Criteria for Evaluating
the Quality of Online Courses

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The criteria presented in this guide are based on the national and international experiences of staff in the Instructional Media and Design department at Grant MacEwan College. Although they were developed to assist educators in evaluating the effectiveness of online courses, they may also be used as guidelines for course developers.

Initially, the evaluation criteria may seem overwhelming, but each item was selected because it identifies specific course components, qualities, or procedures proven to be helpful to learners and/or instructors. When using this list, focus first on the major question or questions under each heading. Then, as you review or develop a course, refer to the bulleted items to ensure that these criteria have been met. As you become more familiar with the items on the list, you will need to refer to it less frequently.

Many courses are evaluated by internal and external reviewers. Consider asking each reviewer to evaluate a specific aspect of the online course by focusing on the list of specifications under one heading.

General Information

At the beginning of the course, are learners provided with general information that will assist them in completing the course and in understanding its objectives and procedures?

- If the course is intended for an international audience, the level of reading proficiency (such as a TOEFL score) necessary to complete the course successfully in the language in which it is written is specified.

- A brief description of the course includes a goal and learning objectives and/or outcomes.

- A program map and/or rationale indicates how this course is related to other courses in the program and the credit value of each course.

- Prerequisites and/or corequisites are identified.

- A list of required and recommended resources includes all textbooks, courseware, and online resources necessary to complete the course. If learners must access online databases, instructions are provided for locating and accessing these resources, including password information. If the materials are located in a library, learners are told whether the items are on reserve and, if so, for how long.

- Special requirements are identified, such as recommended modem speed or Internet bandwidth, hardware (computing speed and storage capacity), software (including an e-mail program adequate for handling assignments and other attachments), and plug-ins. Online sources for these items are provided.

- The estimated time required to complete the module and/or course is stated. If feasible, a timeline is provided that outlines dates by which specific activities must be completed.

- Guidelines for participating in online discussions, also referred to as "netiquette," are provided, as well as suggestions for handling incoming e-mail, e-mail attachments, viruses, and e-mail filters.

- Learners are informed about group-work activities, the guidelines for forming groups, grading criteria for group participation and assignments, and their responsibilities as group members.

- The introduction to the course takes into account the learners' backgrounds, ability levels, and expectations, including their personal learning goals and objectives, or specifies the attributes of the learners for whom the course is designed.

- The availability of technical support is stated, and links to online technical information are provided. The hours during which technical support is available are clearly identified, including the time zone.

- The availability of the instructor is specified, as is the turnaround time for responses to learners' questions.

- Learners are directed to a source for answers to "frequently asked questions" pertaining to online learning. This source may provide information covering many of the items listed above, as well as items related to plagiarism, virus protection, and firewalls.

- Learners are informed about their right to privacy and the conditions under which their names or online submissions may be shared with others.

- Learners are directed to a Web site that helps them determine whether online education is appropriate for them.

- The developers and reviewers of the course are listed. Brief biographies may be provided to assure students of the developers' knowledge and expertise.

- A copyright statement or disclaimer clearly identifies the owner(s) of the course and the source(s) of the material students are about to use.

Accessibility

How accessible is the course material? Can learners find information quickly?

- The function of each icon or button is explained and/or is naturally evident to the learners.
- A detailed table of contents includes objectives, learning outcomes, or topics.
- Every section of the course or module begins with a preview.
- Every page is linked to the previous page, the start of the module, the beginning of the course, and to e-mail so that learners may contact instructors and other learners for clarification and discussion. Some course management systems do not allow designers to place a link on every page, but links may be placed on the screen frame or interface page.
- Links within the course are provided to other parts of the course.
- Page headers or footers identify where the learner is in the course.
- An index lists key words or topics.
- A glossary defines unusual or technical terms used in the course and may provide links to sources of supplementary information.
- Consideration is given to learners who may have visual or auditory challenges.

Has the instructor ensured that the infrastructure and server can handle the number of learners enrolled in the course?

Organization

Is the material organized in such a manner that learners can discern relationships between parts of the course?

