ONLINE CL@SSROOM
IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

MAY 2006

7 Ways to Improve Student Satisfaction in Online Courses

Preparing students for the online learning experience and managing expectations are critical to student satisfaction, says Marie Gould, assistant professor and program manager of Business Administration, and Denise Padavano, associate professor and program manager, Information Technology, both of Peirce College.

Students at Peirce College (whether they are face-to-face or online students) are required to take a one-credit online course that gives an overview of how the college works and helps develop students' time management and study skills. The course uses eCollege, the same course management system used for online, hybrid, Web-supported courses at the college.

By the time students enroll in their regular courses (which are accelerated seven-week courses), they have a working knowledge of eCollege and a good idea of what to expect. But managing expectations needs to go beyond using the technology.

The following are suggestions by Gould and Padavano for improving student satisfaction:

- **Post the course syllabus on the Web.** Part of managing expectations is letting students know up front how the course is organized.
- **Administer a learning-styles inventory.** For each of her courses, Gould uses a learning-styles inventory as an icebreaker activity, and because group work is a required component of her courses, she has students share their results of the inventory. "When the students see the strengths and weaknesses of each person, they tend to delegate roles and responsibilities based on the strengths of each of their learning styles," Gould says.
- **Explain the importance of group work.** Because some students may object to working in groups, students need to see how they will benefit from group work. "We have to try to get students to focus on why we want them to work in teams. We're not just putting them into teams because we want to make them suffer. [Teamwork] is a critical skill that students need to learn so they are functional when they get out and work. We need to help them get over that fear and manage expectations," Padavano says.
- **Use team contracts.** Major obstacles to group work are finding the time for students to

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Engaging Students in Discussion

Getting students to participate in an online course is perhaps the biggest challenge of teaching online, says Deborah Raines, professor and director of the Accelerated Second-Degree BSN Program at Florida Atlantic University. Part of the problem is that students often have misconceptions about what participation means. This is why Raines makes it a point, particularly during the first two weeks of a course, to model and encourage appropriate participation.

During the first week of a course, Raines communicates individually with each student. She makes her responses specific so that the students know that she read their posts.

Because many of her students hold full-time jobs and attend to their studies at night, Raines also logs on to the course at night to interact with the students. Although this communication is asynchronous, Raines' responses are timely and demonstrate her commitment to helping them. "If you're authentically there and responding to them with

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work together and defining each group member's roles and responsibilities. Gould has each group develop a team contract that outlines how and when the group will work together. Interaction options include e-mail, threaded discussion, text-based chat, document sharing, and audio bridging.

- **Use a variety of assessments.** Points should be spread evenly across different assessments because some students might not perform well on tests while others might not write very well.
- **Be flexible.** "I might have guidelines and even assignments prepared, but depending on the makeup of the class and students' learning styles and personalities, I might have to adjust some things," Padavano says. "If you find that the class is quiet, you can become more active. If you find that the students are very active, you can step back. You can facilitate based on the way that the students are participating in the course."
- **Provide frequent interaction.** Instructors need to be responsive to students' needs—Padavano recommends a 24-hour response time to students' questions—but interaction is not solely the responsibility of the instructor. Students also need to interact with each other and with the content. "Students need to touch the content every day. They want to know how they're doing, and they want to know quickly. They want to know the faculty member is there and that he or she cares about the students."

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more than 'Good idea' or 'Nice suggestion,' but really asking a probing question that takes them to the next level, I think that gets them more committed to and involved in the whole process," Raines says.

To model the collaborative relationships found in clinical settings, Raines encourages her students to answer each other's questions and share information. This collaboration comes into play in regular discussions and those built around realistic nursing situations. Because these simulations evolve over the course of a week, Raines tells her students to log on and participate in these discussions at least five days a week, even if it's for just 10 minutes at a time.

