Rider University Online E-coaching Tips – May 2009

Tip One: Getting Your Online Course Ready

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Introduction

If you are getting ready to teach an online course and would like a concise summary of what to do, this tip is for you. This initial e-coaching tip has four sections that focus on the basics in preparing for an online course. Obviously learning how to teach well in an online environment takes time and practice, so this is just a first step.

The four sections are:

- Section One: Some Preliminaries
- Section Two: Tips for Course Beginnings — Course Elements, Syllabus, and Weekly Rhythm
- Section Three: Getting Started with Questioning
- Section Four: Developing an Assessment Plan

SECTION ONE: SOME PRELIMINARIES

Important Companion Resources

The first companion resource that you want to be sure to become familiar with is the set of *Ten Best Practices for Teaching an Online Course for the First Time*. Be sure to keep that handy as you prepare your course. (This document should accompany this tip or an earlier version is on the net at www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tenbest.html.) These best practices summarize the faculty behaviors and tasks that make a significant difference in student's learning and satisfaction with online learning!

A second companion resource is *Ten Core Principles for Designing Effective Learning Environments: Insights from Brain Research and Pedagogical Theory* (Boettcher, 2007). This is available on line in both text and webcast form at innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=54&action=article. (Complete a free registration form and it is available.)

Two additional resources are specific to Rider faculty and one is essential to creating your online course site. The essential resource is a CCS Distance Learning (DL) course

template for your use in Blackboard. This template replaces the generic template that is used in setting up the course site once it is a "live" course. What you will want to do is download the zipped file of this template, available in the template itself, and upload it into your live course site.

This template is organized with the usual items on the left menu, such as the announcement tool, syllabus, other course tools, faculty info, etc. The very top button is a "Start Here" link. This links to a section with completed course resources such as a link to a Blackboard student manual, a "Rider One Stop" that links to a web site for all Rider services. If you are new to online learning, it is best to click on the link, titled "New to Online Learning" that leads to a brief set of very useful hints and guidelines. The other top link is Syllabus link that provides starting points for ten sections of a syllabus.

The second Rider-specific resource is a set of resources for learning about online learning. These resources exist in a Blackboard organization site called Redesign for Online with the course identifier of R4O. This site is set up as an online course and any faculty who receives a DL grant is given a student account in this class. More info about this course is available from Tim McGee <tmcgee@rider.edu>, the Associate Director for Faculty Development. You have many choices in how to use this course and the course materials. First, it can provide a quick and easy look at the components and pieces of an online course from a student perspective. In the Course Information section, there are examples of course goals, communication strategy, expectations and grading strategies. In the Additional Resources section there are examples, references and links to more resources on designing an online course.

Time for Preparing an Online Course

If you only have a few weeks to get ready for teaching an online course, you may want to develop a schedule for yourself to commit to a day a week for focusing on this preparation. This can be wise as there is much to do prior to your students "arriving" at your course! This part of an online course preparation generally requires a minimum of about 20 hours— if you are familiar with the tools. If the tools are new to you, you will also be building new habits and processes, and then preparation will usually take a little longer. It is common for this preparation to take closer to 40 hours over two or three weeks if you are preparing an online course for the first time. If you are a perfectionist, you may be frustrated, and feel you

need two or three times that time, but be patient and accepting and just do the basics for the first time around.

During the first cycle of an online course, the time in preparation and delivery is similar to the first time teaching a new course in the face-to-face environment. The primary difference is that more must be done before the students arrive — excited, curious and a little nervous at your course site!

Entering the world of online teaching and learning can cause fear and trepidation and a feeling of being overwhelmed as you venture into the unknown. However, if you have been an effective instructor in the face-to-face environment you will soon adapt to the new environment with a little time and a little practice. Your first step is to focus on the basics of creating discussions and a set of learning experiences that engage and challenge your students. Be reassured, the first phase of your course is the most work intensive time for you!

Learning Experiences Framework

Before launching into the getting ready tips in this document, here is a framework for teaching and learning to use as you design your course. This Learning Experiences Framework has four elements: Learner, Mentor, Knowledge and Environment. Any variable for teaching and learning belongs to one of these elements. For each learning experience you design for your course, such as discussions, readings, or short assignments, you can use the four elements in this framework as a check to ensure you have thought of the learner tasks, the resources, the environment and the instructor tasks. More on this framework is in the Ten Core Learning Principles resource. This same Learning Experiences framework can help in the design of your entire course, a certificate program or degree program.