- The table of contents gives an accurate indication of how the material is arranged.
- The organization or sequencing of the content is appropriate for the subject matter and the intended audience.
- Units of instruction or topics are divided into subunits or subtopics.
- Subtopics are related to main topics.
- The organization of components is consistent throughout the course. For example, each module may have the following sections:

introduction, objectives, pretest, directions, explanatory text including learning activities such as case studies, suggested answers for learning activities and links to additional information, module summary, self-test, self-test answers, references, additional readings, and module assignment.

- Required course elements are clearly delineated from supplementary elements.
- References to other parts of the material are correct.
- Links to other parts of the course or external sources of information are accurate.

Language

Is the level of the language used appropriate for the intended audience?

- The writing style is clear and direct.
- Clear directions are given.
- Familiar or common words are used.
- A conversational tone employs the second person: *you*, not *the learner*.
- Verbs are in the active, not passive, voice; for example, *Maslow developed the theory,* not *the theory was developed by Maslow.*
- Sentences are short.
- Paragraphs are brief.
- Numbers are used to identify sequential steps in a task or process.
- Bullets are used to list items that are not prioritized or sequential.
- The tone of the writing is supportive and encouraging.
- Terms are used consistently.
- Abbreviations and symbols are defined.
- Bullets, dashes, and numbers are used consistently.
- Instructions are stated simply and are easy to understand.
- Spelling and grammar are consistent and accurate.
- The writing conveys no explicit or implicit bias relative to age, culture or ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual preference. However, biased opinions may be included as examples if they are relevant to the course content.
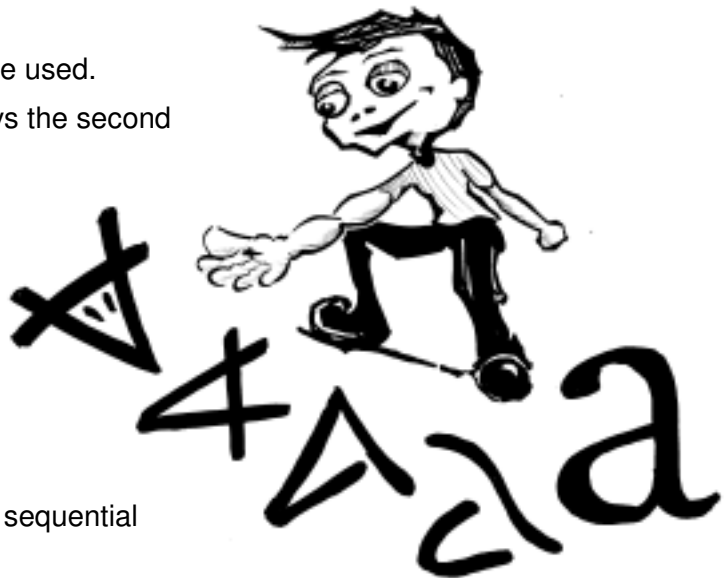
Has the course material been edited for grammar, language, and content verification?

Layout

Does the layout facilitate learning? Is the material attractive and appropriate for the course content and the intended audience? Note that it may be impossible to design a page that is displayed in the same manner on every computer screen; if the equipment and software available to the learners are unknown, a simple layout is best.

- The layout is appropriate for the content and intended audience.

- Navigational icons or cues are used consistently.

- The typeface is appropriate for the content and common to all programs and computers, such as Times Roman.

- Bold-face type is used sparingly, to highlight important terms, for example.

- Capital letters and underlining are not used for emphasis. Underlining is used only for hyperlinks.

- Key words are highlighted, especially when they are first used.

- Headings and subheadings are used to organize content.

- The format is uncluttered and includes white space.

- Ragged right margins are used or letters are kerned (evenly spaced on the line).

- The contrast between text and the background material makes the text legible.

- Colour is used effectively.

- Graphic elements such as diagrams, tables, and photographs illustrate or clarify information presented in the text.

- Illustrations can be seen easily on a computer screen, and JPEG files are used to accommodate different download speeds.

- Text explaining a graphic is aligned with the non-textual material.

