Best Practices and Review Standards for Online Instruction

The following researched-based best practices are recommended to demonstrate quality in online course design. In November 2010 the Distance Education Committee developed and approved an online course review tool for individual faculty and departments to use in identifying minimum course requirements and online course readiness.

Recommended Best Practices for Online Instruction

1. Course Overview and Introduction	
1.1 Course layout, as designed by the faculty, is easy to navigate and understand.	Swan (2001); cited clear and consistent course structure as one of three factors which "contribute significantly to the success of asynchronous online courses."
1.2 Provide a course goal statement to introduce students to the course, the overall structure of student learning, and how to succeed in an online class. In the case of a blended course, this statement should clarify the relationship between the face-to-face and online components. 1.3 Schedule of class activities and assignments that summarizes the course activities with a timeline.	Youngblood, Trede, & DeCorpo (2001); identified a number of essential tasks for an effective teacher including welcoming students and clarifying expectations for contributing online.
1.4 Faculty page or profile that provides an appropriate self-introduction of the faculty. 1.5 Faculty contact information along with information about communicating with the faculty during the course (e.g., email answered within 24 hrs. except for weekend)	Roblyer & Ekhaml (2000), Roblyer & Wiencke (2003); included self-introduction and evidence of instructor engagement at a basic level for building social rapport.
1.6 An ice-breaker or other student activity is provided requesting students to introduce themselves to the class.	Anderson, Garrison, & Archer (2001); noted that social presence or the ability of students to project themselves socially and affectively into a community is strong predictor to student success and necessary for establishing student-teacher rapport.

2. Learning Objectives	
2.1 The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable. 2.2 Each module/unit provides learning objectives that describe measurable outcomes and are consistent with the course-level objectives.	Bloom (1956), Mager (1962 & 1975); clearly written learning objectives are necessary in describing measurable outcomes and assisting students with focusing on learning activities.
2.3 Learning objectives address what the student will know (e.g., content mastery), be able to do (e.g., application and performance), and value and appreciate (e.g., critical thinking skills).	Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson (1998); identified phases of knowledge construction including, cogitative activity, arguments, resources that explore arguments, supporting literature, data and dissenting ideas, and evidence of changes in understanding.

3. Course Materials and Resources	
3.1 The faculty provides a *Teaching Guide* or other foreword for each module/unit that outlines the requirements and specifications serving as a guide for students' action and learning.	Conrad (2002); students judge instructors based on how clearly and completely online course materials present the details of the course/learning activities.
3.2 The instructional materials are logically sequenced and integrated with activities, or in the case of a blended course with face-to-face sessions. 3.3 The purpose of each course element is explained to students. 3.4 The instructional materials and activities support the stated learning objectives. 3.5 The faculty provides a summary or other review activity that enforces the essential learning of each module/unit.	Garrison & Anderson (2003); p. 145, "The goal in deep learning is to move discussion from exploration to integration and then to resolution".
3.6 All resources and materials used in the course are appropriately cited and demonstrate copyright clearance. 3.7 The course provides a Course Resource area for supplemental materials and library resources.	Sonwalker (2001); (pp. 22-25), course content is seen as a set of simulations that support discovery-based learning, the role of experts in content as well as instructional and web design is important and necessitates obtaining copyright permissions.

4. Learner Assessment and Measurements	
4.1 The course grading policy is clearly stated.	Youngblood, Trede, & DeCorpo (2001); students felt clarification of grading and of expectations were most important in online course.
4.2 The types of assessments selected appropriately measure the stated learning objectives. 4.3 Multiple assessment types are used and measurements of learning are frequently presented throughout the course. 4.4 When appropriate, alternative assessments methods are incorporated into the course rather than the use of online testing only.	McLoughlin (2001); evaluation tasks should be associated with both learning outcomes and teaching approaches in order for the numerous characteristics of pedagogy to be supported.
4.5 Low-stakes assessments in addition to high stakes assessments are used to improve student learning. 4.6 Assessment strategies provide feedback to the student regarding grading, mastery, and student success. 4.7 Self-assessments or practice type assignments are provided for timely student feedback. 4.8 Rubrics are provided for all assignments that identify assessment guidelines.	Thurmond et al. (2002); found that when students believe that their learning was being assessed in a variety of ways and that they were receiving timely feedback were among the strongest predictors of student success.