The next section provides three tips for getting your online course ready. Each of the tips begins with the questions commonly asked by online faculty. The tips then describe practical steps and actions supported by theory and research.

SECTION TWO: TIPS FOR COURSE BEGINNINGS — COURSE ELEMENTS, SYLLABUS AND WEEKLY RHYTHM

The three tips in this section focus on the preparation of the essential course elements. Here is a list of the tips.

- Rider Tip #1: Course Launch Preparations — The Absolute Basic Preparations of an Online Course
- Rider Tip #2 How an online syllabus is different than a syllabus for a face-to-face course
- Rider Tip #3 "Getting into the Swing" of a Course — Is there an Ideal Weekly Rhythm?

Rider Tip #1-A Course Launch Preparations — The Essential Course Elements of an Online Course

This tip answers questions such as

- What course elements, such as a syllabus and assessment plans, are absolutely necessary to have ready for students before the *start* of a course?
- What course elements should be ready-to-go for a faculty member to feel *comfortable* about starting an online course?

Tip Introduction

This tip identifies the course elements that are critical for the launch of the course. This tip includes a *To Do List for Preparing an Online Course* and a chart listing the elements of a course and the description and role of each element.

Critical Course Elements

The four core course elements that absolutely must be completed for an online course are the *syllabus*, the *weekly plans* and *discussion postings* for the first weeks, and the *course site*. The syllabus is a familiar part of any teaching preparation for faculty. Building the other online course components is less familiar, but most have an analog in the face-to-face class. Just as a new face-to-face course goes through a gradual formation faculty can anticipate that it generally takes about three cycles of teaching a course for it to be really "developed." During these initial three cycles, faculty develop a new set of teaching behaviors for guiding, mentoring, and assessing students in an online environment. Here is a brief description of the critical course pieces. See the chart for more detail.

Syllabus. The syllabus for an online course performs the same functions in an online course as for a face-to-face class, but even more so! Providing a bird's

eye picture of the whole course so that students can plan their lives is essential to learners having a sense of control.

Weekly Teaching Guides. When planning a face-to-face course, many faculty devote significant time to creating and developing lectures. For online teaching the time spent in preparing lectures transforms into preparing short text or audio or video mini-lectures, developing and managing threaded discussions and monitoring other student spaces, such as forums on the course site. Lectures in the face-to-face class are the primary channel for the faculty-to-student dialogue. This is important to the "teaching presence" as these lectures convey the special expertise and personality of the instructor. In the online classroom, the equivalent teaching presence is expressed in the weekly plans, teaching guides, discussions and faculty comments and observations.

Weekly teaching guides are short text, audio or video pieces that introduce the goals and purposes and activities for the week. These short pieces often provide the rationale for the choice and design of the learning experiences and a brief introduction to the core concepts. Creating short personal videos is so easy now that some faculty are preparing short mini- lecture videos and posting them on YouTube! For example, the short video introductions prepared by Tony Picciano of Hunter College for graduate programs in education are generally about two to six minutes long. Part of the high value of these videos is the opportunity to hear as well as see the instructor.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAj5uBKyqv8

However video weekly teaching guides are not critical! Some faculty use this tool when visual graphs or pictures are helpful for conveying the particular content being discussed.

Discussions and rubrics. The discussion board in an online course is the equivalent of a whole class or small group discussion in a campus class. The discussion board is where dialogue and discussion takes place. The student postings in discussion boards and in other places such as blogs and wikis is where faculty "see" their students. Rather than seeing their students' eyes and faces, the discussion postings are even more revealing of what the students know or think they know and may be about to think! Investing time developing

good questions for the discussion boards and planning out the rubrics and evaluation of the discussion boards makes a real difference in how quickly a learning community starts to form. Experienced online faculty will plan out most if not all of the discussions before a course begins. This is recommended, but not essential for the first online course for a faculty mentor. If you are new to online learning, aim to complete at least the first half of the course discussion questions with the intent that the remainder of the questions can be completed after the course begins. One of the key differences between online and face-to-face teaching is that making changes at the level of assignments or processes is more difficult. If an assignment is not clear or poorly designed students in the face-to-face environment communicate this quickly and often loudly. In the online environments students discover and encounter difficulties by themselves and the feedback and correction loop can take longer.

