

Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences

A Playbook
for Faculty



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Executive Summary

Characteristics of High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences

High-quality digital learning experiences are built on the foundational principles of providing equitable, inclusive, accessible learning environments for all students. In addition, high-quality digital learning experiences are well-organized and thoughtfully designed. These experiences rely on instructional design principles and strategies to align learning outcomes with learning assignments, activities, and assessment practices. In these ways, high-quality digital courses provide robust learning experiences for students, not only through strategic design, but also through integrating intentional opportunities for community-building and interaction in the digital environment.

Student and faculty feedback from remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed an equity gap and became a call to action to focus on optimizing the quality of digital learning experiences for minoritized students¹ (see the following page for how we define minoritized students). As a result, more than ever before, it is now essential that faculty meet the learning needs of minoritized students through effective digital course design and teaching strategies.^{2,3} Building on these principles and the urgency to provide improved and equitable digital learning, the focus of this playbook is to help faculty strategically embed technologies with learning outcomes to amplify the effectiveness of student learning experiences, especially for minoritized students.

Optimizing online learning experiences to ensure equity, inclusivity, and accessibility, particularly for minoritized students, is a continuous process with many benefits:

- limiting potential academic disruption if the course modality unexpectedly shifts
- providing students course materials in efficient and accessible ways
- giving students more flexibility, control, and options regarding when and how they learn
- allowing faculty to engage in the process of building their courses over time

Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty aims to guide faculty in thinking and designing strategically to amplify the opportunities the online environment provides in both their digital spaces and physical classrooms. By integrating teaching and design principles, this guide assists faculty in positively impacting student learning, especially for students who are minoritized because of race, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status.

Pro tip:

The OLC's Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice ([QCTIP](#)) [Scorecard](#) can be used to evaluate the comprehensive overview of the learning environment in ten key areas: course design; Accessibility, ADA compliance, and Universal Design; course learning outcomes; course content; assignments; instructor role; class discussion and engagement; community building; communication; and continuous course improvement.

Who You Are

Whether you are continuing to teach online or have returned to in-person instruction and you want to continue developing digital learning practices, *Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty* will help you create an equitable digital learning experience for students. Whether you teach at a public university, private college, community college, or technical college, this playbook will help you design, enhance, and optimize your online courses and provide resources for applying teaching and design principles.

Who We Are

This playbook is a collaboration between the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and the Every Learner Everywhere Digital Learning Network. This playbook is designed to serve as a concise guide to address faculty needs for online course design, teaching, and continuous improvement.

How this Playbook Defines Minoritized Students

In this playbook, we aim to heighten institutional and individual effectiveness in creating digital learning experiences and promoting achievement of learning outcomes for students from diverse racial, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Throughout this text, we intend to promote equitable and inclusive digital learning experiences that support minoritized students who have been historically marginalized, such as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, poverty-impacted, transgender, first-generation, international, those for whom English is a Second Language (ESL), student parents, student veterans, students with disabilities, or neurodiverse students.

For students who are members of multiple minoritized communities, we recognize the marginalization they experience is complex and intersectional. In referencing the term “minoritized students,” we strive to include diverse perspectives and experiences from many identities. In doing so, our purpose is not to erase the lived and unique experiences of racially and socioeconomically minoritized students but to streamline phrasing. See the [Getting Started with Equity Guide](#) for specific strategies.

Some of the terms we use in this playbook have been in use for decades, while others are relatively new. We suspect, in a future time, some of the terms we use will be obsolete. We particularly struggle with terms around race, which can be too vague, too specific, too outdated, too trendy, too exclusive, too general, and too simple.

Race is connected to the creation of systemic oppressive power dynamics in our society that undergird many policies and practices in higher education institutions. We have two positions regarding terms describing race:

1. We honor the terms by which people wish to be called, with an understanding that these terms change over time.
2. We understand the debate over terms is sometimes a distraction. We aim not to deny the power of words and naming, but we remain focused on action, real change, and justice.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The process of creating high-quality online instruction, at its core, is profoundly simple. It necessitates a shift away from thinking and reflecting on how to translate the content of a face-to-face course to an online environment. It instead focuses on answering the question of how to maximize the opportunities available to students to achieve learning outcomes in the digital environment. Since the onset of the pandemic, many instructors have developed and applied online course design in their remote courses. As the crisis phase of the pandemic begins to fade, many educators are emerging on the other side changed.

Indeed, faculty have had the chance to pivot the modalities of their courses in all directions. Through this experience, much has been gained. Many faculty have renewed and focused their energy around creating more effective online experiences designed through evidence-based practices. In addition, many are leveraging digital technologies to improve student outcomes and ensure that digital learning environments are equitable for all learners, especially for minoritized students. Faculty may have also begun to reflect on what worked best in their synchronous and asynchronous online learning environments. Perhaps, some faculty have begun to identify gaps in their knowledge and practices regarding online learning, and they may have started setting goals toward improving design and practice. These goals coalesce with technologies and methods for advancing higher education, according to the [2021 EDUCAUSE](#)

[Horizon Report: Teaching and Learning Edition](#), which identifies Quality Online Learning as the top key technology and practice.⁴

The purpose of this playbook, *Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty*, is to move higher education individually and collectively forward, helping faculty embrace the process of implementing design principles in order to enhance and optimize digital learning experiences for their students. In short, this playbook is designed to help faculty think and design strategically to amplify the opportunities of the online environment.

Enhancing online course design and instructional practices — the focus of this guide — will help educators embrace the future of digital learning, providing a sense of stability in an ever-changing world. Dr. Brian Beatty, Associate Professor of Instructional Technologies in the Department of Equity, Leadership Studies, and Instructional Technologies at San Francisco State University, credited with creating the HyFlex teaching modality, calls this principle “dynamic stability,” a principle that originated in aviation. “Dynamic stability” refers to the necessity that the materials used to construct a plane are both strong and flexible for successful flight. In writing for higher education leaders, Beatty analogizes this principle of “dynamic instability” to refer to the ability to maintain a strategic direction — to in effect, stay on course — relying on embracing and planning for potential disruption, necessitating that our design and methods be both strong and flexible.⁵

This concept of strength and flexibility is also echoed within the content of this playbook. In the spring of 2020, during the onset of the crisis phase of the pandemic, collaborators from the Every Learner Everywhere Network (Every Learner), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), and the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU) published *Delivering High-Quality Instruction Online in Response to COVID-19 Faculty Playbook*. The resource was written for instructors who charged forth bravely to transition their face-to-face courses online, and it was frequently downloaded and cited. This updated playbook, *Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty*, is a continued collaboration between ELE, the OLC, and the APLU. This playbook is a revised version of the original online teaching

guide, which aims to empower faculty to continue effective work to integrate the affordances of digital learning.

Whether an instructor has been teaching online for the last year or a decade, whether they are new to online teaching or have returned to in-person instruction but are looking for ways to keep and develop digital learning, this playbook is a valuable resource. No matter instructors' levels of expertise, elements of this playbook will help address their students' needs and address challenges and goals in creating effective digital learning experiences.

How to Use This Playbook

Learning to teach online is a developmental process, an iterative course refinement process. As such, the authors of this guide encourage faculty to embrace this learning on multiple levels. This updated playbook is organized to guide educators through the learning process to help operationalize best practices in online instruction through a stepwise process: **design, enhance, and optimize**. This process allows educators to build their courses and develop their online teaching practice in layers. In this way, this playbook presents design principles that offer fundamental guidance for teaching a course online and presents strategies to improve continuously, resulting in a course with evidence-based practices of the highest quality.

Many topics covered in this playbook are organized according to these three different levels:

Design-Enhance-Optimize: An Iterative Process of Online Course Design

Figure 1.1. The Design-Enhance-Optimize process offers an iterative, layered approach to online course design by encouraging faculty reflection and reflexivity. This process allows educators to employ design principles, enhance the learning environment and experience, and optimize their courses with evidence-based practices.

DESIGN

Guides immediate and basic needs for moving a course online.

Most useful for emergent and immediate translation of F2F or blended courses to fully online.

ENHANCE

Provides options to enhance the learning environment and experience.

Most useful for improving F2F elements that do not translate well, or beginning to customize course quality for online.

OPTIMIZE

Offers tips and resources for online teaching and learning that aligns with the highest-quality practices.

Most useful for continuous improvement and maintaining best practices.

These levels are designed to guide faculty to the resources that they need most quickly. Each builds upon the previous, providing a path for continuous improvement along a continuum of increasing quality. The first level, “design,” provides foundational information and resources for developing an online course. The next level, “enhance,” offers information to either continue quality course development or to improve the initial elements of a course. Finally, the “optimize” level provides resources for the design of a course in alignment with the highest-quality recommendations and evidence-based practices, as well as for evaluation and continuous improvement.

Recognizing that **every faculty member, course, and situation is unique**, it is essential for faculty to consider the ideas in this book within the context of the needs of their students and within the context of their communities and institutions to ensure that equity-related objectives are achieved.

Getting Started

A Checklist for Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences

The Key to Success

- **Embrace the Design-Enhance-Optimize framework to adopt a continuous improvement process to build your course and its digital interface.** Building your course and its digital interface over time necessitates flexibility and adaptability, as well as planning, preparation, and technical support. This playbook and its iterative framework guide you through the improvement process. Applying the principles of the Design-Enhance-Optimize process affords you a strategy to develop your teaching, your course, and your course interface.