As the semester progresses, Raines tends to be less visible in the course, although she continues to monitor the discussions. However, she does come in at the end of each discussion to summarize the most important points. "At the end of the week, I usually take all the questions I asked them and write a paper that summarizes everything so that they get the right information, because we do get offtrack sometimes. And sometimes those tangents are important even if they are not directly related to the initial question. By writing the summary at the end of the week, I know that they get the information that's most critical for them to proceed in the curriculum," Raines says.

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The *ABC*s of Online Course Syllabi: Anticipate, Build on Objectives, and Collaborate

By Kam Jugdev, Maureen Hutchison, and Shelley Lynes

The course syllabus is a valuable communication tool. Because the syllabus requires accountability on the parts of several key stakeholder groups—students, prospective students, other institutions, the general public, and academics—it is critical that syllabi be developed so that they are easily understood, are accessible, and reflect current course content. In this article, we discuss the experiences of Athabasca University's Centre for Innovative Management in developing online course syllabi using an "ABC" approach for an online MBA program.

"*A*": Anticipate stakeholder questions

The literature is quite consistent on what a course syllabus should cover. Altman and Cashin suggest that in developing a list of what to cover in a course syllabus, we should think about what information students *need at the start of the course* and what information they *need in writing* so that things are not inferred and key points are clearly provided (Altman & Cashin, 1992). A comprehensive course syllabus should anticipate the types of questions stakeholders may have about the course and should include the following:

- A short, personalized welcome note
- Instructor information
- Textbook and course material details, including supplementary readings and Web links
- A course description and overview of instructional methods
- Course goals and objectives
- Course grading and feedback details
- Prerequisites
- Relevant policies
- Special course features
- Support services, including access services for disabled students
- Miscellaneous topics
- Caveats, such as this statement: "The University reserves the right to amend course outlines from time to time without notice."

Athabasca University's Centre for Innovative Management offers an online executive MBA program. Like many online programs, this program is intended for adult learners, many of whom have family responsibilities, which means that flexibility is an important feature of the program.

When a course is taught online, students must be able to review the syllabus at the start of the online course and have the opportunity to conduct an online dialogue with the instructor. Anticipating students' questions through a well-prepared course syllabus can help to alleviate any anxieties a student may have.

"*B*": Build on course and program objectives

In our program, in an online database, we provide students with a student handbook that is analogous to an MBA course calendar. However, it goes beyond a general calendar in that it includes details on student services, policies, regulations and procedures, comprehensive exam information, and so forth. For some of our courses, we found the course syllabus to be a great complement to the student handbook. For example, we elaborated on the course syllabus for Strategic Management, the first course students take, using references to the student handbook to build on program policies and objectives. Using this approach, we were able to focus student attention on course-specific details by providing electronic links to the handbook. By doing so, we avoided repeating material in the student handbook and reinforced student attention to the handbook and the importance of its use.

When we rewrote the Strategic Management course in late 2004, we found that the syllabus helped us to carefully think through the learning objectives and ensure that the content (including exercises and assignments) helped students achieve the stated course outcomes. The syllabus also encouraged us to provide a clearer rationale as to why certain course topics were covered. In essence, the syllabus served as a "quality control" tool, requiring the course development team to reflect on how and why the course had been built, thus confirming the objectives of the course and the program.

"*C*": Collaborate with course academics administrators

As we examined the literature on course syllabi, including Athabasca University's policy on syllabi, we decided to develop a specific policy for the creation of online syllabi for our MBA program. We began the project of developing a set of consistent course syllabi in 2004.

Ideally, a course syllabus is the responsibility of the instructor or course developer. The reality is that

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The Assessment Quiz (and a Prize)

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

It's only appropriate to wrap up the four-part assessment series with a quiz! You can use this quiz, individually or in a group, to test yourself and determine if you should read (or reread) my articles on objectives and assessments.

For each multiple-choice question, select the *best* answer(s) (more than one answer if the question says "select all that apply"). Questions 8 and 10 are short-answer.