- To assist those who may use screen readers, a description of each illustration is available as an image tag.

- Frames are used effectively to provide a consistent format.

- The material is displayed attractively.

Goals and Objectives

Are goals and objectives provided to outline learning expectations at the beginning of the course and, where appropriate, at the beginning of each module? If you are using a

constructivist approach, you may ask your learners to select their own goals, objectives, content, learning strategies, resources, and evaluation scheme.

- Goals and objectives cover course content and are related to the program of study.

- They are relevant to the subject matter and to the "real world" in which the content may be applied.

- Objectives specify learning outcomes related to knowledge, skills, competencies, behaviours, and/or attitudes.

- Appropriate action verbs are used in goals and objectives. The accomplishment of objectives should be measurable; therefore, vague words such as "understood" and "realize" are not used.

- Objectives state clearly and concisely what must be done.

- Different levels of outcomes are stated, including those that call for critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

- Goals and objectives provide a discernable sequence of expectations.

Course Content

Is the content appropriate, given the subject matter and the learners' backgrounds and abilities? If you are using a constructivist approach to your online course, you may want to substitute the term "learning experiences" for the word "content" below.

The content is:

- Directly related to learning objectives

- Complete, providing all the content or learning experiences needed to achieve the learning objectives

- Appropriate to the learners' characteristics (ability and maturity level) and experiences

- Comparable and at least equal in rigour to similar on-campus courses

- Accurate

- Relevant

- Current

- Broken into small, incremental learning steps

- Presented in a logical sequence

- Related to other material the learners may have studied or experiences they may have had

- Illustrated by examples and/or case studies when new information is presented

- Linked to other sources, with reading assignments clearly specified

Are all quoted materials cited correctly? Has permission to use copyrighted material been obtained?

Was the course reviewed by a second content expert?

Instructional or Learning Strategies and Opportunities for Practice and Transfer

Do the instructional or learning strategies enable learners to learn effectively in a variety of ways and to engage in activities that promote practice and the transfer of skills?

- Instructions or directions are clear and concise.

- Learners are told which activities must be performed synchronously and which may be performed asynchronously.

- Learners are told whether learning activities are sequential or whether they can be completed in any order.

- Learners are informed about their own responsibilities in online learning.

- Expectations are clearly specified for participation in collaborative or team-based learning activities.

- Procedures for grouping learners for team-based learning activities are specified.

- Deadlines are specified, and the consequences of missing deadlines are clearly stated.

- A variety of instructional or learning activities are used to promote interactivity. These may include online discussions, online conferencing, collaborative assignments, and listserv participation.

- Illustrations, photographs, animations, and other forms of multimedia are used to present facts and reinforce concepts. Note that if multimedia material is built into a course, learners may need advanced computer hardware and software, as well as a high-speed Internet connection. If receiving multimedia on a CD-ROM or DVD is an option, this must be stated, as well as any additional costs involved.
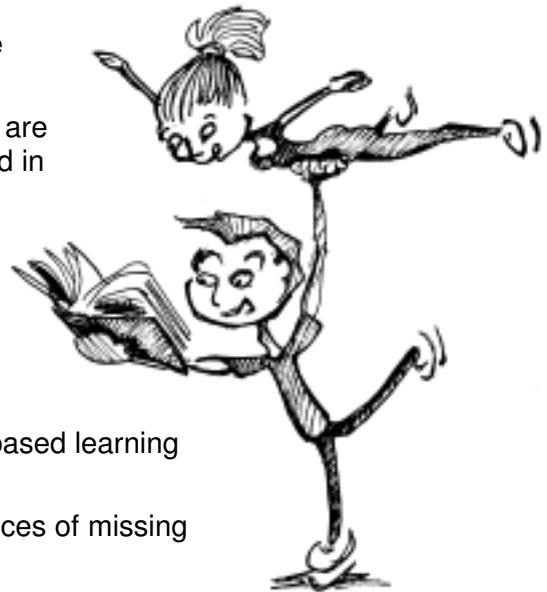
- Learners can select activities that are relevant for them, as the activities have been designed with their ages, cultural backgrounds, and experiential needs in mind.
- Learners can proceed at a pace that is appropriate for them and can repeat sections as often as they need to.
- Activities engage and motivate the learners. Learners must frequently respond to questions, select options, provide information, or contact others.
- Activities develop appropriate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills.
- Activities encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
- Activities and materials are presented sequentially in order of difficulty.
- Learners are encouraged to interact with others and benefit from their experience and professional expertise.
- Learners are linked to resources beyond the course material.
- Activities are sequenced logically, as in a hierarchical or chronological manner.
- The number of activities is sufficient to support learning.
- Activities are realistic and appropriate and can be performed with the resources and time available to the learners.
- Frequent opportunities are provided for practice and knowledge transfer.
- Constructive, relevant, and frequent feedback is provided to promote clarification, elaboration, and transfer.
- Summaries are provided throughout the material, particularly at the end of topics, lessons, and modules.

