



Contemporary Issues

An online course checklist



Introduction

Educational methods are not static and develop over time to meet the needs of society (Lane, 2013). One of the biggest changes in higher education in the past decade has been the explosion of online courses (Taft et al., 2011). The number of students enrolled in online courses at accredited universities grew by 145% between 2002 and 2007 and the number continues to rise (Armstrong, 2011). By utilizing online courses, universities are able to increase access to their courses, give students additional degree offerings and better serve needs of students (Taft et al., 2011). The move to more online courses has been a quick one, leaving many kinks to be ironed out by administrators and educators in the process (Taft et al., 2011). To streamline the development of online courses, a course checklist was developed and is described.

Course Checklist

Online courses vary greatly from one another in several aspects including quality of the course and ease of use. A checklist to create an online course will help ensure a standard leading to the optimal online learning environment. It is important for instructors to engage students with the content of the course and with each other (Dixon, 2010). The course checklist was created using a review of literature, other institution checklists and personal experience. This checklist is organized into six separate sections of focus: organization, communication, content, delivery/instruction, student feedback and assessment. Under each focus area there are several points with specific criteria.

Checklist Instructions

A starting place for creating a well-organized, effective online learning environment for students is found in Table 1. Each area of the course is scored based on whether elements of the course are present, partially present or not present at all. The instructor of the course, a different instructor or a student who has completed the course can complete the checklist. Having it done by different people may help enhance the course, as it would show several different viewpoints.

A course is scored on whether or not it meets the specific criteria. Scores range from one point (baseline or minimum) to three points (exemplary), with two points (sufficient) falling in the middle. Each section is scored separately for convenience, and then added together to find the total. A perfect score on the checklist would equal to 102 points. More detailed instructions on how to use the checklist are included at the beginning of Table 1. This checklist was piloted by an instructor, two fellow students in the same course, as well as the creator of the

checklist in three different courses over two semesters. As online courses continue to evolve, this checklist may need to be modified.

Organization

The first section of Table 1 is organization. It includes introductions, required course materials, an outline of course activities, assignments and objectives. Creating user-friendly online courses is imperative because a high level of organization in the course allows for a more effective learning environment for students. It is important for instructors to engage students with both the content of the course and with each other (Dixon, 2010). There has been debate whether online courses are as effective as face-to-face classroom sessions (Jones, 2012). Dixon (2010) reports on several studies showing students enrolled in online courses do as well as students who participate in face-to-face classroom sessions and it may be that students who participate in online courses are more engaged than those in traditional classrooms. How educators create their online courses may make the difference in whether students are able to gain everything they can from the course. Instructors often struggle through their first semesters (Taft et al., 2011). There are limited opportunities given to instructors who wish to learn more about teaching online courses (Lane, 2013). Those who choose to venture into the world of online instruction should be given more guidance to better prepare them for online teaching.

Communication

In order to be effective, online courses need to have strong methodology as well as opportunities for students to interact with the instructor and each other (Dixon, 2010). Collaboration is especially important in the online learning environment, as students tend to feel more isolated without the usual support systems found in the traditional classroom setting (Qiu et al., 2012). Components of communication include welcoming of the students, appropriate discussion boards, instructor email, and criteria for discussion boards. Dixon (2010) points out that instructors should use several different channels of communication including emails to students, message boards on the course homepage, discussion forums, and online lectures to connect with students and enhance engagement. How often communication between instructors and students should take place, how frequently feedback should be given and when replies to questions are expected to help promote engagement fall under communication. Students who receive timely responses from instructors, had good communication with instructors and could regulate their own learning were found to be more satisfied. Carefully designed course assignments, flexibility by instructors, good written

Table 1

Online checklist.

Instructions: The table is set up into six separate sections. Each section has a maximum number of points listed at the top. Each row should be given a score on a scale of zero to three. A score of one is baseline, score of two sufficient and a score of three exemplary. The score for each section can then be placed at the end of the section in the row provided. When all sections are scored, add the six sections together to receive the overall score of the course. A perfect score equals 102 points.

75 or below: baseline course.

76–86: sufficient course.