Course site. The campus classroom serves as a gathering place for interactions, sharing learning experiences and small and large class activities. In an online course these gatherings take place 'online." The online classroom for you is your Blackboard course site. This is where you and your students gather together, share information, ideas, activities and learning experiences. You as the faculty member, and learning director serve as the hub, the host, the glue of the learning community

More on your course site preparation is below in the "To Do List."

To Do List for Preparing an Online Course

You may find this summary *To Do List* useful to you as you develop your online course.

1. At Rider, the course site is automatically generated with a generic campus course template. What you will want to do for your online course is use the customized Distance Learning Template used by the College of Continuing Studies. You can request this template from Boris Vilic at <bvilic@rider.edu> the Dean of the College of Continuing Studies or you can access the DL template in the Course Documents folder in the CCS Distance Learning BB site. This template includes a "Start Here" icon for students that links to boilerplate information for library access, technical support, and relevant contact information. One rule of thumb which is a

time-saver for everyone is making certain this standard information is upfront, very visible and repeated in two or more places so that the students know whom to contact for what type of question!

2. If you have a syllabus designed for a face-to-face version of your course, start with your existing syllabus. Review your performance goals for your course and see if you want to revise or modify them for your online learners. If you can, review the course goals for any prerequisites or for courses following your course. A concise starting point for a refresher on instructional objectives that you may find useful is one of the links in the *Additional Resources* in the Rider Redesign for Online course. It is called *Planning for Instruction: Instructional Objectives*. Another resource to guide you in your review of learning goals is Information About Behavioral Objectives and How to Write Them from Florida State University. Reminder: Be sure to incorporate an activity in the first week that requires students to review the required learning goals and to set their own personal goals.
3. Select and review textbooks. If you have a choice between a textbook with digital content and one that does not, choose the textbook with a set of rich expanded materials on line and one that provides core content in a variety of formats. Some faculty are choosing not to select textbooks, but choose a wide set of accessible resources on the network. The legality of what can be "linked to" or copied fully to a course site can be complex and confusing. A set of information resources on *Intellectual Property for Teaching and Learning* is at http://www.rider.edu/2559_5876.htm. (Third link down in left menu.) When in doubt and when possible, just link to a resource while you sort out the complexities of making a copy in your course site. For additional help on copyright questions, you can feel free to contact Tim McGee <tmcgee@rider.edu>.
4. If you adopt any resources for core content, be sure to make certain that online students will be able to order them easily with appropriate speed.
5. Prepare your syllabus — using this tip and the other tip focused on the syllabus. Part of preparing your syllabus will be to identify the 8 – 10 modules for your course.
6. Be sure you can access your course site and familiarize yourself with the course template. Obviously you can make changes in the template if you feel that would be beneficial for your particular course.

7. Prepare your assessment plan, being sure to have multiple points of assessment and including points for discussions, quizzes, etc.
8. Plan out the full course schedule, being sure to take note of universal holidays, etc. Plan assignments so you can get feedback to your students in a reasonable time. Design your course with regular weekly rhythm so that you and your students can schedule course work predictably.
9. Prepare discussion postings and post them in the course site. Prepare the rubrics for the postings and include them in the assignment area. The library of ecoaching tips has some examples of rubrics and more will be in future Rider tips.
10. Review actions and plans for the week before the course starts and the next three-four weeks.
11. Ask for feedback from another instructor or use the *Quality Matters* (QM) rubric from http://qminstitute.org/home/Public%20Library/About%20QM/RubricStandards2008-2010.pdf.

In the midst of getting your course ready it is easy to forget how important it is to complete your own getting acquainted posting. Be sure to include a picture of yourself, your favorite food or current book or other introductory info. For more about reminders for the first week, see the ecoaching tip, Five Simple Reminders about Course Beginnings.

Table 1. Elements of an Online Course

Course Elements and Pieces	Description
Syllabus	Your syllabus is your overall plan for the course with performance goals and requirements. A syllabus usually includes an overview of the course goals, a description of the core content resources (textbook, readings, etc.), the course schedule, and assessment plan. A syllabus may also contain the boilerplate information on policies and procedures, library access, technical support, and contact info for non-course specific questions.
Content resources, including textbook (Often a section of the syllabus)	The content resources include required resources for core content and initial application of core concepts, and recommended starting points for resources for more complex customized and personalized learning experiences.