Is the instructor primarily a facilitator of learning, rather than a provider of content?

Learning Resources

Are the learning resources accessible, appropriate, and accurate?

- Learning materials are appropriate for the learners and the subject matter.
- Lists of learning resources are divided into "required" and "optional" categories.
- Various learning resources are used to ensure compatibility with learners' different interests, abilities, and learning styles.
- Multimedia clips, such as audio and video clips, are included only if the learners have access to the appropriate hardware and software and these items are specified at the beginning of the course. If students have purchased a computer within the last two years, this should not be an

issue.

- The format of multimedia materials is specified, and a direct link to a required plug-in is provided.

- Learning resources reflecting different points of view are provided when appropriate.

- The resource material is accurate, current, and related to the course content.

- A bibliography or reference list includes a variety of material such as Web links (URLs), books and journals, CD-ROMs, and videos.

- Links are provided to material within and external to the course.

Evaluation

Are the evaluative activities feasible, relevant, accurate, and congruent with the objectives, content, and practical applications of the content?

- Learners are given clear expectations and criteria for credit assignments. Examples of assignments that meet the criteria may be included for students to review.

- The number of assignments and their due dates are reasonable.

- Evaluation and grading procedures are clear and explicit.

- Appropriate links to institutional policies on grading and evaluation are provided.

- The relationships between course learning outcomes, evaluation strategies, and course assignments are evident to the learner.

- The relationship between individual assignments and the final course grade is clearly specified.

- Detailed step-by-step instructions are provided for each evaluative exercise.

- Guidelines for submitting assignments are provided.

- Students are informed about the criteria that will be used to evaluate their participation in online activities such as discussion groups.

- A variety of feasible and content-relevant assignments or evaluative exercises are provided.

- The evaluative exercises are relevant to the learners and the career or profession they may pursue.

- Learners are able to track and evaluate their own progress. Self-tests are similar to the final evaluation instruments.
- Criteria and procedures for peer review and evaluation are clearly specified if these elements are included in the course.
- Learners are informed about the consequences of plagiarism and the failure to properly cite copyrighted material.
- Learners are told when they can expect to receive feedback from the instructor.
- Evaluation procedures are congruent with the objectives and reflect any priorities that have been established for the objectives.

Overall

- Is there evidence that the course has been piloted and that learners can achieve the objectives of the course?
- Has the course been reviewed by experts in content and design?
- Is the course up-to-date – current in both content and technical aspects? When was it last revised and the URLs updated?
- If the course will be used by instructors who did not participate in its development, can the course be modified? If so, what permission is needed before this modification can occur?

Online learning is the latest trend in education. Its success will depend on the quality of its instructional design and the academic and technical support provided to learners and instructors. This document, as well others such as the *Canadian Recommended E-Learning Guidelines* available from www.FuturEd.com, will help you ensure that online learning is successful.

The above criteria were reviewed by a diverse group of professionals:

- Wayne Baillie, South Shore District School Board, Bridgewater (Nova Scotia)
- Maureen Baron, English Montreal School Board, Montreal
- Cathy Conroy, Athabasca University, Athabasca
- Rod Corbett, University of Calgary, Calgary
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