Supporting Student Learning through Effective Design

- **Design, create, and maintain an inclusive and equitable digital learning environment.** Support the needs of minoritized students by creating a welcoming environment that represents and celebrates diverse perspectives and includes explicit actions to eliminate bias. Ensure that your students have the support they need to achieve success, regardless of individual or experiential differences. Students' intersectional identities might make these needs different, which is the reason that it is vital to get to know your students and to adjust the learning experience to maximize their access and engagement.
- **Strive for alignment between learning outcomes, learning experiences, assessment practices, and technology integration.** Allow the learning outcomes to drive the design of your course, incorporate technology, center diverse student feedback, and design synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences in ways that allow your students to effectively meet these outcomes. To do so, repeatedly reflect: "How do I maximize the opportunities available to my students to meet course learning outcomes in the digital environment?"



STUDENT VOICES

It is so important to get feedback (and listen to it) coming from your students. My favorite classes have always been the ones where my professors are always allowing us to give our opinions on projects, assignments, test dates, etc., and they are more understanding.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



- **Be consistent.** Regardless of the technology that you integrate, using synchronous or asynchronous tools to teach course content, students can succeed if the course is designed to provide consistency. Aim for clarity and consistency in due dates, expectations, assignments, and learning experiences, along with regular and reliable access to you.



STUDENT VOICES

I have greatly appreciated professors who have been available as if it were in person. I did not expect professors to be on standby 24/7, but being able to reach them (preferably on video chat) in a reasonable time, if needed, made it feel like professors had my back and did not just send me off to use the technology and teach myself.

Mark Lannaman

Journalism, Georgia State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Building Your Online Syllabus, Course Schedule, & Communication Plan

- **Build your course with predictable learning cycles to help students find rhythm and consistency with assignments and due dates.** Consider scheduling assignments due dates for specific types of assignments on the same day of the week (e.g., quizzes on Mondays, discussion board posts due on Wednesdays, final drafts of assignments due on Fridays). Maintain the consistency of due dates across all course documents: assignment sheets, calendars, announcements, syllabi, and course policies.



STUDENT VOICES

I had a professor this semester who was very unpredictable with her tests, which made it very stressful and difficult to study. For the important tasks such as tests and quizzes, it is crucial to be consistent, like having a similar style or format for each test, and to not make the class more frustrating for your students (since being online is hard enough already)!

Venus Rodriguez

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- **Include a statement on your syllabus about expected email response times to let students know how much time might pass before receiving a response from you.** The inclusion of this statement helps build student expectations and consistency. It also ensures that your students receive timely answers to their questions.
- **Provide clear expectations for when students can expect to receive feedback on their work.** Including this information in your syllabus helps build consistency into your course, helps set student expectations, and ensures that your students have the availability of feedback to inform their learning.
- **Create conditions to encourage your students to log into the digital classroom each day.** Acknowledging that students have various life responsibilities, setting clear due dates, and maintaining flexibility will ensure that they can authentically engage and succeed in the class. Where applicable, offer your students an understanding of the learning process. For example, James Gray from Community College of Aurora introduces his course by stating: "This class is set up so you do a small amount of work over a greater number of days. An hour's worth of learning done over four days will provide more benefit than four hours of work done on a single day. It is my job to provide just the right amount of work, and it is your job to do that work in a good-faith way." This information helps build habits of engagement for students. To accomplish this, consider building a table of what a typical lesson looks like and sharing it with your students.



STUDENT VOICES

Reminders can help your students be more on top of deadlines by adding it to the calendars of the course homepage. Though I would not recommend having students do a discussion post every day, perhaps a short one every week on a topic that might be on the test or quizzes or even counting that for credit or participation points can encourage them to be more active.

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STUDENT VOICES

[Setting clear due dates and maintaining flexibility are] crucial for online! As I am sure we all can relate, I have 15+ tabs open at any given moment, making it easy to miss random assignments. One of my classes did not announce quizzes and scheduled them sporadically, which no one in my class appreciated.

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- **Ensure that your digital classroom, such as your learning management system (LMS) course shell, is well-organized.** Students who have difficulty locating resources within the digital course shell may become frustrated or disengaged. Aim to organize your course logically and consistently into weekly or topic-based modules. Be sure to set up each module using the same organizational structure and pattern (e.g., lectures, readings, learning activities, and assessments). Also, add context to each item, describing the assignment or the lecture and its purpose towards completing the course.

Creating Instructor Presence and A Sense of Community

- **Use active learning strategies during synchronous meetings.** If your course includes synchronous sessions, build student engagement and sense of community by integrating active learning experiences during this time. Hold class discussions or facilitate a generative, group activity using an interactive virtual whiteboard or collaborative document.
- **Be easily accessible to your students.** Provide multiple regular opportunities for connection and support via email, virtual office hours, prompt feedback, and virtual study sessions or student conferences.



STUDENT VOICES

Virtual study sessions are such a good idea to not only get closer to your students, but to make the professor seem more approachable or “human”! It is such a great way to hear what your students have to say and get good feedback.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



- **Send weekly announcements or a weekly task checklist to your students.** When sent at the beginning of each week, these announcements and weekly checklists remind your students of their goals, assignments, and tasks for the week. They also may be used to provide encouragement to your students and present them with tips for the challenges that they may face in working through the weekly assignments and materials.



STUDENT VOICES

In theory, this is a great resource for specific types of students who are very active with their tasks and goals. However, I would say the most important thing is to, for sure, use the calendar function to put all due dates for assignments that are coming up in the front of the course homepage and make the deadlines clear.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



- **When communicating with your students in writing, aim to use a welcoming and encouraging tone.** It is not just what you write to your student that matters; it is how you write it. The tone that you convey can be a tool to help encourage and provide guidance in meaningful ways.⁶ Try not to write something like, “I provided feedback on your Assignment 2 essay. Please look over my comments and use them to revise your work.” Instead, try writing something like, “The draft you submitted of your Assignment 2 essay is beginning to take shape. I know you have high standards and the ability to meet them, so I encourage you to revise your work using the comments and feedback I suggested to make your work even more effective. I look forward to reading your revision! If you have any questions or need help along the way, just let me know. I am happy to help.”

Course Design

This section contains an overview of key course design principles and approaches to course design to help guide your course development process. It also offers resources for making your course equitable, inclusive, and accessible, using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies whenever possible.

Designing with Equity in Mind



1
Equitable design takes student differences in race, gender, identity, age, background, ability, and individual experiences into account and explicitly works to provide opportunities for success.

2
Equitable course design encompasses considerations spanning technology, the students as individuals, and course design and pedagogy.

3
There are concrete steps you can take to design, enhance, and optimize equity in your course. See the [Getting Started with Equity Guide](#) for specific strategies.

Diversity initiatives speak to access and representation. Equity initiatives highlight the need to interrogate and dismantle the structural racism and systemic poverty that reproduce historic and persistent inequities that manifest in teaching and learning processes.

Currently, equity is a trendy buzzword in education, and it is often misused and more often misunderstood. [University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education](#) has created a short series of images to help illuminate the concept of equity in a way that informs action that is aligned with the principle and distinguishes it from other related values:

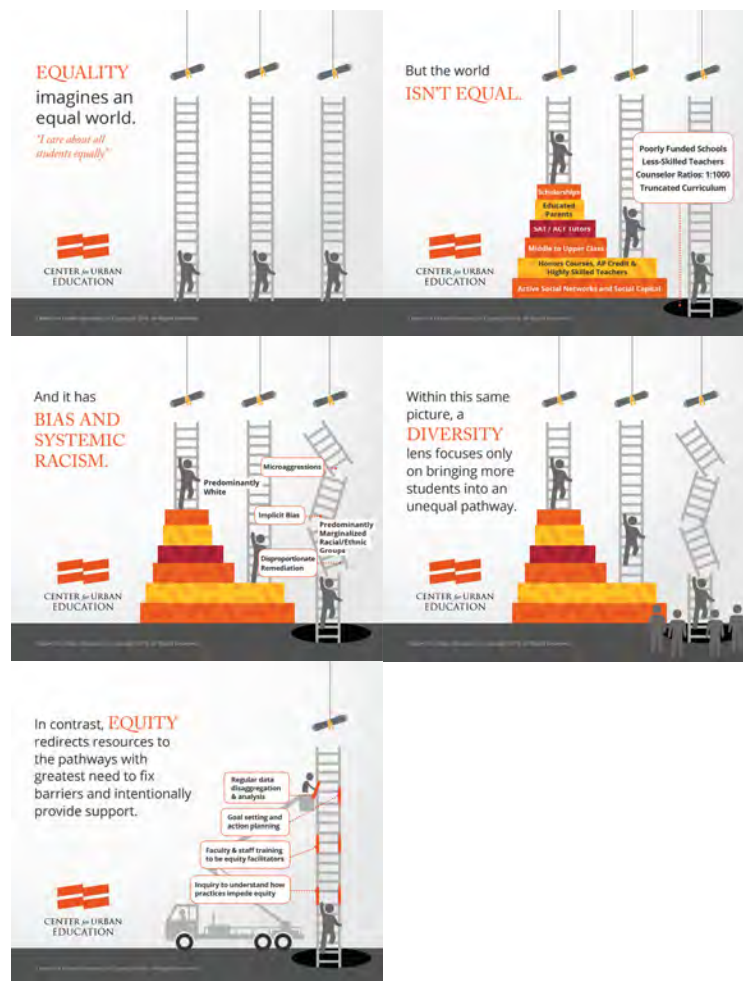


Figure 1.2. Equity and Student Success

Equity centers the outcomes of minoritized students to achieve parity of educational outcomes. Improving student success requires identifying inequities and providing necessary resources and student support.