1. The primary goal when building learning assessments in most higher education and adult training courses should be to:
   a. measure whether actual learning outcomes match desired learning outcomes.
   b. build learners' self-confidence that they have mastered the material.
   c. categorize learners into quartiles, according to their final scores.
   d. help learners determine their aptitudes and skills for certain fields and careers.

2. Dr. Kellermen's final exam for her Argumentation and Debate course was a 50-item multiple-choice test. The scores fell on a bell curve, with the average score (mean) of 72 percent correct. This result is:
   a. expected for a well-designed assessment.
   b. too low because the test was too hard.
   c. unexpected for a well-designed assessment.
   d. too high because the test was too easy.

3. For each of the following objectives, determine if a multiple-choice test is appropriate.
   a. Recall which mammals are now extinct. yes / no
   b. Given an Internet application, determine the most critical security vulnerabilities. yes / no
   c. Develop a compelling argument for taking action. yes / no
   d. Create a care plan for a low-income family with a critically ill child. yes / no

4. Dr. Kellermen's Argumentation and Debate course has a 50-item multiple-choice final exam that counts for 40 percent of the final grade. Two quizzes each count for 10 percent of the final grade and four debate activities count for 10 percent each. Students are expected to participate in weekly debate drills as well. These are the terminal objectives for the course:
   - Effectively use language and argument types for a variety of debate types.
   - Critically analyze social and political issues from multiple points of view.
   - Formulate a strong case, and defend it against strong opposition.

   Given the terminal objectives, Dr. Kellermen's assessment scheme for this course is: (select all that apply)
   a. inappropriate, because the course objectives are primarily procedural.
   b. appropriate, because the course objectives are primarily declarative.
   c. balanced, because she uses a combination of tests and performance assessments.
   d. unbalanced, because the tests and quizzes are weighted more heavily than the debate activities.

5. What problems do you see with the following rating scale, used to rate performance on a given mathematics task? (select all that apply)

Criteria	
proportions 1 (*Low*) - 2 - 3 - 4 (*High*)	*Score*
unit of measurement 1 (*Low*) - 2 - 3 - 4 (*High*)	*Score*
explanation 1 (*Low*) - 2 - 3 - 4 (*High*)	*Score*

   a. The performance descriptors are difficult to write well, requiring multiple levels of review by content experts.
   b. The criteria for performance may change, and the scale will therefore need to be updated.
   c. The lack of scale descriptors makes it hard to differentiate one level from another.
   d. Raters could easily rate performance differently, so ratings by different raters are likely to be inconsistent.

6. Multiple-choice tests can be a good choice for assessment because they: (select all that apply)
   a. are efficient to administer and score.
   b. are not subjective.
   c. can be used to assess whether the learner can construct or perform.
   d. can be improved with item analysis.

7. Scenario, document, graphic, and audio questions are better than most other multiple-choice

question types because they: (select all that apply)
   a. can easily be made tricky and hard to answer.
   b. ask learners to handle realistic situations.
   c. can effectively assess learners' application of knowledge.
   d. are best for assessing recall and recognition of content.

8. What's wrong with the way this question is written?
   Which of the following buildings should be physically accessible?
   a. New buildings
   b. Renovated buildings
   c. All buildings that are open to the public
   d. All buildings

9. Which assessment types are *most appropriate* for assessing whether learners know how to build a Table of Contents from all Heading 1 and Heading 2 styles in Word? (select all that apply)
   a. Document multiple choice: Show a Microsoft Word document with different parts labeled and ask students to select the parts of the graphic that will be used to create the Table of Contents.
   b. Performance assessment: Ask students to create a document that has a table of contents created from all Heading 1 and Heading 2 styles.
   c. One correct multiple choice: Ask students to select the menu that contains the Table of Contents formatting feature.
   d. Essay: Ask students to discuss how to build a Table of Contents from all Heading 1 and Heading 2 styles.

