Best Practices in Distance Education: a Handy Guide

What are some of the ways that you can make sure that your online presence is the best it can be for your students? This quick guide will help you with some of the foundations for a Good Moodle.

Course Access

Students who are new to online classes may need extra support to get started. How can you help these students?

- Create an online Orientation or provide a "how-to" section in each course that gives a basic explanation of the elements in the course and how to use them
- Be available to your students, either through the phone, email, office hours or virtual office hours
- Check in with students who seem to be falling through the cracks, sometimes a timely email from the teacher can give them the boost and support they need to hang in there
- Email all students as a group at the beginning of the semester, with contact and other types of info
- Include information in your syllabus for students with disabilities about services and resources they can access
- If you are using materials from a text book publisher, be sure to check that the materials are accessible for students with disabilities, the publisher should have that information

Instructional Techniques

Here are some things to think about as you put together your Moodle:

- How can you create a "student centered" learning environment in your class?
- What sorts of activities and resources can you provide to students that will engage all types of learning styles?
- How will you encourage and support online discussion?
- How will you promote critical thinking and problem solving skills in your course?

Accessibility

Every element of your class must be accessible to every student. This means:

- All multimedia must be captioned or accompanied by transcripts
- All images must have alt text
- Avoid things like odd fonts or fonts in strange colors
- Layout should be consistent for each area of your course, to avoid confusion
- All of your hyperlinks should be appropriately named and formatted
- Consider using accessible PDF files, or using Google docs, for handouts or PowerPoint's, remember, all students may not have Office or be able to download large files.

Copyright Compliance

You may not be aware of the fact that what is considered "fair use" in the brick and mortar classroom may change when you are putting materials or media online. The following information will help ensure that your educational materials and multimedia adhere to copyright laws:

- Copyright laws protect the authors of "original works of authorship, including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and certain other intellectual works."
- Section 107 of the Copyright Act lists four factors to help you determine types of content usage that may be considered Fair Use:
  - The purpose and character of the use, including whether it is for commercial use or for nonprofit, educational purposes.
  - The nature of the copyrighted work.
  - The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyright-protected work as a whole.
  - The effect of the use on the potential market for or value of the copyright-protected work.

Technology

To help students better utilize technology in your course:

- Provide information on hardware, Web browser, and software requirements of the course (can be included in syllabus)
- Provide resources to assist students in navigating and accessing course materials (these can be included in your online orientation)

- Ensure that students can move logically and easily between areas of the course
- Utilize a consistent look and feel throughout the course (consistent text, colors, bullets, and heading styles
- Incorporate a variety of multimedia to enrich student learning

Schedule

Calendars, due-dates, and time-lines can help students schedule course assignments and improve their time-management. Consider the following:

- Course Announcements are clear and accessible for students (Consider using the news forum for this)
- Confirm that all assignments and due dates are clear and consistent
- Ensure that modules are dated accurately if using Weekly Format
- Provide a checklist for each week so that students have a way to ensure that they have completed all of the required work for that week