ONLINE COURSE REVIEW - ADDITIONAL EXPLANATIONS

Introduction

In the spring of 2013, L&C will host a visit from the Higher Learning Commission’s (HLC) visitation team. HLC is the College’s regional accreditation organization. This visit will culminate several years of preparation and self-study. In the past two years, the HLC has made online teaching and learning a focus category for accreditation. Lewis & Clark must submit a written self-study for reaccreditation in August 2012. To write the self-study and prepare for the campus visit in spring 2013, we need to develop a process for the review of our online and hybrid courses. At present, due to variation among the initial L&C online course designs, L&C students often complain that they don’t know where to find essential items such as course outlines, course schedules, learning content, and course calendars. Faculty initially tended to use the elements of the learning management software as a template and that template has now changed three times since some of our courses were developed and approved. In Academic Year 2009-2010 all of the College’s online and hybrid courses moved from WebCT to Blackboard 9.x. This summer all courses will move to Blackboard 9.1. The “Checklist for Instructor Review of Online and Hybrid Course Design,” guides online faculty through a process of self-review. Online faculty are asked to complete the reviews during the fall 2010 semester as part of the HLC self-study process.

Peer Support Team

A peer support team has been assembled to assist colleagues in this review process. The team has developed the checklist you are asked to complete. Members of this team are available to help you with this process (completing the checklist) and if any changes are necessary, members of the peer support team can assist. Contact any of the following members of the Peer Support Team for assistance:

- Cathy Carruthers
- Sue Czerwinski
- Bob DiPaolo
- Terri Hilgendorf
- Annette Ingram
- Jim Price
- Tracey Smith
- Susan Stanard
- Mary Lou Watson
Completing your Course Review

The checklist should take you less than half an hour to complete. Your completed checklist and course outline (for each online and web-blended course you teach) should be submitted to Mary Lou Watson, Director of Technology Enhanced Learning, no later than November 16, 2010. Email electronic copies to Mary Lou as attachments via L&C email. Instructions for completion of the checklist are included below:

- There are four checklist categories: Meets, Developing, Not Present, and Not Applicable. You will check the appropriate box for each of the checklist criteria.
  - Meets – Evidence of criterion is clear and appropriate for the course. Requires no additional support in the narrative box for each section of the checklist.
  - Developing – Evidence of criterion is present, but needs to be developed or presented more clearly. All “developing” check marks require a brief explanation (placed in the narrative box for the section) of plans for the appropriate changes. For example, your course outline is missing one or more required sections. You would state: Outline – will add (list missing items). Or perhaps you tell students how feedback on assignments will be received but did not include when they can expect to receive your comments. In that case, your note would be: Feedback to students – add how soon after due date feedback can be expected.
  - Not Present – Evidence of criterion based on the course design and content is not present. All “Not Present” check marks require an explanation (placed in the narrative box for the section) of plans for the appropriate changes. For example, technical assistance – will add link to L&C support.
  - Not Applicable – Evidence of criterion is not present in the course. All items checked in this category require justification (in the narrative box for the section) as to why they aren’t necessary. For example, under the “Communications” section of the checklist one criterion is “Student-Student.” If you believe communication among students is unnecessary in your course, you need to explain why you reached that conclusion. There is no “one size fits all” in online instructional design but you must support your decision for “not applicable” checks.

- There are six (6) categories on the checklist that refer to sections of course design. Each category lists several items that must be assessed for inclusion. These categories and the items they include are explained in this manual.
  - Web Design
  - Learner Support and Resources
  - Instructional Design
  - Communication
  - Assessment
  - Student Feedback

- Following the categories and items on the check list are three additional sections:
  - Action Plan – Think of this as a summary of what you discovered by applying the checklist to your course. If you didn’t find any developing, not present, or not applicable areas that need clarification, then your action plan is simple. You intend to keep things up to date and running smoothly. However, if you did find areas that were checked in those categories, your action plan expands on the notes you made in each category’s narrative box. Expand and detail the changes you will make, explaining your rationale.
Remember that any item you marked as “not applicable” needs justification. Finally, explain how you will determine if the changes were effective. For example, a Classroom Assessment Technique will be developed and administered for courses offered in the spring, the action plans will be implemented and assessed during Spring 2011 and the reporting of the outcomes will be included in the Fall 2011 APOs. Because some online or web-blended courses are only offered in the fall, only recommended changes will be included in the Fall 2011 APOs.

