



PROMOTING ONLINE COURSES

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Abstract

When you study online, you achieve the same qualification as someone studying in the classroom at a college, university. But unlike courses delivered the conventional way, online courses allow you to study from anywhere, and choose when you want to fit study into your week. Find out all you need to know about online courses, from the benefits of studying online through to student support and course delivery. Online courses are delivered entirely online. As an online student, you'll be able to log into an online learning system. When you study a course that is 100% online, there will be no travel involved and you will never have to visit a campus. You'll complete and submit all of your coursework online. Online courses are designed to encourage interaction and make you feel part of a learning community. Though you may not meet your teachers and classmates in person, you will be communicating with them regularly.

Although past research has sought to identify the factors of student engagement in traditional online courses, two questions remained largely unanswered with regard to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs): do the factors that could influence student engagement in traditional online courses also apply to online courses that are massive and open? What factors do students consider important in terms of their perceived ability to promote a satisfying or engaging online learning experience? This paper reports a case study of three top-rated MOOCs in the disciplines of programming languages, literature, and arts & design in order to address these very questions. (1) problem-centric reflection learning with clear expositions, (2) instructor accessibility and passion, (3) active learning, (4) peer interaction, and (5) using helpful course resources. The specific design strategies pertaining to each factor are further discussed in this paper. These strategies can provide useful guidance for instructors and are a worthwhile subject for further experimental validation.

Keywords: Online, MOOCs, Course, Studying.

Structuring an Online Course

Course Planning
Course Organization
Communication

Experienced online instructors and students alike emphasize the need to have a clearly structured and well-planned course when teaching and learning online. Structuring the course effectively means planning the course well in advance of when it is being taught, thinking through the organizational structures and qualities that will help students learn, and understanding that the online environment presents a number of communication challenges.

Course Planning

Designing a course always takes a great deal of time and thought. That is no different with online courses. At the same time, the online environment offers particular obstacles and opportunities for both instructors and students. As you think through the course elements, pay particular attention to the course components that may serve as stumbling blocks to student learning online. One particular tension that emerges is the need to have a clear and organized structure, while allowing flexibility for making adaptations mid-stream.

- Develop your course before the semester begins Often new faculty discover that developing online courses is time-consuming and that transitioning a successful traditional course to an online setting can be difficult. Experienced online instructors suggest developing your course well in advance and with a clear, concise objectives statement. The better prepared you are, the better your online teaching experience will be.
- Allow flexibility in your course design although it is important to make course expectations and due dates clear, it is also important to build in flexibility to your schedule. Building flexibility into your course structure will allow you to compensate for unexpected technological problems as well as give you opportunities to respond to student feedback.

Course Organization

Students in online courses are in particular need of a clear organizational structure. Keep in mind that each student is experiencing the course on his or her own – without the opportunity to turn immediately to a neighbor if confused or unclear about something in the course. In addition, students in online courses do not have the imposed structure of attending class at a consistent time and place each week they do not have the traditional “markers” of handing in papers in class or coming to the



classroom to take a test. For all these reasons, it's important to think carefully about how to appropriately organize your course to encourage student participation and facilitate student learning.

Chunk the Syllabus into Sections

Divide the course syllabus into discrete segments, organized by topic. Self-contained segments can be used to assess student mastery of that unit before moving forward in the course

Break Assignments into Chunks with “Touch Points”

Because students work at their own pace (and procrastinate) in an online course, it works best to develop guidelines that require students to come back to the course website often. Chunking assignments helps students keep up with the work.

In addition, use “touch points” at which point students do something—write in a journal, send an email, enter into a discussion—to help chunk course content and give the course more structure.

Provide Due Dates for Assignments

Each assignment should have a clear due date and time (for example, “midnight EST on July 8”). In addition, multiple due dates every week keep students on track with course requirements.

Provide Multiple Opportunities for Graded Activities

Assess students on writing assignments, standard test formats, and class participation. The online course format offers a number of opportunities for graded written assignments, including threaded discussions, papers, web research, and online exercises. Multiple measurement points will stimulate students to become involved in multiple activities and keep them participating in class.

Give Credit for Participating in Online Discussions

Give students credit for the substantive learning that students provide for each other through online discussions. In many online courses, these discussions are essential for advancing the course goals. By assigning credit for participation in online discussions, instructors can deter “lurking,” where students listen to the conversation but do not participate.

Communication

In considering how you communicate with students about course goals and your expectations, it is again important to remember that students experience your course on their own and will come to the course with varying levels of technical expertise. Place important information in a variety of places, and repeat it often, in order to enhance the chances that students will pay attention to it.

