

The aims of this document are to help faculty new to online teaching develop quality courses and to assist departments in assuring that online offerings represent the best of local practice. The goal of WSU Online is to provide students with convenient asynchronous access to learning experiences of the same quality and completeness the university prides itself on in the traditional classroom setting. Maintaining standards of academic quality is the responsibility of the academic department and college. Because of the newness of the world wide web as a means of instruction, however, it is sometimes difficult to identify equivalencies between the new and the more traditional means of instruction.

Thus a group of experienced WSU Online faculty from all academic colleges has led the WSU Online delivery team in articulating the following standards derived from three years' experience and our local practices in teaching online. Committee members include William Clapp, Computer and Electronic Engineering Technology; Betty Damask-Bembenek, Nursing; Charles Davidson, Chemistry; Tom Day, Child and Family Studies; Bruce Handley, Business Administration; Levi Peterson, Prasanna Reddy, English; Gene Sessions, History; Tamara Aird, Scott Allen, Peg Wherry (WSU Online).

The WSU Online development team in continuing education has been assigned responsibility for assisting faculty in online course development, including provision of technical tools and orientation to teaching online as well as assisting faculty at all stages of course development. The team is also responsible for providing technical support and assistance to students enrolled in online courses. WSU Online team members are Tamara Aird (Project Leader), Scott Allen, Marvin Ellis, Cynthia Palumbo, Susan Smith, Jeff Willden; Peg Wherry (Distance Learning Director)

COURSE PLANNING

1. An online course should be based on the same learning outcomes and demand the same rigor as a traditional class. The identification of courses to be taught online, the semesters in which to offer them, and the assignment of instructors rest with the academic department.

2. Students should spend the same amount of time on an online course as they do for a campus course. The rule of 15 clock hours of class time per credit hour should guide development of an online course.

Comment: In addition, the well-established notion of spending two hours out of class for every hour in class means a student should spend a total of at least 45 hours in study for each credit hour earned.

3. Online courses should reach the same learning outcomes as traditional courses. Assessment of the effectiveness of online offerings should be conducted at the same time as and in a manner consistent with departmental standards and practice for traditional courses.

Comment: The generic WSU Online "evaluation" instrument is administered online and addresses technical delivery issues more than quality of instruction. Departments may wish to adapt their standard instruments to online purposes.

4. Online faculty are responsible for identifying copyrighted materials used in their courses and for

either citing that material appropriately or obtaining written permission to use it in the web environment in advance of coursework beginning.

Comment: The concept of “fair use” is still quite unstable in cyberspace. The only rule seems to be the one about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure. Online staff can assist faculty in the permissions process. Costs for permissions and a cost code for paying for them should be identified early in the course development process.

5. Discussions, chat, use of media (especially streamed media) should all be chosen to be value-added to the student.

Comment: Is the urgency of the content worth the frustration of overlapping dialog in real-time chat? Is the big MPEG file worth the download wait? The WSU Online team constantly monitor new web technologies and assist faculty who adopt them. Through this experience, they are developing and revising guidelines for the use of multi-media. Development of any multi-media applications (video, audio, animations, etc.) should involve the Online team as early as possible.

6. Every course should address the needs of students with disabilities; boilerplate language can be provided.

Comment: One member of the WSU Online team is specifically assigned to staying current on issues of accessible media.

COURSE COMPONENTS

7. . All online courses use the course template (which includes navigation pathways and design standards) developed by the WSU Online team and modified by the experience of WSU Online faculty.

Comment: It is in students’ interest for all courses to be similarly structured and to follow the same navigation strategies—students should only have to learn one way to learn in the web environment. The Online team provides help and technical support to students enrolled in Online courses and can be most effective when they are most familiar with all features of a course design.

8. Course content should be up-to-date at the beginning of the term, with dates changed from term to term and links updated.

9. Because online courses are unique in being a form of publication, experienced online faculty feel that each course must reflect the highest professional standards, including careful attention to such fundamentals as spelling, grammar, and mechanics.

Comment: Even though access to courses is restricted to enrolled students, posting material to the world wide web is a form of publication that reflects not only on the individual faculty member but also on the institution as a whole. Errors can be magnified and multiplied in the online environment. The standard stated here addresses the instructor’s work. Each instructor may set and should articulate his own standard for the level of editing expected in student work. If the instructor views web assignments as written work to be graded on mechanics as well as content, that should be clearly stated. If the instructor is more concerned that students make

substantive content contributions to an online discussion without worrying about spelling (for instance), that too should be clearly stated.