Assessment plan (Often a section of the syllabus)	The assessment plan summarizes the assessment activities for assessing student learning and ideally maps the assessment experiences to the performance goals and requirements. Online assessment plans include multiple assessment experiences, including low-stakes quizzes, peer responses and reviews and high-stake projects and products.
Papers, projects and quizzes	Papers, projects, and quizzes are usual components of an assessment plan. These are the products of a learners' learning. The requirements for each of these are in the assessment plan. However, the directions and specifications for projects and papers are often separate documents; the quizzes, if any, are within the quiz section of the course management system.
Schedule of class activities and events	This is an overall course calendar that summarizes the course activities. This course calendar usually needs fine-tuning to ensure a balanced course design. A balanced course design builds in balanced dialogue, a range of individual and group activities, and synchronous and asynchronous events. Learners use this course calendar to integrate their life events over the term of a course.

Online classroom - Course Site	The course site is the online classroom. This is where learners and faculty gather for the course experiences and activities. Getting a course site ready for an online class means getting the syllabus ready, the resources and activities all prepared. The resources include the teaching guides, the discussions and planned individual work detailed below.
Teaching guides	This is a set of introductions and guides for each of the topics and modules of the course, setting out the requirements and specifications for student action and learning. These teaching guides are part of the prepared teaching presence.
Discussions & interactions	This is a set of catalyst discussion questions, usually a set for each week. These questions focus on the core concepts and performance goals of the course. These discussions are the means by which community grows, develops and flourishes.
Individual work & reflection	This is the learning work that students complete, more or less on their own. It is the work to be done during their study time, reading, writing, researching or collaborating with another learner or study group. The resources, learning outcomes and goals of these activities are designed in broad terms by the instructor, but the instructor is generally not present while the learner is doing the work.

Quality Standards for an Online Course

The following section is not absolutely required for launching an online course, but it is a good rubric containing the quality standards for an online course. If possible, use this checklist to guide you as your develop your course and prepare your course site. If you are very crunched for time, use it as soon as you can, but definitely before the second delivery of a course.

The Quality Matters Rubric is available at the Quality Matters Institute. http://qminstitute.org/home/Public%20Library/About%20QM/RubricStandards2008-2010.pdf. This rubric was developed as part of the *Quality Matters* (QM) project funded by FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education). The goal of the project is to provide tools for assessing and assuring the quality of online courses. The rubric has eight sections that address key elements of any online course.

1. Courses Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives/Outcomes
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Resources and Materials
5. Learner interaction
6. Course technology
7. Learner support
8. Accessibility

Rider Tip #1-B How an Online Syllabus is Different from a Campus Course

This tip answers questions such as

- Which areas of my syllabus need to be changed to meet the new demands and environment of online teaching and learning, such as a regular weekly rhythm and assessment strategies?

Introduction

If you are modifying an existing classroom course for the online learning environment, many of the core components of a course can remain the same. These might include the following:

- Course Description
- Performance Goals and Learning Outcomes
- Content resources such as textbooks and how to access supplementary recommended resources. This section may be enhanced to include more online resources. A reminder about where to purchase the textbook is also good to include.
- Assignments (A paragraph on how to turn in the assignment online is helpful if this hasn't been covered in an orientation for learners)

The major sections that need to be added to a syllabus for an online course address the expectations and mechanics of how to communicate and learn in an online environment.

Syllabus Additions for an Online Course

Instructors usually do not have to remind students how to behave in a classroom: students generally know the script for a campus classroom and are familiar with the communication patterns and structure. In an online learning environment, we cannot assume that learners know how to communicate effectively with an instructor or their fellow students. They may have extensive experience in online chat rooms and virtual environments, such as Second Life; but they may need to learn how to communicate well in the more structured course environments. Here are items to consider including in a syllabus for an online course:

1. "Netiquette" or how to communicate effectively and courteously online. There are many good sites for netiquette so don't feel you have to make up a set of these rules on your own. Here are a couple of sites to get you started:

- *The Core Rules of Netiquette* by Virginia Shea http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html
- *Top 26 Most Important Rules of Email Etiquette* (Note: These are also applicable to discussion posts): http://email.about.com/od/emailnetiquette/tp/core_netiquette.htm

Learners can forget that sites such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and other sites are open to the public and that their work is there for anyone to see. Also,

as noted by Tracy Mitrano (Cornell) on her Thoughts on Facebook, it can be very difficult to remove content from these sites. So a cautionary note and even discussions about posting content and remaining professional in their public postings can be advisable.