87–102: exemplary course.

Baseline 1 point	Sufficient 2 points	Exemplary 3 points	Online course components score
<i>Section one: organization</i>			
<i>Total points available in section: 24</i>			
Information is present but difficult to navigate and find at times.	Course is organized and is able to be navigated.	Course is well organized, easy to navigate; all components of the course are easily understood.	
Introduction to course is under construction.	Introduction to course is present.	Introduction to course is clear and provides needed information.	
Course outline is present but difficult to locate.	Course outline is present but may not be detailed.	Detailed course outline including assignment due dates, exam dates and reading list is easy to locate.	
Required textbooks are posted.	Required textbooks are posted in an easy to locate section.	Required textbooks posted with information on where to obtain them and the dates in the course they will be needed.	
Course assignments are present but do not have clear instructions or expectations.	Course assignments have detailed instructions.	Course assignments have detailed instructions and rubrics.	
Important documents such as the school's mission/values, honor code etc. is present but not easily located.	Important documents such as the school's mission/values, honor code are available but several links are used.	Important documents such as the school's mission/values, honor code are easy located or linked.	
Technology requirements for course not explained	Technology requirements for course are clearly explained	Technology requirements for course are clearly explained, including programs needed and where to access them if one does not have them	
Number of points			
<i>Section two: communication</i>			
<i>Total points available in section: 21</i>			
Welcome email sent to all students introducing self is vague without much information.	Welcome email sent to all students introducing self prior to course.	Welcome email sent to all students introducing self prior to course start includes teaching philosophy.	
"Ask instructor" discussion board absent.	"Ask instructor" discussion board provided.	"Ask instructor" discussion board provided, with directions on when it should be used.	
No informal discussion forum is available for students use.	Informal discussion forum available to students.	Informal discussion forum available to students with explanation of instructor access to the forum but that it is not monitored.	
Instructor email address is provided.	Instructor email address is provided and expectations of when to/reasons to email instructor are present.	Instructor email address is provided and expectations of when to/reasons to email instructor and timeframe for reply are clear.	
Introductions are required during first week discussion.	Student introductions and student background are required during first week discussion; required even if students know each other from previous courses.	If students and/or instructor are unfamiliar with each other from previous courses — allow introductions first week; may omit if students are familiar with each other from previous courses.	
Time given to students to participate is present; may not be adequate to discuss topic given.	Adequate time given for students to participate in discussions once or twice per one-week period.	Adequate time given for students to participate meaningfully in discussions several times per week. Students are given a minimal number of discussion posts to be done during a one-week period.	
Number of points			
<i>Section three: content</i>			
<i>Total points available in section: 12</i>			
Content is present and labeled but is difficult to navigate.	Content is present and labeled; can be navigated but not grouped by themes, chapters, content or sections.	Content is grouped by themes, chapters, content or sections.	
Content links are dysfunctional at times.	Content links are functional.	Content links are functional and updated this term to reflect most recent webpage updates.	
Content is incomplete or has errors.	Content is complete.	Content is complete and completely free of errors.	
Links to outside websites are outdated.	Not all links to outside websites are current; some may be outdated.	All links to outside websites are fresh and current. They are updated each term.	
Number of points			
<i>Section four: instruction/delivery</i>			
<i>Total points available in section: 27</i>			
Instructions and expectations are unclear.	Instructions and expectations are clear.	Instructions and expectations are clear and align with course objectives.	
Expectations of discussion assignments are unclear.	Discussion and other assignments are not optional on the course outline.	Discussion and other assignments are not optional on the course outline; grade point totals are clear for all assignments including discussions.	
In a class greater than 10 students, there are no separate discussion groups, all class participants post to the same discussion board	Discussion groups are either too small (less than 8) or too large (greater than 10) to facilitate adequate discussion.	Discussion groups are the correct size, between 8 and 10, allowing students to participate in meaningful discussion without feeling overwhelmed.	
Limited different learning methods are provided.	Two different methods of learning are used (ex visual, auditory, textual, interactive).	At least three different methods of learning are promoted (ex visual, auditory, textual, interactive).	

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