10. What's wrong with the way this question is written?
   Which of these conditions are specifically not covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?
   a. Homosexuality
   b. Mental illness
   c. Illegal drug use by those who are not in recovery
   d. Obesity
   e. Pregnancy

Prize

I need example pairs of poorly written/well-written multiple-choice questions that I can use in my assessment writing training materials. These pairs should show the same question before fixing it (poorly written) and after it is fixed (well written).

I will send a copy of my book *Making Sense of Online Learning* (Wiley, 2004) to the person submitting the best example pair of poorly written/well-written multiple-choice questions I receive via e-mail (exampleMCQs@learningpeaks.com) by June 30, 2006. I'll post example pairs (with attribution) in an upcoming article.

Answers, according to Patti

1. a. The goal of learning assessments should be to measure whether actual learning outcomes match desired learning outcomes.
2. c. The bell curve is what might be expected *without instruction.* Instruction should be designed to provide the instruction, practice, feedback, and remediation needed to bring about achievement of the desired outcomes.
3. a. yes, b. no, c. no, d. no. A is a declarative objective that requires only recall. B through d are complex procedural objectives, which require learners to construct an answer or perform a task. These actions cannot be assessed with multiple-choice testing.
4. a., d. Kellermen's objectives are primarily procedural, but her assessment scheme is heavily weighted toward declarative objectives. A more appropriate and balanced grading scheme would have given more weight to debate activities and weekly debate drills.
5. c., d. The lack of scale descriptiveness makes it hard to differentiate one level from another. This means different raters are very likely to rate inconsistently.
6. a., d. They are efficient to administer and score, may be subjective because of the way they are written, cannot be used to assess ability to construct or perform, and can be improved with item analysis.
7. b., c. These question types can test use of knowledge more effectively than similar questions not set within the context of realistic situations.
8. There isn't one unambiguously correct answer. The question says *should* and doesn't say according to what law, policy, or other decree.
9. a., b. This is a procedural objective, so the best way to assess it is with b. But a document-based multiple-choice question can also be effectively used to assess whether students know which parts of the document are to be used.
10. If a question is negatively worded, the negative word(s) should be CAPITALIZED, <u>underlined</u>, *italicized*, or **bolded**.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized instructional designer and instructional technologist, writer, and author, who builds and helps others build good online and blended courses and facilitate learning. She can be reached through her website: www.learningpeaks.com. @

Writing the Online Research Paper: 13 Guidelines to Getting It Right

By Errol Sull, M.A.

There are many facets of teaching students in a “landline” setting that cross over to an online one. Certainly, nearly all of these must be tweaked and honed somewhat to work effectively in the online learning environment. Some assignments need no adjustment and work extremely well whether the students are in a traditional or an online classroom. Among these is the research paper: the topic of this month’s column.

The research paper is an important staple of teaching whether one teaches law, biology, English, criminal justice, American literature, math, or whatever. So here, for you to share with your students, is a comprehensive guide to writing an effective research paper, no matter what the subject (and with a bit of a nod to our online teaching environment!):

Introduction

Unless you are asked to write an editorial (which is opinion alone) or a paper in which research is really not necessary (such as a descriptive essay) or your instructor specifically indicates doing an essay based on your experience, knowledge, and opinions alone, research will always enter into your writing. And it can help you in several ways:

- **Research allows you to substantiate and give credibility to an opinion you hold or a conclusion you’ve made and helps you come to a conclusion or decision.**
- **Research can offer a variety of sources to add “meat” to your primary thesis.**
- **Research can make your writing more sophisticated.**
- **Research can introduce you to other thoughts or approaches to your primary thesis that you hadn’t previously considered.**
- **Research allows you to open your mind to additional ideas and information, thus expanding your overall education.**

Virtually any grammar and composition book as well as numerous Internet sites can help you know what resources to use for research, how research should be cited in an essay, and the specifics of integrating research into a paper. But the basics of how to write a research paper that not only is effective but also takes into consideration the online learning environment is not so easy to find, and thus the 13 points that follow.

