be that it encourages the type of thinking that will benefit students in the real world" (as cited in Beall, Shaw, & Seiler, 2005, sect. 1). Of course, proctored and/or timed exams using the IMS platform can be scheduled.

A Course Specific Online Module

The course I have taught the most often online, Interpersonal Communication, provides the following course specific content. This is the content module for the chapter of unit 2 on effective listening. The textbook used is *Communicate: A workbook for interpersonal communication*.

IPC; Unit 2; Chapter 2—Effective Listening

Listening is our most frequently used communication tool, yet it is the least taught skill. Unfortunately, many people think listening is a natural process. This chapter will help you examine your listening abilities. Different types of listening are explained and definitions will help you distinguish listening from hearing.

Outcomes

The student will explain the difference between listening and hearing.

The student will visit the homepage of the International Listening Association: www.listen.org

The student will explain which of the 5 types of listening applies best to his/her communication style.

The student will assess his/her listening knowledge.

The student will assess his/her listening habits.

Homework to help you study and prepare for assignments and discussion questions.

Read chapter 2

Take the Listening Quiz on pages 27-28. (You do NOT have to discuss each question as directed on page 28.)

Complete the Test of Listening Power survey on pages 38-39.

Navigate to the homepage of the International Listening Association (ILA) and compare the ILA's definition of listening to the textbook's definition of

listening. www.listen.org

When you finish this chapter, submit the Chapter 2 Survey posted in the survey section.

Assignments to post in the D2L Drop Box

Listening Questionnaire upload your answers for the Listening Questionnaire page 34 to the D2L Drop Box

Listening Self Analysis Ask a partner (a friend or relative) to help you with the Analysis of My Listening Effectiveness exercise on page 35. Summarize the response. List the scores assigned by you and your partner. Compare and contrast the scores. Answer the questions in section B. Upload your work to the D2L Drop Box.

Question 3 Page 41 In (minimum) 10 well written sentences, answer question 3 on page 41. Upload your work to the D2L Drop Box

Discussion Questions (Remember to answer and to defend your answer. You must sub-thread to one other student in each question.)

U2C2Q1. Answer the question on page 39 about your Test of Listening Power survey. Discuss your score and identify your strengths and weaknesses.

U2C2Q2. Choose one quotation from the ILA homepage. Write out the quotation and cite its author. Indicate how it applies (or fails to apply) to your interpersonal communication. Relate your answer to emphatic or active listening as described by Carl Rogers, pages 29-31.

U2C2Q3. Find out what is meant by the speech speed and thought speed differential. Explain what can you do to minimize the impact of the speech speed and thought speed differential on your listening habits.

U2C2Q4. Which of the 5 types of listening is hardest for you and why? Define it in your own words and give examples of how/why you use this form of listening.

Closing Remarks

This document includes ideas, suggestions, and some of the procedures I use to plan an online course. As I cautioned earlier, these techniques work for me. As with all educational endeavors, instructors need to find the model that works best for them. This is one option to use as a springboard for the unique and dynamic process of online teaching and learning.

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