10. When possible and when supportive of course objectives, the course should draw on and incorporate some of the vast information resources available via the web.

Comment: Many textbook publishers now host websites, and there are many databases, archives, and other information resources available. New resources appear and old ones change, so an instructor should review this point periodically after a course is developed. One way to identify possible resources is to make an annotated “webliography” an extra credit assignment in either an online or traditional class.

11. Instructors should feel free to use library resources to the same extent for online courses as they do in traditional classes.

Comment: Stewart Library staff have done an outstanding job of designing services for distant learners. The Library is consistently praised by distance learning professionals reviewing WSU Online.

12. There should be task submissions for students with substantive feedback on a regular basis, preferably weekly.

Comment: Online courses give students more options to schedule—or to procrastinate—their course work. To replace frequent class attendance as means of pacing and motivation, experience has shown that regular and somewhat more frequent submission deadlines are effective. It is especially important to create a very early assignment or message from the student to the instructor. One of the lessons from Independent Study is that the sooner students start their work, the more likely they are to finish. Instructional quizzes built into lessons or assignments offer one opportunity for integrated, immediate feedback.

13. Online instructors should set and articulate clear and realistic timelines for responding to students and should adhere to them.

Comment: Users of the web have come to expect a response every time they click, which is unrealistic in the context of careful consideration of student work. It is essential for faculty to manage student expectations and to set ground rules. Experience suggests that students be told to expect feedback on routine items in 2-3 days; assignments or more complex projects should include a statement that grading will be completed within some longer but still definite period of time. It is also wise to alert students when the instructor will be at a conference or traveling or otherwise temporarily unavailable.

14. Special efforts should be made to create and support a learning community among online students who may feel they are working in isolation.

Comment: Online discussion and chat are two obvious methods; group projects are also possible. Class discussion can function somewhat differently online than in the traditional classroom, because it is feasible to require every student to participate. The instructor can choose her role in discussion: deliberately directing it at every stage, setting the initial question and providing prompts, intervening only when necessary, or just turning the students loose.

15. The course should use the richness of the electronic medium to the fullest extent possible. Online faculty should possess skills in word processing and electronic communication at least equivalent to those identified in the computer literacy requirement for students.

Comment: Use of other than electronic communication should be based on course content (i.e., where student performance must be literally hands-on, where coursework requires the manipulation of items or substances, etc.).

16. Course design should include appropriate orientation about how the course is structured and how online tools work.

Comment: Although our students are arriving with more sophistication about navigating cyberspace each semester, they still need clear statements of expectations and strategies for success. To address this need, a course should have a clearly labeled set of instructions: a separate page called “Orientation,” “Start Here,” etc.; a brief bit of streamed audio or video of the instructor welcoming students and providing a starting point; a face-to-face meeting on campus (though this can be a problem for students outside northern Utah), etc.

17. The online medium should be used for teaching and learning activities. A syllabus and a set of online tests do not constitute an online course.

Comment: Since the usual image of a teacher is a person standing at the front of a classroom talking, it is natural to assume that’s what teaching is. But teaching is not primarily a set of motor skills (standing or pacing and talking): what is the teacher talking *about*? One WSU department chair commenting on teaching in another context came up with the following list of teaching tasks: “Beside the problems of motivation, a teacher focuses attention on relevant areas, models modes of understanding, makes unusual connections between experience and the content, and between disparate content areas, all missed if one merely reads a book.” And all of that is in addition to presenting material (i.e. lecturing)! A wide range of teaching and learning actions can be incorporated into an online course.

In the words of one faculty member beginning to develop an online course, “Think about what you could do in class if you could do whatever you wanted.” The web environment makes it possible to use visual and audio media in ways that would be cumbersome in a face-to-face class, and it makes every student a more active learner. Students can’t just sleep in the back of the room in an online environment.

18. Every course should address academic honesty.

Comment: Although the student handbook policy is posted in WSU Online, each course should also include a statement of expectations and penalties. It is especially important to spell out whether and to what extent collaboration among students is appropriate. Chi-tester is actually a very secure testing environment, and there are strategies for making “homework” assignments less susceptible to cheating.