- **Suggestions** – You are asked to provide any changes to the checklist form and/or the overall design review and reporting process that would make it more effective for future reviews.
- **Recommended** – This is an addition to the checklist of items that, while not required, is included to illustrate other features which may enhance student learning. Completion of this section is required using the same procedures as those specified for the other two sections.

### Further Explanations and Examples of Checklist Items

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#### Web Design

Web Design pertains to the look and usability of your course components. All course web pages, attachments, etc., within a course should have a *consistent* look to aid in student navigation and use. They don’t have to look like your colleagues’, but they should be essentially the same design for all the material in your course. Design consistency helps students become more comfortable with the layout of the course, makes print materials easier to read, and produces more effective multimedia.

1. Since much of an online course consists of words, *font styles* are an important consideration. There is no one font that works best online although you should avoid serf fonts (those are the ones with curly ends) such as Times New Roman. The font this manual is printed in is Calibri and is a sans serif font which is best for online web pages and documents that will be used online. Font size can be controlled by most browsers, but since most people don’t know how to do that, your original font size should be about **16 pt.** for headings and **12 pt.** for other material. Font styles should be consistent unless there is a reason for doing so (such as to draw attention to something).

2. *Color* usage is another consideration in your web design. You need to be consistent throughout the course and using more than 4 colors on a web page can become distracting. Backgrounds should be a low contrast color and print high contrast (think white background and black printing as an example). One in twelve people experience some sort of color blindness so they could have difficulty reading your material if your background and print are similar in shade/color. Avoid using only red and green in your design as most color blind people can’t distinguish between them.
3. Although *images* are more difficult to use in Blackboard, it is possible to add them to certain tools. They should enhance your course material and not be random or extraneous to your intent.

4. *Scrolling* refers to moving vertically on a page that cannot be viewed entirely on the screen at one time. It is difficult to read long sections of text online so the amount of scrolling necessary on any webpage or document for online courses should be minimized. Links should be provided at the top of the page which anchor to sections of the page (see examples of links in this document if you are reading it in digital format). One example of this would be your course outline. You probably want it to be a continuous document, making it easy for students to print. However, students shouldn’t have to scroll to find the information they need when accessing it online. You can make links at the top of the page that anchor to each section for ease of use.

5. *Hyperlinks* are one of the most used functions in web design. Make sure your links actually work and go where they are supposed to go. There should be no links that simply link to another link.

6. Make sure that any *multimedia* materials you use in your course serve a specific purpose that assists students in achieving the learning objectives for the course. Check the quality (sound, video, etc.) to ensure clarity. Don’t use them just as “bells and whistles.”

7. Unless your course actually requires more than basic hardware/software to complete the objectives, don’t include materials that would require students to expand their computer hardware/software. (The exception would be Java and the Adobe Acrobat Reader.) Keep in mind that many within our district are still using dial-up Internet connections which make downloads and streaming video very slow.

**Learner Support and Resources**

Just as face to face (F2F) students in a traditional classroom often need materials or assistance, so do online students. Since you are not available 24/7 online, you need to provide materials or links to materials that students can access immediately when they are working in the class. You need to link students to L&C’s Blackboard *technical support, institutional policies* (things like the student code of conduct, plagiarism policy, etc.) and any *academic resources* you believe that they may find useful. Academic resources might be a link to a site that instructs students on proper MLA-style citations or a program that works as a graphing calculator. Links to the L&C writing lab, math resource center, and the Reid Memorial Library are appropriate as well.