2. Emoticons: These are symbols that are used to add emotion to text. The one that is most used is "colon-dash-right parenthesis" which becomes a happy face ☺. Here are a couple of sites describing emoticons and their meanings. Some faculty outlaw the use of emoticons, but as long as they are used tastefully, they convey some of our invisible body language.

- http://messenger.msn.com/Resource/Emoticons.aspx
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon

3. Communication Patterns: It is good to remind students that communication patterns in an online course are often different than those in the face-to-face environment. In the face-to-face class the instructor is generally more directive of the communication processes and the natural inclination is for students to direct their questions to the faculty member. So communication patterns flow predominately between faculty and students. Depending on how blended or interactive a campus course is, this may be more or less true.

In the online course site content questions are posted in the question forum and not in a private email to the instructor. The purpose of the online question forum, or questions within a threaded discussion, is to encourage whole class or group participation in content discussions. All content comments are public to the class members and the instructor. This communication pattern encourages community and course discussion and brainstorming and mutual help. It is good to have a separate space, such as an open forum area for strictly socializing. A good time-saving and learning tip is to do as little communication by private email as possible. The course site is the place for presence, for learning and for sharing — as much as possible.

4. Plagiarism: A section on plagiarism, particularly what it is and how to avoid it can be helpful. Policies on plagiarism are outlined in the Student Handbook (The Source) at http://www.rider.edu/2529_3753.htm, so you may want to make

reference to those policies or repeat them in your syllabus. Since plagiarism is so easy in the online learning environment and it is also easy to plagiarize inadvertently, here are additional resources on this topic:

- Definition of plagiarism: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarism
- Self-detection and checking: http://plagiarism.com/self.detect.htm http://turnitin.com/static/index.html (Note: Rider University has a site license for this software. Faculty can request an account for this tool by sending an email to John LeMasney <lemasney@rider.edu>. You will receive an email with additional info on resources and tutorials for using this tool.
- Another self-detection and checking tool: http://www.essayrater.com/?gclid=CKHcr_b6s5cCFQKfnAodmwRqig

5. Expectations: You may currently have a section on expectation**s** but it's a good idea to make sure this section includes:

- Communication turnaround time (For example, "I'll reply to most e-mails and discussion posts within 24 to 48 hours during the work week.")
- Participation guidelines: how often to log in to the course, how often to post in the discussions, length of posts and depth of posts.

6. Assessment: Assessment or participation in a face-to-face course is often based on memory — what you, the instructor, remember about each student's participation in the class discussions. Often times, if a student is listening intently and offers a few thoughtful comments a semester that is deemed satisfactory. In an online course, participation in discussion boards and forums are a more significant source of getting to know a student's understanding of course content. This means that more explicit guidelines and grading are recommended. In the early days of online courses a colleague conducted a small action research project in which the instructor did not post anything about participation and let the learners participate as they felt moved to do so. Only 20% of the class posted anything in the discussions. The next time, the instructor wrote guidelines and based about 30% of the grade on participation. Participation in this course jumped to 80% of the class posting in the discussions. So, if you are thinking that "if you post it, they will participate",

we'd suggest rethinking that strategy. A rubric is often a good way to let learners know what you think equates to good participation.

7. Troubleshooting In the event something goes wrong in a course, learners need to know whom to contact. If you do not specify whom to call for what types of questions, students will be contacting you when any technical glitch or content question arises. The troubleshooting section of your syllabus can be a separate section or a subset of the policies and procedures section of your syllabus. Stating ahead of time the contact information for the Help Desk and what to do in the event the course site is down and an assignment is due helps the students and helps you. It is good to remind students to use the question forum if they have a question. It is often likely that students can help other students in those wee hours of the morning, for example. In general, it is good to have a contact and phone number for technical questions; a program administrator for program level inquiries; a question forum that is monitored by you and the students; and a preferred way to contact you, the instructor, for private and confidential matters.

Adding these sections will not ensure a trouble-free course but it will prepare students to participate fully and effectively in the course and be able to resolve problems without involving you every step of the way.

Rider Tip #1-C "Getting into the Swing" of a Course — Is there an Ideal Weekly Rhythm?