Source: [Center for Urban Education](#)

Course Design Designing with Equity in Mind

The terms **equity** and **equality** are often used interchangeably, but understanding the distinction between these two concepts is critical to resolving issues that minoritized students face in the classroom. While many educational programs and interventions strive for equality, this infers a level playing field. If everyone is treated the same, everyone will have what they need to be successful. Equality does not consider that some students have to navigate ineffective institutions, discriminatory policies, structural barriers, and inadequate academic and social support to secure an education. These images also show the limitations of diversity as an end goal, since increasing access to a biased and racist system does not remove the predictability of success associated with students' social or cultural identities. The broken ladder and the repaired ladder images speak directly to the central aspect of equity, requiring educators to identify, critically evaluate, and change the policies and practices that students experience as inequitable barriers to their persistence and success.

Equity-minded teaching practices offer targeted support to students, thereby addressing and mitigating the specific barriers they encounter by providing resources that meet their needs. Equity has the power and potential to significantly impact the academic, economic, and social opportunities of students who have been, at best, ignored and, at worst, treated unjustly throughout their educational experiences. Equity work requires thoughtful and intentional effort to identify and address specific issues that targeted groups or individuals experience in the learning environment.

What can be done at the course level to support equity in students' learning experiences? Equity-minded practice requires educators to acknowledge that traditional academic curricula privileges students who have academic, social, financial, and cultural advantages. As institutions of higher learning were intentionally built for Eurocentric, upper-class, Christian males, it is essential to identify ways to include students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, interests, and ways of knowing to create more equitable student outcomes.

To take this into account in your teaching, you might try:

- Naming and identifying specific groups, as well as acknowledging intersectionality, instead of using [coded language](#);
- Transitioning from a traditional, one-size-fits-all curriculum to one that supports culturally responsive teaching practices (See the section "Discover New Approaches for Caring for Students" in the Caring for Students [companion resource](#)); and
- Acknowledging [white fragility](#) and adopting [anti-racist practices](#).

Designing for Accessibility



1
Universal Design for Learning, as a course design strategy, ensures maximum broad accessibility and benefits for all students – not just for those requiring accommodations.

2
According to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, 2008, all learners are legally entitled to accessible courses and course materials. As such, providing accessible materials to all students is an ethical and legal responsibility. Faculty should follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and institutional guidelines to ensure all course materials are accessible.

Designing your course for accessibility means building your course to ensure that everyone, regardless of their abilities, can utilize, navigate, and interact with the course materials and information.

“Accessible,” as defined by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights,⁷ “means a person with a disability is afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and equally integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use. The person with a disability must be able to obtain the information as fully, equally and independently as a person without a disability. Although this might not result in identical ease of use compared to that of persons without disabilities, it still must ensure equal opportunity to the educational benefits and opportunities afforded by the technology and equal treatment in the use of such technology.”

Following accessibility principles and guidelines can help ensure that your course fulfills the ethical and legal obligations to students as



Course Design Designing for Accessibility

regards making information accessible to everyone, no matter ability. The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Online & Distance Learning Knowledge & Practice Community offers five tips for increasing accessibility in digital courses:

- 1 **Use descriptive hyperlinks** that provide information for readers about the hyperlink content (e.g., five tips for increasing accessibility) instead of vague link names (e.g., click here).
- 2 **Include transcripts for audio content.** In other words, ensure that all audio content is also available in text form for all communicated information.
- 3 **Include transcripts and closed captions for all video content.** Closed captions allow readers to view the video and read the content, while transcripts allow users to read the content without requiring them to watch the video.
- 4 **Include alternative text for graphics and images.** All images and graphics that communicate content (decorative images are the exception) must include alternative text to describe the visual content to users.
- 5 **Use only accessible PDF documents.** Accessible PDF documents allow users who rely on assistive technology to access the contents of the document, a feature not available with traditional PDF documents.⁸

Using the principles of [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), a framework to optimize teaching and learning for all people, can help faculty design courses that provide quality accessible learning experiences for neurodiverse students, students with disabilities, and for all students. Just as we would never dream of constructing buildings without sidewalk curb-cut ramps, or only choose to add them on later, whenever an individual in a wheelchair would like to access the building, we should strive to make all course content accessible to everyone, starting with the design phase. While universal design benefits students with disabilities, there are advantages for others as well.

Instructors should, regardless of teaching modality, follow institutional guidelines for accessibility requirements.

Course Design Designing for Accessibility

DESIGN

Implement the principles of UDL in your course to anticipate the diversity of students who may enroll in your course and plan accordingly. These [ten key elements](#) will significantly enhance the accessibility and usability of your course for students with and without disabilities.

ENHANCE

This [comprehensive Accessibility Toolkit](#) is a compilation of helpful resources and tutorials for diving deeper into the key aspects of accessibility, including the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#), the creation of accessible documents, closed captioning and transcription, and commonly used accessibility evaluation tools.

OPTIMIZE

[Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) is a specific framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people, based on scientific insights into how humans learn. The [UDL Guidelines](#) from CAST offer a set of concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful and challenging learning opportunities.

Designing to Create a Community of Learners

Key Takeaways

1
The Community of Inquiry Framework provides a model for finding an optimal balance between teaching, social, and cognitive presence.

2
Create opportunities for students to engage with you and each other.

The Community of Inquiry framework, a research-based model that has been used extensively in online and blended education, highlights the importance of three interdependent elements that facilitate successful learning experiences: **social presence**, **teaching presence**, and **cognitive presence**.

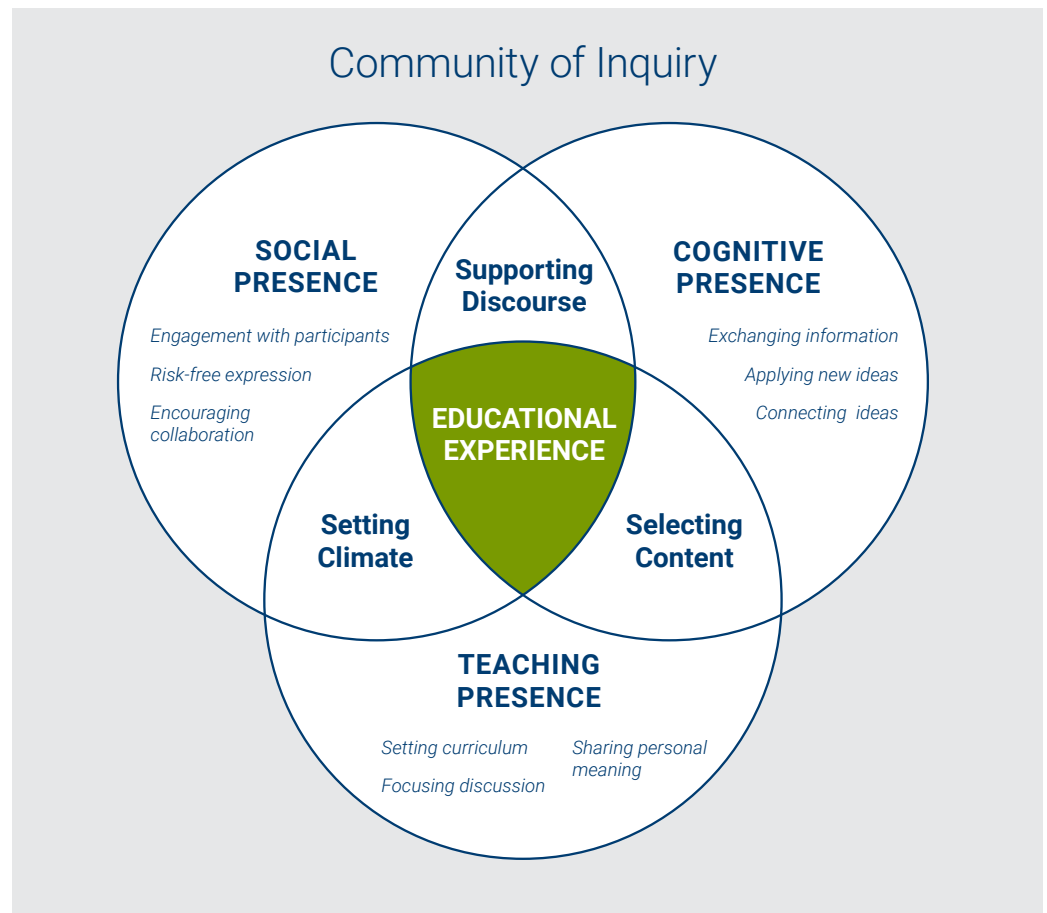


Figure 1.3. The Community of Inquiry Model

This theoretical framework depicts the intersections of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence in creating a meaningful educational experience for students.