**Instructional Design**

The instructional design of your course is the systematic development of the course based upon your measurable learning objectives for the course. Measurable objectives are the foundation upon which you build your course. Everything you include in the course (learning materials/resources, assignments/activities, assessments, feedback, etc.) all must relate to objectives. Always ask yourself how an item or section of your course relates back to one or more of the learning objectives.
The first area you are asked to review on the checklist under instructional design relates to the structure of the course. How a course is designed assists or hinders students in finding and using the materials and learning activities they need to achieve the objectives.

1. The sequence of presented materials needs to be logical and consistent throughout the course, making it easy for students to locate the information they need. The sequence of a course will follow a progression that moves students from what they know about the subject to a greater understanding and application of the subject matter.

2. Chunking refers to how material is grouped. Courses are typically grouped in one of the following ways: chapters, modules, units, or weeks which usually contain lessons related to a specific topic. Chunking should also apply to the amount/length of material presented in any one document/resource or other learning activities/assignments. Try not to overwhelm students with long documents that require them to scroll through vast amounts of information in one grouping.

L&C has clear guidelines for what needs to be included in your course outline. While the style of the outline is usually a personal choice, it needs to contain the information bulleted on the checklist under the Course Outline/Information section: instructor information, a description of the course, course goals and learning objectives, course materials, a concise list of course content, your grading policy, a calendar or list of due dates, and any policies about which students need to be aware. This is a good place to include your learner support and resource materials. In fact, a detailed, inclusive course outline can become the main document that students use to complete the course.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle online students face (over which you have control) is during the first week of class when they are just starting the course. That’s why the course overview/introduction item on the checklist is so important. Even though L&C offers a F2F workshop for online students that provide an overview of how functions in Blackboard work, it doesn’t mean they know how to get started in your course.

1. All online courses need to provide a section that is specific to the course which provides clear step-by-step instructions on how to start working in the course. This section needs to be easily located and available on the first day students log in to the course. It should mirror your first class in a F2F section and include similar instructions, course policies, and handouts (Syllabus, course outline, expectations, etc.) Scheduling a few days at the beginning of the semester to get students familiar with the technical aspects and functions you will use throughout your course, before jumping into learning subject matter, will save you from answering a lot of messages from confused students and allow students to become familiar with the environment so they are more focused on learning later in the course.

2. Be sure your getting started section includes instructions on the required course components needed to participate effectively in the course. Let them know where to find these elements. For example if you use Blackboard’s messaging function for private communication, tell them how to find the link to that function (probably on your course menu).
Instructional Strategies are course components that provide ways for students to demonstrate their degree of fulfillment of the learning objectives of the course. Knowledge Demonstration includes a variety of learning activities including but not limited to assignments, activities, discussion, quizzes and tests. Your course should not limit students to just one method of demonstrating knowledge. For example, a course that only uses quizzes/tests as a means of showing what has been learned won’t give you a clear picture of what all students have achieved. As research confirms, due to test anxiety and other factors, traditional testing frequently doesn’t measure what a student has learned about a subject but merely how well they take tests. Using a variety of methods will provide you with a better means of assessment. As mentioned previously in this manual, everything you include in your course should promote achievement of learning objectives designed for your course.

Instructional Materials are obviously resources that help students understand the subject matter. The integration of a textbook (if you require one) and the use of other instructional materials (handouts, lecture notes, PowerPoint, etc.) all must assist and support students’ achievement of the learning objectives.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the checklist will be related to the compliance section of the review. Compliance refers to those legal aspects of an online course that must be adhered to. No one expects us to be experts in this area as they are fairly technical in nature. However, we do need to make sure we have made an attempt to fulfill those aspects that are within our control as course designers related to copyright and fair use laws, ADA (American Disabilities Act) and Accessibility 502 (B) first level standards.

