Guidelines for Online Course Review

This resource provides information for quality review of an online course.

The Online Course

Online courses can be an excellent way to take advantage of technology for education. Because of the flexibility and convenience associated with no on-campus meeting, students can take the course from any location. This can help to retain students, allow students flexibility in their schedule and increase the reach of the university beyond the traditional campus.

Similar to traditional classes, in online courses, students can interact with each other and the professor. They can discuss issues and collaborate. Professors can engage students in a variety of media. The main difference is that the class members are meeting in-person at the same time and place. Instead, students meet in an online course site where they can type and use audio or video to accomplish the objectives of the course. Live virtual sessions can also take place during online courses so that students can have interaction with their classmates and professor at the same time. These live virtual sessions can be created to use the preferred teaching strategies of every professor, including lectures, discussion, demonstration, Q&A, student-led presentations or group work.

Curriculum Review

In addition to the syllabus review, the review of an online course could include several additional components. Key components could include:

- Contact hours
- Syllabus
- Course objectives and materials
- Interactivity component
- Technologies

Contact Hours

One way in which an online course must be evaluated differently from the traditional face-to-face course is in the way that the minimum number of credit hours is calculated. Although meeting the minimum number of contact hours has always been a requirement of university courses, the notion of having *students in seats in a classroom* has really never been the central method for determining the quality and rigor of a course. To determine quality, a curriculum committee would review the overall content of the course based on the syllabus, the list of course objectives and the evaluation methods that have been used to determine whether students have met those objectives.

For a traditional 1 course unit (CU) Penn course (3-credits at many other institutions), 42 contact hours, or hours spent in the classroom, are required. In the online environment, this contact time is no longer represented by just the number of face-to-face meetings that a particular course holds. A campus credit class may meet for three hours per week in a classroom. In the online

learning environment, the in-class work would equate to the work that students do in their course site or in any live virtual sessions. So, in a traditional campus class, a student may spend their time in a classroom listening to lectures or presentations, participating in a discussion, asking questions or taking exams. An online student would spend this time watching a lecture video or movie clips, reviewing PowerPoint presentations, participating in discussion boards, reading information from linked websites, reviewing instructor notes and directions, or any other activity that engages the student in the course content.

In-Class Activities	
Traditional Course	**Online Course** LMS
Lecture	Watch video, audio
Q&A	Ask & respond to
Discussion	Composing
Quiz, test, exam	Online quizzes and
Formal writing	Formal writing
Short reflection	Blog or formal
Participation	Responding to
Practice language in	Practice using voice in course site,
Teamwork	Team breakout rooms, boards
Oral Presentation	Student video upload, narrated

Homework is another major aspect of the credit hour. For a 3-credit course (1 CU at Penn), students are expected to engage in an extra 6 hours of homework each week. Homework activities for an online course are very similar to homework activities for a traditional course. In the online course, these activities may be more clearly documented and observed. For example homework might consist of reading the assigned textbooks and articles, completing formal writing or research assignments, answering questions on readings,

conducting research, writing/reviewing class notes, studying for examinations and other project work. In the online classroom, these activities will be similar and because of the nature of the online class environment, student work may be tracked and observed directly in the course site.

Homework Activities	
Traditional	**Online Course**
Read text/articles, take notes	Read text, take notes, document
Research	Research &
Writing	Writing: blogs,
Study text, class	Study text, notes,
Respond to readings, submit	Respond to readings – blogs,
Study for	Study for

Syllabus Review

The syllabus is the main document used to describe the class goals and set course expectations and materials used in the course. The criteria expressed by the curriculum committee within the School of Arts & Sciences are listed below, and this list is available online at: http://www.sas.upenn.edu/ugrad/faculty/committee/cccoursereview.htm. In general, these questions can be used to evaluate the syllabus of an online courses as well as a traditional one.

1. *Does the course have substantive intellectual content?*
2. *Are the criteria for evaluating student performance clearly described in the syllabus?*
3. *Are the topics to be covered, readings, and other assignments clearly and adequately described in the syllabus?*
4. *Is the level of course appropriate for the students who may take it?*

5. *Is the description of the course for the Course Register adequate (succinct and informative)?*
6. *If the course is to be cross-listed in another department, has the chair of that department indicated approval (by letter or e-mail)?*

Course Objectives & Materials

Course objectives list the expectations for the outcomes of a course. They articulate the accomplishments that students should reach by the end of a course. There is a direct link from course objectives to the assessments and evaluation methods that will show that students have met the objectives. The course objectives and materials used in order to accomplish these objectives can be reviewed for an online course in a syllabus or other specific documentation.

Interactivity

In an online course, it is important to incorporate interactivity between students and peers as well as the professor. Interaction must be encouraged in the online class and can be documented in the descriptions for student engagement. This may be identified in the syllabus as the requirement for participation in asynchronous discussion boards, including responses to peers, peer assessment, blogs and group work. Access to the professor should also be identified, since there may be no regular meeting times. This may be included in the syllabus, course site, discussion boards, virtual office hour or in the ability to ask questions and receive feedback. All of these strategies may also be available in a live virtual session.

Technologies

Online courses can use asynchronous and synchronous technologies. Courses are often hosted in a Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS is an online platform (Canvas, Blackboard, D2L) that can be used to host course documents, and multimedia files such as video. The LMS also has features that encourage asynchronous interactivity such as discussion boards, blogs, wikis, audio and video sharing. The LMS often includes a way to link class members in a learning community with an ability to stay connected through email and mobile devices.

Online virtual sessions are one aspect of the online classroom that can be used to engage students with each other and the professor. These live synchronous meetings can be hosted using a variety of technologies and some LMS platforms include live meetings in their feature set. Live meetings can be organized to accomplish many objectives including lecturing, demonstration, Q&A, discussion, student reports and group work.

Many LMS platforms also include access to a grade book to easily track accomplishments, as well as a dropbox for private submissions to professors. Online courses do not need to be hosted on an expensive LMS platform. The main requirement is easy access to content materials, and a private environment for sharing and interaction.

Questions?

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