Adapted from: Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., Archer, W. (1999) Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2), 87–105

Course Design Designing to Create a Community of Learners

Teaching Presence – how you design your course

- Nurturing the class climate/culture
- Coaching students through learning activities
- Making sure social interactions enhance their learning
- Involving direct instruction to define and initiate discussion topics, build understanding, and share personal meaning

Social Presence – opportunities to be “real people”

- Opportunities to project their personality to the community
- Outlets for creating social cohesion to reinforce learning
- Opportunities for open communication by inviting personal stories and encouraging collaboration to create group cohesion

Cognitive Presence – foster the construction of meaning

- Various avenues for idea exchange and building knowledge together
- Opportunities for students to ask and answer one another’s questions
- **Integration** of course concepts by helping students connect ideas, **exploration** with information exchange, and **resolution** by applying emerging ideas

Instructional Design Principles and Strategies

Key Takeaways

- 1 Use measurable learning objectives/outcomes.
- 2 Align content and assessments to learning objectives/outcomes.
- 3 Consider how your course elements can be developed to be culturally responsive and affirming to your students.

Understanding by Design, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe,⁹ offers a course design planning framework called Backward Design, which invites you to consider the course learning goals.

Starting with the end in mind, it is possible to find an effective blend of content and performance. By placing the learning outcomes at the forefront of the planning process, you can create an assessment strategy that fosters learning and provides ample opportunity for accurate measurement of student learning. Then, you can decide the most effective instructional choices for teaching the content that sets the stage for building an interactive, inclusive learning community.

Each step of the way, consider how your course elements can be developed to be culturally responsive to your students, while breaking down stereotypes and white normative constructs. From the beginning of your design process, consider that it takes intentional effort to prioritize minoritized students' voices that are silenced within education due to systemic racism.¹⁰

Starting with your learning objectives provides a solid foundation. Keep in mind that you will want to [align instruction and assessment](#) with these objectives and practices rooted in the learning sciences in order to ensure a successful course design process.

STUDENT VOICES

Lecture videos are better when shorter, or broken up into sections. Anytime I had to watch an hour-long video lecture, it was hard for me to stay engaged. In a classroom, I have the option of raising my hand to ask questions, where, in hour-long videos lectures, I do not.

Mark Lannaman

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Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Course Design Instructional Design Principles and Strategies

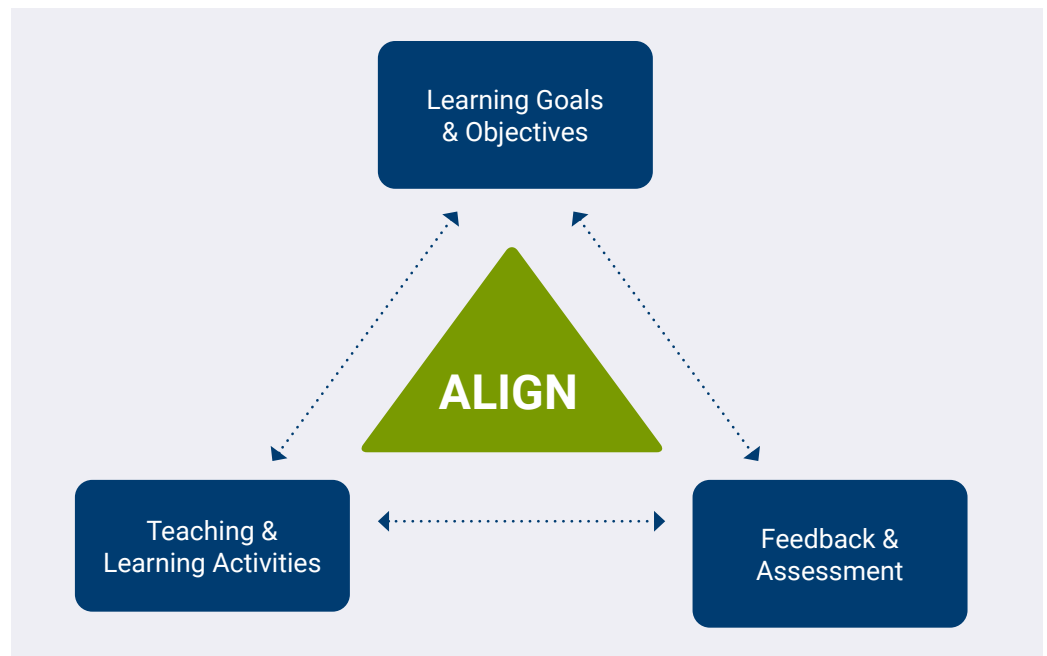


Figure 1.4. Alignment of Learning Goals, Activities, and Assessment

To ensure learning goals drive the design of your course, align learning goals with learning activities and assessment. Note the interrelationship between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment. Adjusting one of these components will require adjustment of the other two components to preserve alignment.

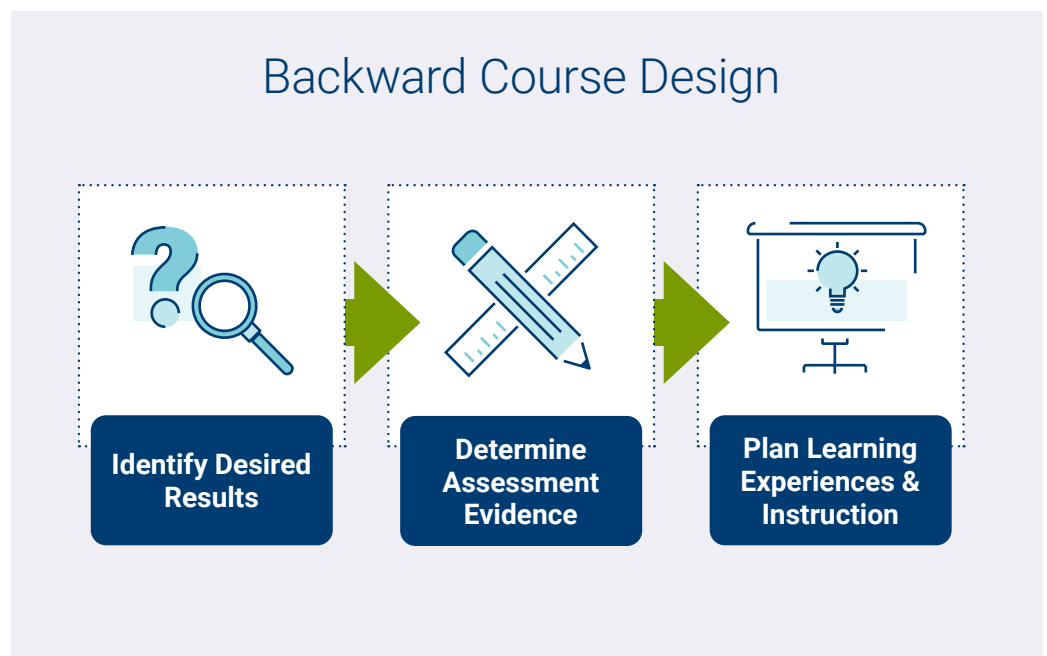


Figure 1.5. Principles of Backward Course Design

Faculty engaging in backward course design begin the design process by identifying learning outcomes. Faculty then use the learning outcomes to determine assessment evidence, which is used to plan learning experiences.

DESIGN

[Review and Communicate Your Learning Objectives](#): Focusing the design of your course around well-written and measurable learning objectives/ outcomes helps both students and instructors by providing a structure for the course and clear goals.

The Backward Design planning framework presented above is an effective start. Here is a short [introduction to Backward Design](#), including a few simple questions to get you started. As you begin a more in-depth and intentional course design process, there are many resources to help you learn more about Backward Design and guide your course development. Here are two that you may find useful: [Understanding by Design](#) and [Backward Course Design](#). Optimal course design is dependent on aligned learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessments. As you evaluate your course for quality and best practices, following the Backward Design model allows you to continuously improve in an effective, efficient way.

ENHANCE

Use your learning objectives to [create a “map”](#) of your course that outlines the associated course content and learning objectives. Mapping your course provides a template to organize content and design for an effective teaching and learning experience. To guide your thinking around culturally responsive course design, use the [Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard](#). Although framed for the K-12 space, it offers criteria to support centering multiple perspectives in the course content, aligning clear prompts and activities that connect student learning to real-life issues and experiences. For those in the STEAM fields, here is the [STEAM Scorecard](#).

OPTIMIZE

Another asset to optimize your course design process is to use the section on “Learning Foundations” in OLC’s [Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice \(QCTIP\) Scorecard](#) to evaluate the quality of your course design. Evaluating quality is an essential part of continuous improvement. Using tools such as the Scorecard helps ensure that your course aligns with research-based best practices (see Instructional Strategies on the following page).

Instructional Strategies

Key Takeaways

1
Consider how your teaching strategies can be enhanced by the thoughtful use of digital spaces to support online learning. Think strategically about the advantages that the online environment affords your teaching and your students' learning.

2
Active learning strategies and findings from neuro, cognitive, and learning research can help shape effective online learning.

3
Culturally Responsive Teaching encourages students to embrace their culture in order to fuel their learning.

Instructional strategies define ways to approach the facilitation of learning. Many of the instructional strategies used in a face-to-face setting can also be used in an online course, such as group discussions, writing activities, and project-based learning. For further development, consider incorporating active learning and other [evidence-based practices](#) into your course design to enhance learning further. Examples include [differentiated instruction](#), inquiry-based learning, service-learning, and project-based learning, which can all be facilitated in online digital classrooms.

Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies

Here are seven teaching strategies that researchers have shown to be beneficial to students:

- 1 Active learning¹¹
- 2 Intentionally scaffolded collaborative learning (especially peer-to-peer learning)¹²
- 3 Learning made relevant by triggering student curiosity¹³
- 4 Provision of more formative practice, including the use of digital learning tools. Student practice of skills in ways that provide timely and targeted feedback to nudge them toward mastery.¹⁴
- 5 Limiting of cognitive overload¹⁵
- 6 Transparency to provide students with a clear understanding of the course's content, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria.¹⁶
- 7 Meta-cognition, self-regulation, and agency through practices that help students learn to be better learners and take control of the learning process.¹⁷

Course Design Instructional Strategies

These additional strategies benefit minoritized students, while remaining impactful and effective for all students:

- 1 Sense of belonging and inclusive environment through practices that enable all students to feel that they and their unique background have a place in the life of the classroom.¹⁸
- 2 Individualized, on-demand support (personalized learning systems, adaptive learning courseware, and searchable just-in-time resources on a website)
- 3 Peer learning supports such as tutors and undergraduate assistants
- 4 Structural supports that ensure student engagement and progress (learning labs, task lists, digital nudges, early-alert interventions, and automated and immediate feedback)¹⁹

Recall that a combination of strategies, groupings, and multimodal approaches is vital to ensure that you are reaching a diverse range of learners. An equity-minded instructional approach, known as culturally responsive teaching, utilizes inclusive curriculum design to connect the realms of the socio-emotional and information processing.

To apply culturally responsive teaching to your courses, you can start by reflecting on culture as a cognitive tool, not only analyzing how culture and diversity are portrayed, but also examining how students' cultures and lived experiences are positioned in the curriculum. You can position cultural knowledge as a cognitive tool to support performance and scaffold learning. This approach requires paying constant attention to the social and cultural capital that African American, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, first-generation, poverty-impacted, multilingual learners, non-gender conforming, and other minoritized students bring to the learning process. Culturally responsive pedagogy creates space within the curriculum that includes and invites cultural displays of learning (e.g., norms, values, beliefs, language, tradition, and art), while designing learning activities that are meaningful and authentic. By foregrounding students' culture in course materials, assessments, and teaching processes, you create opportunities for students to connect new material to their prior knowledge and existing cultural schemas, which strengthens comprehension and retention.²⁰

There has been much research into the connection between neuroscience, brain-based learning, and education. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond²¹ explains how one's culture programs the brain to process data in specific ways. This research can further be used to inform our continued teaching and design practices.

Course Design Instructional Strategies

DESIGN

Review your course learning objectives and use that as a basis for selecting online instructional strategies to employ in your course design.

ENHANCE

Determine what types of active learning strategies can be used in your course, while employing culturally responsive teaching approaches that position cultural knowledge as a cognitive tool, to support performance and scaffold learning.

OPTIMIZE

Adopt inclusive curriculum design to connect the socio-emotional and information-processing realms and strategies from the neuro, cognitive, and learning sciences into your course design.

Course Components

This section includes an overview of course components common across disciplines and course types. Online course components are similar to face-to-face and hybrid courses, but there are special considerations for a successful online experience.

Adaptive Courseware and Digital Learning Tools

Key Takeaways

- 1 Become familiar with the Learning Management System (LMS), along with other available educational technologies your institution offers and allows.
- 2 Select other digital learning tools, such as adaptive courseware, based on your course outcomes and goals.
- 3 Consider the impact that new tools will have on students.

When teaching online, it is helpful to consider designing digital learning spaces that may support face-to-face learning or be the primary “home” for its content and learning. Optimizing a digital learning space can include providing easy-to-navigate signals to access course content, participating in synchronous activities such as live class sessions, providing opportunities for students to engage with peers and with the instructor, and engaging in virtual office hours, online discussion boards, and formative assessments and activities.

The Learning Management System (LMS) is most likely the primary environment for the online portion of your course. Your institution may license an LMS — such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle — or may use free courseware like Google Classroom. By integrating adaptive courseware into your digital classroom, students can be provided with a highly responsive tool that answers students immediately. The responses provide them with feedback offering a personalized learning path to mastery. [Adaptive courseware can be used in many ways](#) to enable a variety of content provision and learning activities, provide opportunities for independent practice, more effectively personalize learning, and provide faculty with valuable data on student learning.

You may also want to consider other technology tools to enhance your course. These tools may be integrated with the LMS or used independently and may be either synchronous or asynchronous. Remember that, with any tool you evaluate for use in your course, your learning goals, not the technology, should be the deciding factor for whether you use it. Beyond learning goals, consider any costs associated with your selected tools and how the tool will be integrated with your course — especially if it is not connected and integrated into the LMS.²² Additionally, evaluate the use of synchronous versus asynchronous tools. While synchronous options like virtual classrooms within the LMS and web conferencing can provide direct interaction opportunities, they also often require more bandwidth for students and regular meeting schedules. Keep in mind that synchronous requirements may be challenging for students with work or family commitments, international students, students on active military deployment, and students joining from other time zones.

Course Components Adaptive Courseware and Digital Learning Tools

For some online learners, flexibility is a crucial benefit, and synchronous meetings may not be possible. You will want to ensure that any synchronous requirements are communicated before or during registration for the course. You should also consider offering other equal means of engaging students, such as recording synchronous sessions and providing opportunities for asynchronous engagement. In an emergent situation, students who have been attending face-to-face courses may also be experiencing disruption in their personal and professional lives, and they may not be able to meet synchronous requirements for a distance course on the same schedule that they had followed on campus. For example, students who are simultaneously primary caretakers, working, and attending classes may struggle to participate in synchronous meetings; therefore, the flexibility of asynchronous options can be essential to a successful experience. Considerations for a wide range of situations and iterative learning from students about how their needs are met are key to covering the needs of learners from a wide variety of backgrounds. Asynchronous tools offer a wide range of options for learning, and you will want to consider costs, technical support (if needed), and the ways in which you will manage deliverables from students on an asynchronous schedule.

When making technology decisions, consider whether the tool will be easy to use or if it will create unnecessary stress for you or your students.



STUDENT VOICES

[Flexibility] is very important for hybrid classes. I got sick a few times during the semester, and I was not given much flexibility with my work/exams. Although it may not be an emergency situation, there are many occurrences in which you cannot necessarily bring a doctor's note to excuse an absence.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



DESIGN

It can be challenging and overwhelming to identify technology tools that meet your needs — especially if you need to do so quickly. [This guide to the top tools used in education](#) can help you find what you need.

ENHANCE

Once you have selected and incorporated technology tools into your online classroom, you can ensure that they are effective through evaluation. This [Checklist for Evaluating Tech Tools, Apps, Software, and Hardware](#) can help you determine how well a tool fits your course.

OPTIMIZE

Evaluation tools like the [OLC Digital Courseware Instructional Practice Scorecard](#), the [Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide Workbook](#), and the [CourseGateway](#) can help you further refine your course technology selections by providing key considerations for evaluation and use.

Course Materials

Selecting Textbooks, OER, and Courseware

Key Takeaways

1
Evaluate course materials for how well they will function in an online environment.

2
Consider media-rich and courseware options for enhancing the learning experience through a variety of course materials.

3
Consider providing students immersive, free learning experiences through the use of [Open Educational Resources](#).

The course materials that you select to complement your course content are an important part of shaping your students' experiences. Typically, textbooks and journal articles are the most common materials. Of course, you can still have these in your online course — but you have additional options to consider. You may also want to integrate assigned materials by choosing online courseware or other online content that easily integrates into your LMS. [CourseGateway](#) provides a selection tool that may help you identify and select appropriate resources, and EdSurge curates a [selection of courseware options](#).

Another option that can provide an immersive, customizable learning experience is [Open Educational Resources](#) designed for online use and the incorporation of multimedia approaches (in addition to being more cost-efficient than traditional textbooks). In addition, there are countless resources, from audio and video selections and interactive games and activities to self-created student learning artifacts that you can use to reinforce learning and keep students actively engaged.

Consider browsing resources such as [Cool4Ed](#), [MERLOT](#), [OpenStax](#), [Khan Academy](#), [VideoLectures.net](#), [iTunesU](#), [Forum Network](#), [OER Commons](#), [CCCOER](#), and [Creative Commons](#) for materials that may help your students learn in the new online environment. Content varies in cost, from no-cost and independently-priced (at a cost either to the student or institution) to subscription-based (either student or institution-based). You should consider any potential costs when selecting content. You will also want to ensure the content you choose is high-quality; aligned with course objectives; and holds depth, range, and interest. Encourage critical thinking, engagement, and reflection from a variety of learners, and be sure to invite and celebrate diverse perspectives to create an inclusive environment for racially and economically minoritized students.

**Course
Components
Course Materials**

DESIGN

Consider what you want to achieve through course materials and explore the options available for your online course.

ENHANCE

Evaluate the materials you are using, and consider options to customize your materials as it makes sense in support of your course objectives and learning activities.

OPTIMIZE

Keep your content fresh and relevant by reviewing existing content and incorporating new materials as appropriate. Consider your selection process and reflect on how well your course materials support your objectives.

Course Organization and Content



1
Consider multimedia options for presenting your course content in effective ways for an online environment.

2
Consider an equity-minded approach by identifying ways to include students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, interests, and ways of knowing in your course.

3
Generate a course blueprint by taking your course map and crafting an outline that includes the elements for each module.

The way that you provide knowledge and facilitate learning — your course content — is crucial when creating high-quality digital learning experiences. Since traditional academic curricula privileges students who have academic, social, financial, and cultural advantages, it is vital to provide and assign course materials that celebrate students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, interests, and ways of knowing in order to create a rich, inclusive learning environment and equitable student outcomes.