1. Copyright and fair use laws relate to posting course materials online. Even if you are familiar with copyright and fair use for the traditional F2F course, you need to be aware that they aren’t necessarily the same for use online. While the copyright cops are unlikely to show up and log in to your course, you should be aware that there are a growing number of lawsuits related to copyright infringement (in online courses) and ignorance of the law isn’t a defense. The easiest way to avoid copyright infringement is to only upload/copy materials (including graphics) into your course that you have created (hence you are the copyright owner), have permission to copy from the copyright owner (typically materials provided by a publisher/course cartridge) or by linking students within your course to another site where the information/materials are available (avoiding the copy issues completely). You can also copy/use materials that are already available on the web that are US government materials (by law the government can’t hold copyright) or materials that are made Open Access or Open Source by the rights holder and include a statement of permission or list a Creative Commons license. You may also copy works in the Public Domain to your course, generally speaking most works published in the US before 1923 fall into this category.

2. Fair use is even more complicated than direct copyright. Fair use is a legal term that allows the limited use of copyrighted materials without permission. Simple concise rules do not exist for fair use online. However since L&C meets the requirements of the TEACH ACT (not for profit institution, material posted in a password protected course management system, etc.), it is possible to invoke fair use doctrines online. There are four factors (Section 107 of the Copyright Act) that can help you decide if the material can legally be copied into your course. You need
not meet all the following requirements for the material to be considered fair use but must meet the preponderance in most of the categories.

1. Purpose
   a. The materials are used specifically for teaching/learning purposes not entertainment.
   b. Students are not charged a fee specifically for access to the material.
   c. Materials are available only for a specific period of time for student use and are not used repeatedly.
   d. No one benefits monetarily from the use of the material.

2. Nature of original work
   a. The copied works is relevant to the learning objectives of the course.
   b. Fair use applies narrowly to creative works such as excerpts from literary works, art images and musical compositions. Avoid substantial copying of these into your course.
   c. Works are published but not available in a digital form that can be linked to.
   d. Works of fact or nonfiction more readily fall under fair use than highly creative material.

3. Amount
   a. Fair use can only be invoked legally if small quantities are used from the original work.
   b. Segments of the original works used are not central or significant to the entire work.
   c. The amount used is appropriate for the educational purposes it is related to (learning objective).

4. Effect on the market for the original
   a. Materials placed online cannot be works that are reasonably available and affordable for students to purchase.
   b. Access to material is only available through the use of a password (Blackboard is password protected).
   c. Materials are cited correctly, and students are advised not to distribute the materials beyond those enrolled in the course. (It's always a good idea to tell students what they can/can’t copy into the course as well.)
   d. There is no significant demand in the market for the copyrighted work.

3. Compliance with ADA requirements and level 1 accessibility are closely related. In fact, level 1 accessibility for web design was established to assure web pages are usable by those with disabilities. According to Blackboard documentation, “Blackboard is committed to the accessibility of our learning platform. We are working with leaders in the accessibility field to bring our software into compliance with industry standards and federal guidelines for accessibility. Much of this functionality is already available in Blackboard and Blackboard 5.5 is intended to bring these features up to 100% compliance throughout the system.” Since we are using version 9.1, we can assume it is now in compliance. What this means is that the course management system will automatically make your web pages meet the basic standards required
by law for ADA and level 1 web design compliance with little additional implementation by the course designer. Since web accessibility is defined as “the ability of people with a disability to perceive, understand, navigate and interact with and contribute to the web,” you should make sure your course meets the following criteria:

1. Add an “alt” tag for each graphic you upload to your course. This is easy to do as when you import a graphic into Blackboard a box will pop up where you can add a description (alt tag) for the image.
2. Avoid using links such as “click here” and “follow this link” as they are not descriptive enough for text readers to inform visually impaired users on where the link is located.
3. Provide text versions of all audio and video content.
4. Make sure that information conveyed with color can be used by those who are color blind or visually impaired.
5. Avoid the use of flickering icons or scrolling text.
6. Use the clearest and simplest language appropriate for the course content.