Give Students a Clear Overall Understanding of the Course Structure

Students need a clear message of the “vision” of the course so provide them a sense of the overall landscape of the course.

Post Course Syllabus, Policies, Expectations, and Objectives on the Course Website

You will most likely not be available to respond immediately when students email questions regarding assignments or due dates, so posting your syllabus on the course homepage will eliminate confusion.

Setup a Housekeeping Clearinghouse Section on your Webpage

To cut down on the number of individual questions, set-up a housekeeping clearinghouse section (sometimes called “Frequently Asked Questions”) on your webpage where students can post a question and get answers about general course information (e.g., how do I download the article, when is the next paper due, etc.) Encourage students to go to this section of the course before asking the instructor.

Use Printed Materials if a Student Requests

Have a printed workbook of course syllabus and other critical course information available for students who request printed copies.

Structure Online Discussions

Structure the course to capitalize on the threaded discussion format. Use existing textbook material or website readings for “lecture” and guide students through activities and threaded postings for active learning.



Remind Students Frequently of Due Dates

Use a technique like “Nag Notes” to remind students of due dates and other requirements.

What is Interactivity in Online Courses?

What is meant by 'interactivity in online courses'? Well, the term **interactivity** refers to how much a student uses the online course; how active he is and how much he participates in all the aspects of the course. In face-to-face courses, interactivity is much easier to ensure. Instructors and students can see each other. If a student looks confused, the instructor can ask them if they have a question. Instructors can give regular time for students to chat amongst themselves in small groups. Students can interact before and after class; increasing their level of interactivity in the course.

Online courses are very different from face-to-face courses in this sense. Students must work harder to actively participate in a course. The convenience of sitting next to someone in class cannot promote interaction in an online course as it does in an on-site course. The instructor cannot see when a student needs prompting to ask a question. Interaction requires intentional action on the part of the student.

Studies have shown that students who interact more with their courses report higher levels of success and satisfaction with their online course.

Student-to-Student Interaction

Ways to promote student - student interaction are:

- Requiring participation in weekly discussion questions.
- Making discussion questions open-ended and thought provoking (avoid objective questions with obvious right and wrong answers).
- Creating a 'Students Only' zone in your course to allow students a safe space to discuss anything they like (even the instructor).
- Setting up the ability for students to enjoy synchronous interaction if desired (through internet applications allowing online chat sessions or video communication).
- Requiring collaborative projects. These projects increase student interaction through working together toward their final product.
- Creating a public question discussion where students can ask each other questions. This is similar to the scenario of a student standing in a group of fellow students and verbally asking the group a question. Anyone can hear the question and anyone can answer it.

Faculty-to-Student Interaction

Some ways to promote student-instructor interaction:

- As an instructor, make sure that you respond to every submitted assignment in a timely manner (within 24 hours is optimum). Ensure that you give detailed feedback about what has been done correctly as well as what could be improved upon for each submission.
- Send regular emails to students to check in and give information about what is to come in the course.
- Set up synchronous office hours to allow the ability to ask questions and receive answers in real-time. These sessions could be through online chats or applications that allow video conferencing.

General Reasons to Choose Online Courses

Students appreciated the flexibility and convenience of online courses, and some felt that online courses allowed them to use their learning time more efficiently. In addition to these structural reasons, a few students felt that online courses were a better match to their own learning style or interpersonal interaction preferences.

Course Importance and Interest

In terms of the third category of courses that students were reluctant to take online, several respondents said they preferred to take “important” courses (including courses in their academic major) or “interesting” subjects face to face. For example, one student said that she had initially signed up for a particular course online, “But I started to, I actually enjoyed going, or actually enjoyed the class, so I didn’t want to just take it online. I wanted to actually go sit in the classroom and actually learn about it.” As these students discussed why they preferred to take such courses face To face, they consistently stressed the importance of instructor presence. For example, a student said she preferred taking psychology courses face To face because “I think I could learn so much more, and those teachers, they always have other little things to talk about in the class, and stories and examples, and you don’t really get that quite as much with online.”



Conclusion

Developing effective instructional materials depends on a great deal of planning and collaboration, and concerted efforts from many people skilled at using the right tools. These requirements are even more crucial in online multimedia and course development, which is highly dependent on ever-changing computer technologies. Pedagogical standards must not be compromised, regardless of the instructional medium employed. Employing the principles and guidelines offered in this chapter will help all stakeholders involved in online instructional development to ensure that their efforts are rewarded, ultimately, with satisfied learners.

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