One strategy that can enhance teaching presence in an online course is to provide audio and video content that can be developed with relative ease using multimedia applications. Creating micro-lectures along with other multimedia is a great option for designing online course content.

In addition to developing your own course content, you can use content created by [publishers](#) or explore a plethora of open content on websites like [Khan Academy](#), [VideoLectures.net](#), [iTunesU](#), [Forum Network](#), [Merlot](#), [OpenStax](#), [OER Commons](#), [CCCOER](#), and [Creative Commons](#). It is always important to ensure that the content aligns with the course and modular learning objectives and that you have followed [copyright compliance guidelines](#).

Creating your own closed-caption video content, along with video transcripts, is a practical option for communicating course concepts to students. You might also consider providing supplementary written materials or curating content from other sources to help students master course concepts.

Course Components Course Organization and Content

Organize your course content in meaningful and logical ways for students by creating topic-based or weekly course modules. To ensure the effectiveness of the structure of your course, create a course blueprint by taking your course map and crafting an outline that includes the elements for each module. This blueprint helps to organize the content for your online space. Whether it is an LMS or website on which students will access your course content, offering a logical and consistent flow helps them move through the course with ease.

For example:

Module Overview: In your brief overview or introduction, introduce the material, highlight the main ideas or topics, and explain what students will learn.

What You Will Learn: List module-level outcomes here (these can also include your course level objectives that align with this module).

What You Will Do (example):

- Read four articles
- Watch a short lecture about the Hippocratic Oath
- Watch a lecture on ethical theories
- Complete a reading quiz
- Participate in a graded discussion forum

Readings and Media: With descriptions, guiding questions, or focus statements. Introduce the readings, videos, or podcasts with a brief focus narrative that explains its purpose and value to the students. When possible, connect it to course topics, objectives, activities, and assignments.

Summary and Next Steps: In your summary, highlight what students learned, a preview of the next module. Also remind students about anything they need to be working on, and include any invitations to take their learning deeper.

Course Components Course Organization and Content

DESIGN

Identify your course goals, and consider how you can adapt content using multimedia to provide learning opportunities that engage your students. Note that, when infusing a course with additional courseware or media, you should consider access to the tools or platforms, as well as sufficient internet access for students to support your selections.

ENHANCE

Continue to provide media-rich, interactive, and culturally responsive content, curating and refining as you become comfortable with the online course and discover best-fit options for your style and course outcomes.

OPTIMIZE

Create a course blueprint by taking your course map and crafting an outline that includes the elements for each module. This blueprint helps to organize the content for your online space.



STUDENT VOICES

The part about internet [access] is crucial. Some programs were too powerful for my computer, and I had to use my university library. Some students will have to deal with slow internet, as well as technology that is not ideal for newer, more sophisticated programs. And not every student has a work environment where they can focus easily and is not noisy like they would have in a classroom.

Mark Lannaman

Journalism, Georgia State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Welcome and Start Here

Key Takeaways

1
Introducing yourself and your course is just as important in the online environment as it is in a face-to-face setting.

2
Be creative and encourage students to interact with each other and the instructor

When teaching online, it is essential to take the opportunity to introduce yourself and the course, as well as to meet your students and allow them to get to know each other. This introduction not only sets the tone of the course and expectations, but also facilitates trust.

Introduce your course with a “Welcome and Start Here” page to accomplish these goals online.

DESIGN

Create your welcome page. [Here is a short guide to quickly creating a course welcome that hits the essential points.](#)

ENHANCE

Send out a [welcome message](#) before the course starts. You can send an email, post on the LMS, or get creative with a video or other media to make the most of your first interaction with your students. When designing your messaging, remember that students will come into your class with varying needs and preferences, and messaging should be equity-focused from the beginning. Make sure that any used media meets accessibility standards (for example, captions, transcripts, etc.). Ensure that your welcome is inclusive and open to the differentiated contexts from which your students will begin the course.

OPTIMIZE

Identify different methods to welcome students in the online classroom. [Here is a quick resource](#) for some ideas on how you can create a sense of community and help your students become comfortable with you and each other. There are lots of virtual icebreakers that can be easily found with a quick web search — feel free to find something that fits your personality and classroom environment in order to get students engaged from the start.

Syllabus

Key Takeaways

1

The syllabus in an online course serves the same purpose as in a face-to-face course, but includes some unique key elements, such as communication and technology policies.

2

The online environment provides an opportunity to create an interactive syllabus that is fully integrated into the course. Consider multimedia options and how you want the syllabus to be used.

3

Your syllabus can be reimagined by bringing an eye for inclusivity and culturally responsive principles to its creation.

The syllabus in an online class serves the same purpose and has the same elements as a face-to-face course syllabus. However, the syllabus for an online course should include some additional information and may be customized to make it easier to navigate and use. The syllabus is also the first moment to create a welcoming climate and to set the stage for students to be part of a learning community.²³ A simple activity to get to know your students, either through first-week icebreaker activities or a personal artifact or statement, will help you understand the students and the experiences that they bring to your class. [Bryan Dewsbury](#), Associate Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Rhode Island, asks his students to complete a [“This I believe” essay](#) describing the core values that guide their daily lives.



STUDENT VOICES

One professor provided links to multiple tools we needed, some more suited for tight budgets and some on the higher-end. He said any of the brands are fine, and if we cannot afford the cameras, GSU has an office that loans equipment for weeks at a time. I appreciated him going the extra mile to consider that equipment is expensive, and finding cheaper alternatives.

Mark Lannaman

Journalism, Georgia State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Course Components Syllabus

If you must share a standard syllabus created for all faculty teaching the course, still remember that you can add opportunities in the course to make this a living and welcoming document. When creating a syllabus designed for an online course, it is essential to write with clarity and organization to signal how to navigate the digital learning environment and key technology information that offers accessibility alternatives to access learning materials. The Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst outlines [six guiding principles for developing an inclusive syllabus](#). This helpful resource offers multiple strategies for syllabus development, including short videos on each of the following six principles:

- 1 Make the syllabus learning-focused
- 2 Use essential questions and big themes to organize your course
- 3 Align the syllabus with Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- 4 Use inclusive language
- 5 Design supportive course policies to help students be successful
- 6 Ensure that your syllabus is accessible

Be sure your syllabus communicates student support resources to connect students with campus offices that can support their needs for academic advising, student disability services, tutoring, writing center services, career services, technical support, loaner laptops, library services, campus or community food assistance, and housing resources. Providing these resources upfront sets a tone of being equity-forward. It creates a sense of belonging and connects students to needed supports.



STUDENT VOICES

I find it so great when professors provide helpful resources because there are so many things that our universities do not tell us that I find out about through students. Giving cheap/free alternatives to things such as textbooks or other equipment does help the course feel more equitable for students, especially minoritized students.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



DESIGN

Be sure the syllabus is clearly written and thoughtfully organized. In addition, you will also want to make sure that you do the following:

- Set expectations for communication, including your preferred method (e.g., through LMS, Campus Email), the response time (i.e., within one business day), and any virtual office hours that you will hold).
- Provide technology information: What kind of device, software, etc. will students need? Who should they contact for help with technology? What should they do if the LMS (or other tools) is down? You might also consider including any resources available during the crisis for internet access services.
- Ensure that your syllabus is accessible to all students.

ENHANCE

[This guide](#) from the Purdue Repository for Online Teaching and Learning provides an overview of considerations for developing a syllabus for online learning. It is helpful to tell students how and why the course content is relevant to their lives and their future careers to help foster a sense of inclusion. To assist in this approach, download the [social justice syllabus design tool \(SJSTD\)](#) by the Social Justice Pedagogy Team.²⁴

OPTIMIZE

Take it up a notch and [make your syllabus interactive](#). There are many methods and technologies you can use. Consider your course objectives and design and what might be most beneficial to your students. The more you can craft the syllabus to be a useful resource throughout your course, the more valuable it will be.

Course Interaction

 Key Takeaways

1
Design your course to provide intentional opportunities for students to interact with the instructor, each other, and the course content.

2
Intentionally provide instructor presence in your course through weekly announcements, personalized videos, and feedback to students.

Student and faculty interaction are essential quality indicators in an online course setting. Course interaction can be organized into three categories: student-to-student, instructor-to-student, and student-to-content interactions. Instructor-to-student interactions, the extent to which instructors engage with students in an online course, can be achieved with class discussions, daily or weekly multimedia announcements in the LMS, synchronous meetings, virtual office hours, and providing substantive feedback.

For online learners, one of the most critical elements of a course is opportunities for interaction. In designing your course, ensure that you build opportunities for regular and sustained interaction between you and your students and between your students and each other. Synchronous opportunities can be structured through scheduled study sessions, student conferences, group work, or virtual office hours. Asynchronous opportunities include discussion boards, annotating a group document, or conducting peer reviews on one another's assignments. Basic tools in the LMS allow you to do this in ways that are simple and already familiar to many students and instructors.

DESIGN
Establish instructor presence with LMS tools such as announcements and discussion forums.

ENHANCE
Facilitate effective online discussion activities to foster student-to-student and instructor-to-student interaction.

OPTIMIZE
Implement online course activities that include student collaboration and group work.

Assessments

 Key Takeaways

1
Align assessments with learning objectives and course activities/ assignments.

2
Include multiple types of assessments in your course to allow for holistic and diverse opportunities to evaluate learning and performance.