Communication

1. Contact and interaction is essential to online classes. This includes instructor to student (and student to instructor), content to student and (when appropriate) student to student communication. If your course includes any method for students to contact you and you to respond (messaging, email, discussion forum, etc.), you have met this criteria. It seems obvious that any course designed to promote student learning fulfills the content requirement of student interaction necessary to meet this criteria. However, you may decide that you want to provide more complete or clearer instructions, in which case you would check “developing.” The need for student to student communication is a bit more controversial. While research clearly indicates that providing (even requiring) interaction between and among students is an effective learning strategy, the use of asynchronous discussions is easier to design for some disciplines. At a minimum, you probably want to include a discussion forum that acts like a virtual “student lounge” where students can post messages to their classmates. However if you have decided that such communication is unnecessary for your course, you would check it as “not applicable” and provide a rationale for that decision.

2. Instructor Responsiveness is, according to research, one of the most important factors in students effectively learning online. You should provide students with what type of feedback will be provided to them by you (e.g. You will receive individual comments on all assignments), how the feedback will be provided (e.g. Using the course messaging function, you will receive an attachment that highlights the points earned per the rubric for each assignment), and when they can anticipate such feedback (e.g. Feedback on all unit assignments/activities will be sent within 3 days of a unit closing). Logical places to include this information would include the course outline, with the instructions for assignments, and introductory materials provided in the course orientation.

3. Student Participation needs to be defined by you so students know what is expected of them. This definition will vary greatly from course to course and instructor to instructor. In one class it
may be there is no requirement for how often students should log in into the course. As long as assignments are submitted by the due date, there are no other participation requirements. In other classes student participation is defined by logging in a required number of times (e.g. don’t allow more than 72 hours to pass between logins to the course) and/or required postings to discussion forums. Students need to know what is expected; otherwise, they may assume (just as some F2F students think attending class but not completing assignments is acceptable) that just logging in occasionally is all that they need to do. Include this as a section of your course outline, orientation materials, or any other place you think appropriate.

4. When using public discussions in your course, they must be organized by either forums or by threads within a forum for ease of use.

Assessment

Assessment is the process used to measure students’ progress toward reaching the student learning objectives for the course. This includes the quality and quantity of work completed which is typically communicated to students through grades. Students should be made aware of the methods that will be used to assess their learning (quizzes, projects, surveys, assignments, etc.) and the frequency of such evaluations (midterm and final test, individual assignments each unit, group project in unit 4, etc.). Information on how much time is allotted (you have 30 minutes to complete this test, you have one week to submit this assignment) and when any assessment activity is available (all unit assignments will be available on the date specified on the course calendar, the mid-term exam becomes available on March 8) needs to be conveyed. Provide students with a deadline for everything. Since your course contains a calendar or due date schedule, this criterion is most likely met. It doesn’t matter if you allow them to turn assignments in weekly, on a specific date, or even a week before the end of the semester; they just need to know that. Inform students if retakes or “second chances” are available on tests, assignments, etc. Again your course outline would be a suitable place to make such information available as would any rubric you provide. Access to the online grade book needs to be provided so students know where to check on their progress and grades.

Student Feedback

In addition to the standard L&C online end of course student survey, you need to gain ongoing information from your students (designated as student feedback on the check list) for the purpose of course improvement. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Examples include but aren’t limited to CATs, blogs, anonymous surveys, email, etc.

Conclusion

The Peer Support Team has provided this manual and the checklist to you as a preview to the next academic year’s project. A workshop will be offered for all online faculty on Friday, August 20 at 9 a.m. in NU L201 to review the checklist and answer questions. Two additional workshops are scheduled for adjunct faculty on Tuesday, August 24 and Wednesday, August 25 at 6 p.m. in NUL201. Some faculty may choose to use the more relaxed summer months to conduct the self-review, make any needed changes, and submit the completed checklist.
It is the mission of the Peer Support Team to assist you in completing the checklist and making any changes to your online courses that may be necessary (or desired). Please contact any member of the team for clarification or help on this project. We are also interested in your feedback on the ease of using the checklist and this manual, or any additions/corrections/comments have.

Together we will not only provide information for our HLC self-study, we will assure that all L&C students have the opportunity for a rewarding learning experience in all of our course environments.