Online Course Design Essentials

These research-based standards are used to design online and hybrid courses and assess online course quality at Northern Illinois University. All new and redeveloped courses are expected to meet essential standards and are strongly encouraged to meet exemplary standards. Courses that meet all noted essential standards are recognized as NIU quality essentials courses.

Course Overview and Introduction

The overall design of the course is made clear to the learner at the beginning of the course. The course overview and introduction set the tone for the course, let learners know what to expect, and provide other guidance to help learners succeed from the beginning.

✅ Essential

- Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.
- Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.
- Course and institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated within the course, or a link to current policies is provided.
- Minimum technology requirements for the course are clearly stated, and information on how to obtain the technologies is provided.
- Technical skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.

🎖 Exemplary

- Communication guidelines for online discussions, email, and other forms of interaction are clearly stated.
- Required prior knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated in the course site.
- The self-introduction by the instructor is welcoming and is available in the course site.
- Learners have the opportunity to introduce themselves.

Learning Objectives (Competencies)

Learning objectives describe what learners will be able to do upon completion of the course. The learning objectives establish a foundation upon which the rest of the course is based. *For the purpose of readability, "objectives" refer to "competencies" or "outcomes."*

✅ Essential

- The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable.

🎖 Exemplary

- The module/unit-level learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.

- Learning objectives are stated clearly, are learner-centered and are prominently located in the course.
- The relationship between learning objectives, learning activities and assessments is made clear.
- The learning objectives are suited to and reflect the level of the course.

Assessment and Measurement

Assessments are integral to the learning process and are designed to evaluate learner progress in achieving the stated learning outcomes. Assessment is implemented in a matter that corresponds to the course learning objectives and not only allows the instructor a broad perspective on the learners' achievement, but also allows learners to track their learning progress throughout the course.

✓ Essential

- The assessments measure the achievement of the stated learning objectives.
- The course grading policy is stated clearly, available at the beginning of the course, and consistent throughout the course site.
- Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learners' work, and their connection to the course grading policy is clearly explained.
- The types and timing of assessments provide learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress with timely feedback.

🏅 Exemplary

- The course includes multiple types of assessments that are sequenced and suited to the level of the course.
- The assessments provide guidance to the learner about how to uphold academic integrity.

Instructional Materials

Materials for online and hybrid classes should be created for the audience of online and hybrid students. Online students feel at a disadvantage when they are merely given recording of on-campus activities or lectures. Instructional materials should prepare students for assessments. Research shows that using best practices for presenting instructional materials helps students learn more effectively (for example, using active learning strategies, where students perform meaningful actions involving course content and then reflect on learning).

✓ Essential

- The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated learning objectives.
- The course models the academic integrity expected of learners by providing both source references and permissions for use of instructional materials.
- A variety of instructional materials is used in the course.

Exemplary

- The relationship between the use of instructional materials in the course and completion of learning activities and assessments is clearly explained.
- The instructional materials represent up-to-date theory and practice in the discipline.

Course Activities and Learner Interaction

Learning activities foster and facilitate learner interaction and engagement. Course components that promote active learning contribute to the learning process and to learner persistence.

Essential

- The learning activities help learners achieve the stated learning objectives.
- The instructor's plan for regular interaction with learners is substantive ways during the course is clearly stated.
- The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.

Exemplary

- Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.

Course Technology

Course technologies support learners' achievement of course objectives. The technologies enabling the various tools used in the course facilitate the learning process.

Essential

- The tools used in the course support the learning objectives.

Exemplary

- Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning.
- A variety of technology is used in the course.
- The course provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy.

Learner Support

The course facilitates learner access to institutional support services essential to learner success. It is important to ensure online learners know they have access to and are encouraged to use the services that support learners at the institution.

Essential

- The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.
- Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and accommodation services.
- Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's academic support services and resources that can help learners succeed in the course. [NIU student success tips and tools]
- Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's student services and resources that can help learners succeed. [NIU student life site]

Accessibility and Usability

The course design reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for diverse learners. The course design utilizes the principles of accessibility and usability, reflecting a commitment to ensuring diverse learners can access course content and activities and can easily navigate and interact with course components.

Essential

- Course navigation facilitates ease of use.

Exemplary

- The course design facilitates readability.
- Text in the course is accessible.
- Images in the course are accessible.
- Video and audio content in the course is accessible.
- Multimedia in the course is easy to use.
- Vendor accessibility statements are provided for all technologies required in the course.