An important component of successful online teaching is developing efficient assessment strategies and methods. Integrating multiple forms of assessment allows students more opportunities to evaluate their performance. It is vital to align learning objectives and activities with the assessments and provide summative and formative assessments. Research shows positive results when students can repeat assessments to achieve optimal results, instead of high-stakes testing. More consistent assessments over short periods of time can help students and faculty see the specific steps at which students may be struggling.



STUDENT VOICES

I have always thought that, if the goal is to have the student learn, why not let them learn from their mistakes, instead of giving them one test and penalizing them? Retaking [tests] would seem like a way for students to know what areas they should study more. Not everyone may receive a 100, sure, but allowing for growth from failure, rather than the stress of poor grades, seems like a great idea.

Mark Lannaman

Journalism, Georgia State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow





STUDENT VOICES

Allowing for your students to learn from their mistakes encourages them to fix their mistakes and better themselves as a student. Moreover, it takes off some pressure and leaves more room for improvement.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



For more information, please visit the [Assessment and Grading Toolkit](#) developed by Every Learner Everywhere and Intentional Futures.

When designing an online course, there are many assessment options and best practices that can enhance both the learning experience and your ability to assess learning.

DESIGN

Develop assessments that can be implemented in the online environment. This video, [Effective Assessment Practices for Online Learning](#), may be helpful, as well as this [basic guide to online assessment](#).

ENHANCE

Design learner-centered assessments that include opportunities for reflection. This guide on [Using Reflection for Assessment](#) can help you implement this technique.

OPTIMIZE

[Design and include grading rubrics](#) for the assessment of contributions to discussions, as well as for all assignments, projects, and collaborations.

Course Management

The successful management of a course involves important components that provide clarity for students and maximize student learning. This section on course management provides information about setting clear expectations for students, creating conditions for effective student-instructor communication, providing academic support resources, setting online-specific course policies, and connecting students to online-specific course resources.

Setting Expectations

Key Takeaways

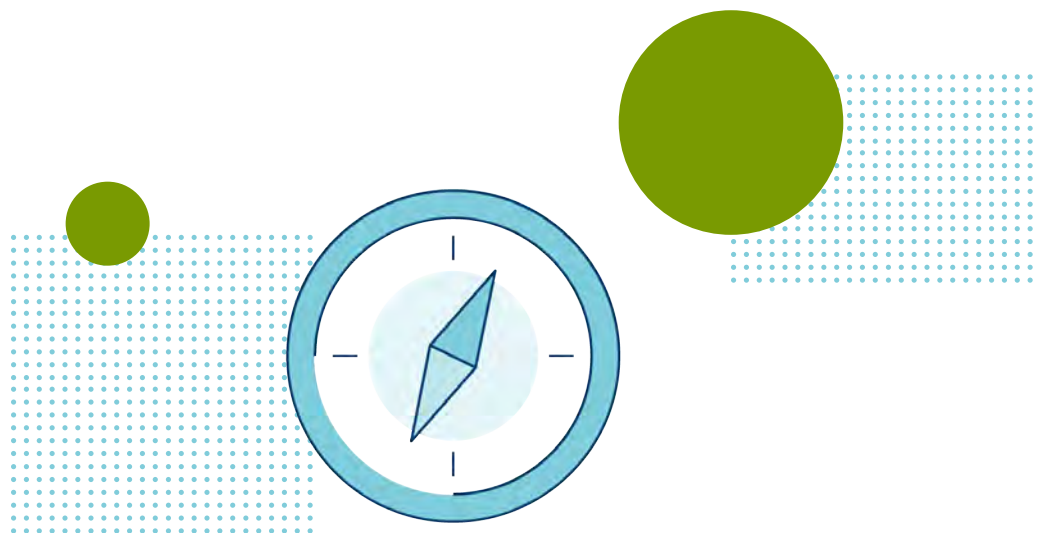
1
Set clear and explicit expectations for your course for both performance and interaction. These clear expectations are essential in the online environment, where there are fewer verbal or behavioral cues than in face-to-face courses.

2
Solicit and incorporate feedback from students throughout the semester to allow students to help shape the course content and ensure that their needs are continuously being met.

In online courses, especially, it is essential to clearly state expectations for performance and interaction. In light of the loss of in-person dialogue, clear communication can be especially important for multilingual learners who benefit from detailed language.

Communicating in a welcoming and supportive manner from the beginning with a personal and course introduction, an approachable syllabus, and an interactive introduction discussion sets the tone for the online class. Expectation-setting can help calm some of your students' anxieties and set the stage for clear communication and a clear vision and understanding of the rhythm of the remainder of the term or semester.

It is also important to provide students opportunities to provide feedback about course expectations throughout the semester. Consider soliciting and incorporating feedback from students throughout the semester or administering a [mid-semester survey](#), allowing students to help shape the course content and ensure that their needs are continuously met.



DESIGN

Course Expectations: Why You Need Them and How to Communicate Them

ENHANCE

Develop an awareness of best practices and what is expected of you as the instructor in an online course.

OPTIMIZE

Identify and implement strategies to manage student expectations. Also, consider a learning pact and have your students add to it. For example, Michelle Pacansky-Brock suggests making a list of what a student can expect from you as the instructor and then a list of what you can expect from each student.

For the teacher:

- “I will regularly communicate with you. I will be flexible.
- I will provide a supportive and trustworthy environment for you to share and discuss ideas with your peers.”²⁵

For the student:

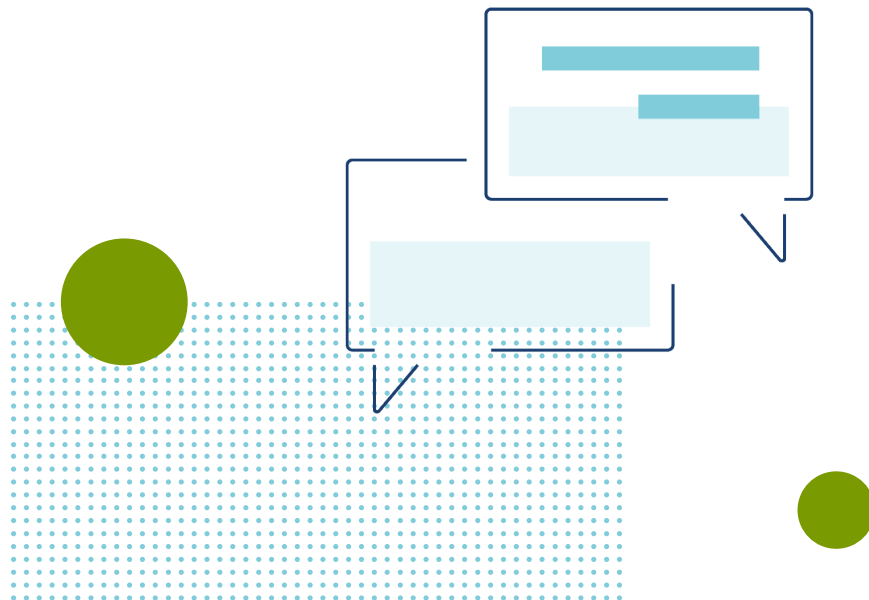
- “You will strive to be an active participant in this course and do your best to meet due dates.
- You will maintain an open line of communication with me.
- You will contact me when you have a concern about meeting a due date.”²⁶

Student-Instructor Communication

 Key Takeaways

1 Provide options and opportunities for students to communicate with the instructor. These opportunities are especially impactful in online courses, in which real-time interaction is limited or unavailable.

Providing opportunities for students to communicate with the instructor in an online course is essential to establishing instructor presence. Students do not necessarily see or interact with instructors in real-time in the online environment. Ensuring that there are adequate opportunities for communication for students is critical, most especially for minoritized students or students who face learning or circumstantial barriers. The most impactful way to understand and identify the needs of your students is to communicate with them regularly and make yourself accessible through email, virtual office hours, study sessions, individual conferences, and other means.



Course Management Student-Instructor Communication

DESIGN

Identify ways to establish effective student-instructor communication by establishing a communication plan. To help you develop a communication plan, consider the following:

- What are your communication preferences and virtual office hours?
- How and when will you provide feedback to your students?
- When will you typically respond to emails, discussion posts, and grade assignments?
- What virtual learning support services are available on your campus?
- Does your institution offer an early alert warning system for at-risk students? If so, implement it in your course.
- What online specific policies are in place at your institution? Consider creating a guide that helps students with appropriate etiquette in the online classroom and any digital literacy and academic integrity guidelines.

ENHANCE

Implement communication best practices to create a sense of community in the online course.

OPTIMIZE

Look for ways to keep the human element present in your online course.

Academic Support Resources

Key Takeaways

1

Providing academic support resources and ensuring that students are aware of them is essential in all course modalities, but critical in online courses. See the [Caring for Students Playbook](#) for specific strategies.

2

Academic support options range from course-level (e.g., office hours, peer learning/tutoring) to institutional (e.g., library, tutoring centers, etc.) and may include using data insights to identify students who would benefit from additional support and direct them to appropriate resources.

Providing students with academic support resources is essential in any course. It is a good idea to give this information freely and without students asking in any modality; however, it is critical in the online environment, where students may not have face-to-face opportunities to seek assistance, and instructors may not have access to the same cues that a student needs help. You should aim to create ways to seek feedback from students and identify early on how students want to be supported. You should be familiar with academic support resources (e.g., study skills courses, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and student disability services) and staff at your institution, so that you can connect students to additional opportunities for assistance.

