A Design Model for Successful Online Learning Courses

Judith Simons Gold

Computer Information Systems Department
Marygrove College

jgold@marygrove.edu

Abstract

Online learning has become a major stakeholder in higher education. The first wave of courses was implemented with limited thought to feasibility, design, development and assessment. Institutions wanted to jump on the e-learning bandwagon to join this new educational paradigm. The number of online learners is increasing because of the following factors. These are course availability, ease of scheduling, fewer face-to-face courses, and the technologically adept generation of learners. Students appreciate the convenience of taking courses without leaving the confines of their homes. Due to the number of distance learners and the increase of course offerings, it is imperative that this mode of educational delivery is appropriate, focused, valuable, and constructivist centered. Colleges and universities should be concerned with the instructional systems developed and designed for online courses. There is a need for in-depth planning to ensure successful implementation of these courses. In some instances face-to-face courses are converted to online formats. In other cases, newly developed courses are created for online delivery, without a classroom presence. This presentation will focus to rigorous online course standards documents, used as a model to ensure successful delivery of online courses. The preparation and strategies that are devoted to the online learning environment will benefit students, instructors, and institutions. The framework that guides this educational genre will be helpful to participants who are involved in online learning.

Key Words
Criteria, Online Learning, Distance Learning, Design, Development, Evaluation, Standards

1 Introduction
Marygrove College has been designing, developing, and implementing online learning since 2003. The researcher has been involved with online instruc-

2 Problem Formulation
June 2006, the Provost determined that there was a need for an online learning standards committee. This committee was charged with developing documents to be used as a check and balance system to ensure that online courses met appropriate standards.

3 Problem Solution
After months of research the committee members and chair, lead by the Director of Instructional Technology, decided that prescriptive steps need to be in place prior to putting a course online.
Documents had to be prepared to ensure the appropriate design, development, and implementation for these courses.

3.1 Mission Statement
The first item tackled was the Mission Statement: “The committee will evaluate and implement methodologies, systems, support structures and policies with the goal of ensuring effective student learning in the online environment” (Application for online course development stipend, 2006).
Committee members approached the committee responsibilities document as a precedent that would set standards college-wide. It was important that standards be established for appropriate online course procedures, course approvals, and student participation requirements.

3.2 Standards for Online Courses
The standards for online courses have six main elements.
1. Organization and Structure
   a. Syllabus
   b. Learning objectives
   c. Content structure
d. Course assignment and activities

2. Content
   a. Accuracy
   b. Clarity
   c. Critical thinking
   d. Education resources

3. Usability
   a. Navigation
   b. Technical issues
   c. Technology requirements
   d. Course elements and tools

4. Communication
   a. Student readiness
   b. Instructor communication
   c. Use of the discussion board
   d. Communication tools

5. Instructional Design
   a. Social rapport
   b. Interactivity
   c. Collaborative learning
   d. Active learning
   e. Look and feel
   f. ADA requirements

6. Assessment/Evaluation
   a. Alignment
   b. Grading
   c. Feedback (Faculty online course evaluation rubric, 2006)

3.3 Faculty Online Course Evaluation Rubric-Development Criteria

The Online Course Evaluation Rubric is a document all instructors must complete to ensure that the intended course meets specific criteria and quality curriculum standards.

This document reflects all elements of the online course standards. After review, committee members may suggest that the course is recommended for online delivery. In cases where the course is not recommended, the instructor has the opportunity to review the rubric and make changes to bring it within the standards guidelines.

The key that is used to rate the course has four options.

3. Present and meets standards. No changes required.
2. Present but does not meet standards. Requires update and review.
1. Not present. Required rational for not including.
N/A - Not applicable in this course (Gold, 2005).

3.4 Student Online Readiness Survey

The Student Online Readiness Survey was designed to help students gauge the readiness for online learning. The questions fall into three categories.

Technology experience/access, Study habits, and Lifestyle. Each of these areas will have an impact on students’ ability to be successful in an online course.

The survey has 32 questions that are answered either yes or no. If a student answers 18 or more questions “yes” he or she may elect an online course (Gold, 2007).

3.5 Online Course Approval Form

This document is used to evaluate a traditional course than an instructor wants to present in an online format. The instructor must include a syllabus, detailed information about the method of instructional delivery, a description of the assignments and projects, and a description of the assessment/evaluation format. In addition, the specifics for student interaction must be included, activities and special equipment, special software that may be needed, and the specific training the instructor may require before he or she teaches the course.

The training components offered are: Introduction to Blackboard, Blackboard Pt. 2: Communication, Collaboration, and Productivity Tools, Strategies for the Effective Use of the Discussion Board, Strategies for the Effective Use of Chat, and Activities for the Online Environment (Online course approval form, 2006).

3.6 Online Learning Syllabus

The syllabus for an online course must include the components to ensure students are in the loop for instructor communication and instructor expectations. The syllabus should include: Course Information, Instructor Information, Student/Instructor Expectations, Assessment Information, Course Policies, Course Mechanics, and a Netiquette statement (Online learning committee responsibilities, 2006).

3.7 Application for Online Course Development Stipend

The course development stipend application is offered to faculty who are interested in teaching an online course. This is to encourage faculty to embrace the online format. Stipends are not available for courses that have already received compensation, or for web-enhanced courses. The online course is defined “where at least 80% of the instruction takes place online” (Online learning syllabus, 2006).

For 15 week courses, a maximum of 3 class meetings may occur face to face.
3.8 Assessment Questionnaire Specific to Standards for Online Courses

The assessment questionnaire is an online survey given to all students enrolled in an online course. This instrument allows students to evaluate the course based on the standards for online courses. The 20 questions are grouped in the following way: Organization and Structure, Content, Usability, Communication, Instructional Design, and Assessment/Evaluation (*Standards for online courses*, 2006).

This instrument captures data reflective of the standards developed as goals by the Online Standards Committee. It also reflects the online course evaluation rubric (*Student online readiness survey*, 2006).

4 Conclusion

The process the committee members embraced, and the documents produced have three main objectives. They are to ensure online courses are designed, developed, and delivered in an appropriate format so students can succeed, instructors can interact with students, and learning can be a positive experience. The documents are a check and balance process that will need to be fine tuned as Marygrove College continues to bring more online courses to the educational environment. The feedback loop is essential in keeping the documents up to date, and addressing the needs of the learning community; our students and our faculty.

References

*Application for online course development stipend.* (2006). Detroit, MI: Marygrove College, Online Learning Standards Committee.

*Faculty online course evaluation rubric.* (2006). Detroit, MI: Marygrove College. Online Learning Standards Committee.


*Online course approval form.* (2006). Detroit, MI: Marygrove College, Online Learning Standards Committee.


*Standards for online courses.* (2006). Detroit, MI: Marygrove College, Online Learning Standards Committee.

*Student online readiness survey.* (2006). Detroit, MI: Marygrove College. Detroit, MI: Marygrove College, Online Learning Standards Committee.