5. Communication, Interaction, & Collaboration	
5.1 Include one open forum discussion board where students can ask questions about the course or upcoming assignments. 5.2 Promote a sense of community by providing collaborative projects and assignments that support groups and other student-to-student interactions. 5.3 Provide ample opportunities for synchronous and/or asynchronous communication to promote critical thinking and other higher order learning aligned with the learning objectives. 5.4 Use threaded discussion forums designed to promote meaningful and engaged learning that fosters critical thinking rather a knowledge-based only question/answer format.	Anderson, Garrison, & Archer (2001); social presence or the ability of students to project themselves socially and affectively into a community is strong predictor to student success and necessary for establishing student-teacher rapport. Social presence is found to support cogitative presence or critical thinking.
5.5 Use a variety of communication and collaboration tools in the course (e.g., discussion board, group pages, announcements, email, blogs, wikis, web-conferencing or teleconferencing, chat or virtual classroom tools). 5.6 Allow students to take ownership of their learning and become co-creators of the information shared and the learning taking place in the online environment.	Anderson (2003, 2002); increased learner control and the ability to tailor courses to learners' needs based on their input, as well as opportunities for meaningful collaboration among learners results in increased interactivity.

6. Course Technology & Media Value		
6.1	The tools and media support the learning objectives and are appropriately chosen for the delivery of content and type of learning activities.	Sonwalker (2001); course content is seen as a set of simulations that support discovery-based learning, taking advantage of media assets to allow for learner's cognitive preferences.
6.2	The tools and media enhance student interactivity and guide the student to become a more active learner.	
6.3	The course takes full advantage of available tools and media.	
6.4	Access to technologies and files are provided for students from within the course and content items are easily downloadable. On campus, files should open in 30 seconds or less.	Shirathuddin, Hassan, & Landoni (2003); based on a critical review of four well-known usability design guidelines for preparing content for electronically delivery in higher education courses, unnecessary media should be avoided to present long downloading time.
6.5	Students with modems are provided low-bandwidth alternatives for downloading media.	
6.6	Instructions on how to access resources outside the course are clear and easy to understand.	
7. Learner Engagement & Motivation		
	Learning activities demonstrate strategies and techniques that actively engage student s in the learning process (e.g., group activities, case-studies, in-class writing, threaded discussions, analysis, synthesis and evaluation instead of passive lectures).	
	When appropriate, assignments allow for different interests, backgrounds, and personal learning styles.	
	Course structure fosters student-instructor, student-content, and student-student interaction.	
	Clear standards are set for instructor response and availability (e.g., turn-around time for email, posting grades, etc.).	
	The requirements for course interaction are clearly stated.	
	The course structure prompts the faculty to be active and engaged with the students.	
	The course extends student learning beyond the class with course resources and optional readings or web resources.	
	The online learning environment is positive and offers choice and options to the learning community (autonomy-supportive).	
	The online learning environment fosters higher levels of motivation and self-regulation.	
	The course structure fosters learning of content and development of knowledge and skills	

8. Evaluation and Assessment Plan for Course Improvement	
	The course structure allows for informal feedback from students on their learning experience (about week 3). This evaluation can be developed in conjunction with the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning.	
	Offer multiple opportunities for students to provide feedback on ease of online technology and accessibility/structure of the course.	
	Use ongoing learning activities and assignments data to improve course content and practices.	
	Development/adoption of a strategy for using student feedback in an ongoing basis to revise as needed throughout the semester.	
	Provide an informal end-of-course experience reflection or a more formal assessment plan designed in conjunction with the Faculty Center on Teaching and Learning to capture student feedback about particular course elements and experiences. These could include students' perceptions of the learning climate, students' satisfaction, motivation, level of engagement, and course performance on identified learning objectives.	
	Strategy for using assessment data in revising course for next semester.	