DESIGN

At a minimum, ensure that students know your communication/appointment policies and any virtual office hours that you hold, and provide clear information for campus-based resources for virtual learning. For example, library services/resources, tutoring services (including general tutoring, math centers, writing labs, supplemental instruction/peer-to-peer tutoring, etc.).

ENHANCE

Provide [supplemental resources](#) that support academic success, including topics like time management, study skills, and test-taking, among others. You should also consider enabling LMS or courseware-based study tools (independent practice, adaptive learning, etc.). Additionally, [peer learning](#) is an option for students to learn, assess progress, and review.

OPTIMIZE

If your institution offers an [Early Alert Warning System](#) to identify students who would benefit most from additional support, engage with this system to create a network of institutional support for your students. You can also consider [indicators](#) and use your course data to identify students needing academic support.

Online-Specific Course Policies

Key Takeaways

1
Provide both general course policies and those specific to online courses to your students.

2
Include information on appropriate etiquette in the online classroom in your course.

3
Consider creating an orientation video or screencast for your course that highlights crucial policies and other information.

Your online course should include specific policies, underlying expectations, and requirements for student participation and course completion, providing students with a clear understanding of their responsibilities as online students. You should consider working with students to define course expectations, including setting class discussion norms to help set ways for students to engage in online dialogue in a respectful manner that validates all voices.

DESIGN

Ensure that your institution's general course policies and procedures are included in your course and course syllabus. Review [Best Practices and Expectations for Online Teaching](#) when considering policies that you may need to include in your course information.

ENHANCE

Create a guide on [appropriate etiquette in the online classroom](#) for your students.

OPTIMIZE

Create an ["Online Student Orientation"](#) overview in your course (section or video) highlighting the key policies.



STUDENT VOICES

Being specific is super important, especially when you are fully online and there is less interaction between professors and students already.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Online-Specific Course Resources

Key Takeaways

1
Ensure that information provided is relevant and up-to-date.

2
Teach digital literacy and make sure that students understand how to identify and use appropriate resources.

The Internet provides a wealth of information and resources. It is important, in an online course, that you are providing relevant, up-to-date information to your learners. You should also raise student awareness and work with students to identify ways regarding how to identify and use appropriate resources.

DESIGN

Understand what types of resources are appropriate for your online class.

ENHANCE

Create a plan or schedule for checking online resources used in your class. This guide, 7 Keys for Successfully Updating Online Courses, can help you efficiently manage this process.

OPTIMIZE

Ensure that your students understand the importance of digital literacy in order to understand the complexities of the web, which are technical, social, cultural, and political.



STUDENT VOICES

It is astonishing when professors still utilize very outdated resources and information (sometimes they even reuse the same assignments for years and years). Using current information makes the content more relatable for students and can provide more diverse perspectives.

Venus Rodriguez

Integrated Health Sciences, Kennesaw State University
Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellow



Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

Evaluation should be an iterative process while the course is in session and also be implemented after an online course is completed. It is important to regularly evaluate and continuously improve the course to ensure that it is up-to-date, relevant, and following current best practices for high-quality online education.

Since its inception in the 1990s, online education has always had its share of skepticism and scrutiny (despite empirical research indicating the quality and effectiveness of online learning).²⁷ This scrutiny adds to the innate need for quality assurance. It is important to keep in mind that there are various widely recognized sets of standards developed by different organizations like [Quality Matters \(QM\)](#), [Quality Learning and Teaching \(QLT\)](#), and others.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement Introduction

The Online Learning Consortium also has the [OLC Quality Scorecard Suite](#), which consists of multiple scorecards for different aspects of online and blended education and provides institutions with the necessary criteria and benchmarking tools to ensure online learning excellence for the entire institution.



Figure 1.6. Overview of the OLC Quality Scorecard Suite

The OLC Quality Scorecard Suite includes a comprehensive set of scorecards to provide institutions with effective tools to benchmark the quality of online learning excellence across their entire institution.

Source: [OLC Quality Scorecard Suite](#)

Course-Level Evaluation

Key Takeaways

1

Become familiar with basic quality standards for online courses as you begin to design your course — regardless of whether you have months to prepare or are going online quickly.

Benchmark your course against a quality framework for opportunities to enhance your course and engage in continuous improvement.

The [OSCQR Course Design Review Scorecard](#) is a course-level quality rubric developed by the State University of New York for reviewing and improving the instructional design and accessibility of online courses based on online best practices. With 50 instructional design and accessibility standards integrated into the rubric, it can be used to identify and target aspects of online courses for improvement. The rubric includes the following categories: course overview and information, course technology and tools, design and layout, content and activities, interaction, assessment, and feedback.

DESIGN

If you are an educator facing the challenge of putting your face-to-face course online in a short time frame, familiarize yourself with the indicators of the OSCQR as you design your online course. This scorecard can help ensure that you set yourself up for a successful course and efficient continued development. However, if you do not have the time or resources to do that, refer to the foundational principles of an evidence-based model such as Backward Design.

ENHANCE

As you run your course online for the first time, identify areas of improvement using the quality metrics of the OSCQR rubric and implement them for the next iteration. You may also consider running through the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard to uncover any areas of your course design choices that can incorporate equity-minded practices: [Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard](#).

OPTIMIZE

Organize a continuous improvement schedule that addresses all sections of the QCTIP (described on the following page) over a series of semesters.

Instructional Evaluation

Key Takeaways

1 Become familiar with basic quality standards for online courses as you begin to design your course – regardless of whether you have months to prepare or are going online quickly.

Benchmark your course against a quality framework for opportunities to enhance your course and engage in continuous improvement.

The [Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice \(QCTIP\)](#) is a comprehensive scorecard that can be used for an in-depth review to validate instructional practices compared to quality standards identified by a panel of experts. This tool, which is designed to evaluate the overall classroom experience, can be used to evaluate teaching effectiveness in several areas, including course fundamentals, learning foundations, faculty engagement, and student engagement.

DESIGN

If you are an educator facing the challenge of putting your face-to-face course online in a short time frame, familiarize yourself with the indicators of the QCTIP as you design your online course.

ENHANCE

As you run your course online for the first time, identify areas of improvement using the quality metrics of the QCTIP rubric and implement them for the next iteration.

OPTIMIZE

Organize a continuous improvement schedule that addresses all sections of the QCTIP over a series of semesters.

Summary and Next Steps

Delivering instruction online and ensuring that students have a high-quality and effective learning experience — whether through an intentional choice to develop an online course or because of an emergent situation — is a process that requires thoughtful design based on evidence-based best practices and proven strategies.

These strategies build upon each other across the different components of a course, the course development or delivery stage, and the instructor's goals for the course.

This playbook provides solid strategies and resources for further development. While as comprehensive as possible, yet remaining accessible for ease of use, you may seek more in-depth information about specific topics and, of course,

there will be ongoing developments in the field overall and as a result of the current COVID-19 situation. Keep an eye out for future resources, and visit the [Every Learner Everywhere Digital Learning Network](#) as a source for ongoing information.

Summary and Next Steps

Additional Resources

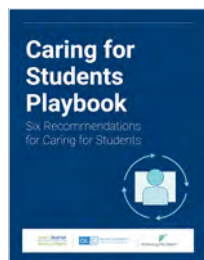
The resources provided in this playbook are broadly applicable and may be used by any faculty member developing or enhancing a course with digital learning tools. This section provides additional information specific to the unique needs of faculty and institutions.

Related Publications from Every Learner Everywhere



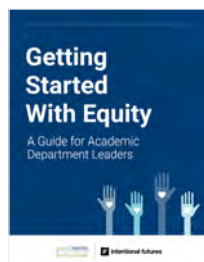
[Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide](#)

This resource is a guide for instructors to center racial and socioeconomic equity and student voice in adopting adaptive courseware. After years of implementing adaptive courseware at various levels of scale in gateway general education courses, course instructors and institutions have several lessons to share with those at the beginning of the implementation process. This extensive resource will provide you with practical strategies and resources to implement adaptive courseware with an equity-minded and student-centered approach.



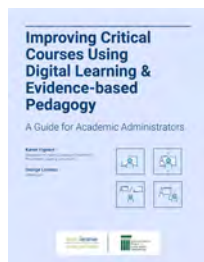
[Caring for Students Playbook](#)

COVID-19 has changed the way we work, learn, and socialize. This playbook is about more than just the pandemic – it is really about taking what we have been learning and reflecting regarding teaching and learning and applying it to our future. We need to continue to put the whole student at the center of our teaching. This playbook has been designed to provide instructors with examples about how to support putting student care into action. The playbook will help us to reflect on barriers we might not have seen before and to give concrete strategies to help address them.



[Getting Started with Equity Guide](#)

Getting Started with Equity is a guide to introduce academic department leaders to the principles, strategies, and teaching practices of educational equity. The guide's purpose is very specific: to serve as the first step for department chairs to develop and curate an educational environment that is simultaneously justice-centered and equity-advancing.



[Improving Critical Courses Using Digital Learning & Evidence-based Pedagogy](#)

Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has ignited the need to improve student success in high-priority courses and to improve equity for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation learners. Academic administrators oversee and support the development of high-quality teaching and learning environments that can seamlessly switch back and forth between in-person and online education.

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