The guide

(1) Decide whether research is needed. Doing research just for the sake of saying you did research is stupid. Period. But if you need to bolster an argument, give credibility to an opinion, or substantiate a proposal, then yes, you definitely need to do research.

(2) Develop a research master resource list and add to it. You will have several papers in college that need research; you will find research needed for various projects, assignments, and presentations in your career. To save time on these, keep a master research list (preferably on a flash drive or a CD) that you can continually refer to as each project comes along. (For Internet resources, keep them always available and organized in various folders under favorites.) And as you discover new research resources you find helpful, add these to the master list (as well as to your favorites).

(3) Never use only one source for research. You want to offer your readers balance in the research you choose; if you do not, they might get a slanted or weakened view.

(4) Decide how your research will be used. Do you intend to simply draw a conclusion based on the research available, or do you have a strong opinion on something but need research to add weight to your belief? Do you intend to do research to better understand where to market a product or service or to decide if an idea is unique? Knowing how you intend to use your research will allow you to better focus on the types of resources you will use and how you will use those resources.

(5) Never let research take over your paper. Research is secondary to your thesis and the overall writing that ties together your thoughts and the research. Never throw in so much research that your paper simply reads as other people’s ideas and information. You are the author of your paper, and thus it should have the feel, look, and sound of you.

(6) Never toss in research simply for the sake of being able to say, “I did research.” All substantive (solid) research you do in your paper MUST relate to your thesis. But if your thesis is, for example, stem cell research, and

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you cite a bill that was introduced in Congress in 2002, in Washington, D.C., and then insert a bit of research material on the origin of the name "Washington," yes, you did research—but no, it has nothing to do with your thesis on stem cell research.

(7) Consider readers' possible questions, and answer them with research. When the reader takes in your words, he or she will certainly have questions based on what you have written. The smart research paper will have taken into consideration the primary questions or objections the paper's points will probably raise, "answering" and "responding to" these with a combination of research and the writer tying this research into the thesis and main points. Obviously, you cannot anticipate all reader questions and/or objections, but meeting some major ones head-on in the paper will make for a more contented reader.

(8) Use research that is as fresh as possible. Research that is too old might no longer be valid, having been surpassed, revised, or negated by more recent research. (Of course, if the only research available is older than three years, indicate as much in your paper so the reader can put the research in perspective: you want the reader to know that in your research efforts this was the most recent you could find, not that you were lazy and simply stopped looking.)

(9) Don't over-research. Research "Mark Twain's humor" through a search engine and you'll find nearly 300 hits; there are dozens of books and hundreds of journal articles that have also appeared on this topic. Obviously, you can't use it all. What you want is a sufficient number of varied resources to make your case: 10 different resources in an eight- to 10-page paper should be tops, with a good average at about five to eight.

(10) Make certain your resources are credible. This perhaps applies most to the Internet, where anyone can publish a website or blog, and just about everyone does. More often than not, these sites contain personal opinions, but little of the information is based on scholarly research, thus raising the question: how much of it is credible? The same question must be asked of interviewees not very familiar with a subject, an article that appears in an obscure periodical, and a subject discussed in a fictional TV program or movie. All your hard work in writing a paper can be weakened by one or more resources that are not credible.

(11) Have all your research right in front of you and cited. This simply makes better use of your time. Gather your research, put little notes on each indicating the citation info you need for the paper, and then begin writing your paper (based on the outline you've developed). This also helps you focus more on your writing project rather than breaking from your writing to hunt down another resource.

(12) Always remember to footnote and cite. This is a no-brainer: without footnoting and/or citing all your research, you are plagiarizing; and if you do, you can forget about seeing yourself on a Wheaties box! Be sure you use the correct format—MLA, APA, etc.—that your instructor has designated.

(13) Remember that the research paper must fit the online environment. Always send a copy of your research paper to yourself as well as to your instructor, just to be sure you remembered to attach it (whether e-mail or dropbox). Check for any limitations—either at your or your instructor's end—that may limit the size of the file you are sending. "Cut and paste" into an e-mail as a last resort: this plays havoc with the layout on a Works Cited or References page, as well as with bullets and other formatting. Always include your name (and other pertinent information) both on the first page of your paper and in the subject line of the e-mail. Save each copy of your research paper returned to you: you may need them all for a final grade, and instructors' comments on your paper can prove helpful for future assignments.

REMEMBER: It's the spices that add taste, character, and personality to any food; without them, blandness and "ho-hum" quickly set in.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errolcraigsull@aol.com. And as always, with each of my columns I will be offering a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed; for this column, if you'd like a guide to writing the research paper in either APA or MLA format—including nearly two dozen very helpful websites—please drop me an e-mail.

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not all academics appreciate the value of a syllabus, and some may view it as an administrative function. Given that there was a vested interest in developing course syllabi and a need to present course information to our stakeholders in a clear, consistent manner, we decided to take a collaborative approach. We worked closely with our Learning Services department and Registrations, Records, and Graduate Student Services department on this initiative.

Our core academic faculty agreed on the main topics to be covered in our syllabi. By creating a syllabus for our first MBA program course (Strategic Management), we shared it with faculty members to use as a guide when developing their own syllabi. Faculty members have the option of drafting their own syllabi for their current courses or requesting the assistance of editors in our Learning Services department to draft the first version (using the syllabus template) for them to review and finalize. As syllabi are completed, they are reviewed for consistency and posted on our Centre for Innovative Management website. Examples of our completed syllabi are available on each course's Web page, accessible at the following link: www.mba.athabascau.ca/Titan/aucimwebsite.nsf/AllDoc/EC01FB28AD3C051A87256F3C00550AB3?OpenDocument.

This collaborative approach helped to move an important initiative to the forefront, allowed our academics to draw on the resources of other internal departments, and ensured that the project was completed and communicated to stakeholders.

Concluding comments

Our experience in introducing online course syllabi was positive for several reasons:

- Using a syllabus template and working collaboratively ensured that we covered the pertinent topics of a syllabus in a consistent manner and, at the same time, enabled us to portray our courses in unique and personalized ways.
- Faculty have an annual checkpoint where they review and revise courses regularly, so we are able to collaborate internally to ensure that the related course syllabi are also updated.
- Feedback from students indicates that access to syllabi helps them better determine their program schedules, and it helps reduce concerns that some students have regarding certain courses that they think they may find more challenging.
- The Registrations, Records, and Graduate Student Services department appreciates having past and current syllabi to provide to potential students, students, and alumni.

We must ensure that our course syllabi remain current and thus meaningful to stakeholders. As a first step, we require course authors to provide an updated course syllabus when any changes are made to the course content. Also, as a relatively "young" program (in existence since 1994), we are being increasingly contacted by alumni of our program who have gone on to other learning pursuits (such as doctoral studies) and who require course syllabi of past courses for entrance or course credit transfer at other institutions. Developing syllabi for past courses is an additional challenge and places extra pressure on staff resources—the sooner your institution can develop a process for developing and updating course syllabi, the better!

A course syllabus is not the place to try to answer all questions that can be anticipated; however, it is a place where a solid foundation of material can be conveyed in a consistent and clear manner, expectations can be set, and the door can be opened for further discussion. We developed an appreciation that the syllabus is not just an administrative document, but a critical communication tool for our stakeholders. By using the "ABC" approach, we believe our course syllabi process will serve us well now and into the future.

Reference

Altman, H. B., & Cashin, W. E. (1992, September). *Writing a syllabus.* Retrieved April 2006 from www.idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea_Paper_27.pdf

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