This tip answers questions such as

- Should I have a weekly rhythm for my course?
- What are the different types of activities that need to be scheduled and planned for?
- How much time should I estimate for monitoring and responding to discussion posts in the first weeks?
- When should learner-to-learner engagement be started?

The weekly schedule for campus classes usually revolves around scheduled classes. These classes serve well as "pacing events" and reminders for students. Regular weekly assignments and activities keep students engaged with the course content. Students find

that a weekly rhythm for an online course provides similar benefits in keeping learners engaged without a physical gathering place. Is there an "ideal weekly rhythm?" Not really, but a predictable weekly plan guides the learning experience and communicates expectations for both faculty and students.

Online students have schedules from many competing responsibilities, such as parenting, working, and just living. So, designing your online course with a predictable weekly schedule is a tremendous aid for you and your students. Many faculty like to use the Class Discussion board activity as one of these pacing activities. For example, the discussion board might open with a problem, question, or challenge on Monday, require an initial posting or response by Wednesday and comments on other students' posting by Friday or Saturday. The faculty member then commits to commenting, summarizing on the posts by the following Monday. Readings, assignments, projects and other content assignments can orbit around these class discussions.

Table 2 is a sample weekly schedule for students in an online class based on a six-day schedule. This schedule anticipates that most online learners will be using one of the two weekend days for their learning. It also assumes about 5 to 7 hours a week for one online course. Learners should plan on logging in to their online course at least two-three times a week at a minimum. The sample schedule below encourages this level of participation.

This schedule may well change in the second half of the course when project and team work ramps up. When group work is required, it is useful in the very first phase of a team project for learners to identify a time that works for synchronous or almost synchronous collaborative activity.

A weekly schedule makes expectations clear and helps students plan their daily personal and work life. It also helps to set those clear expectations that an online course requires regular commitments and interaction. Note the schedule categorizes activities into individual and group activities and also suggests weekly collaborative times when the instructor might be available by phone, IM, or live classroom time. Of course you determine the days/times for your monitoring and scanning of students' work, responding to students' questions, and providing feedback to students.

Note the insertion on Tuesday of "special availability hours." This might be a time for you to schedule an audio/ or audio and video question and answer time. Remember that these can be recorded and archived for other students who are not able to participate in a synchronous event. Faculty using synchronous events will often schedule these events on different days alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays, for example, or even offering them twice

a week, but always in consideration of their own schedule and the perhaps special considerations of students' working lives.

Table 2. *Sample* Weekly Schedule for an Online Course

	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
Individual Activity (L – R Dialogue)*	Assignment: Listening, Reading, Creating (1.0 hour)		Assignment: Listening, Reading, Creating (1.0 hour)		Assignment: Listening, Reading, Creating (1.0 hour)	
Individual Activity II (L – F and L - L Dialogue)	Discussion board "opens"	Discussion board readings and postings (1.5 hours)		Discussion board readings and postings (1.5 hours)		
Individual Activity III (L – R Dialogue)			Self-Test Quiz Review (30 minutes)		Occasional survey/feedback	
Individual Activity IV (L - L Dialogue)	IM, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)	IM, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)		IM, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)		IM, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)
Group or Team Activity (L - L Dialogue		Possible group activity day		Possible group activity day		Possible group activity day
Faculty Activity (F-L Dialogue	Feedback to students on previous week discussions	Special "availability hours"	Monitoring and scanning student interactions + Possible audio/video Q & A session	Special "availability hours"	Monitoring and scanning student interactions + Possible audio/video Q & A session	

* L –R Dialogue is learner to resource dialogue; L-L Dialogue is learner to learner dialogue and F – L Dialogue is faculty to learner dialogue.

Background and Summary on Types of Activities

The tasks and activities for an online course are primarily of three types, each corresponding to the three types of dialogue in a course. One dialogue type is the tasks and assignments that students do by themselves at any time when they are engaging in a dyad of learner to resource. Examples of these include reading assignments, watching or listening to streaming lectures or presentations, analyzing and solving problems, reading and

responding to online discussion forums, online postings in blogs, wikis, online quizzes, sending or receiving instant messages (IM-ing), email and general research or thinking. Even though these activities can be done "at any time" a time to do them needs be scheduled. Personal experience suggests that if something can be done anywhere and anytime, it usually never gets done!

Other types of learning activities are learning events that students do with other students or with the instructor or faculty mentor. The dialogue between students is expressed as learner-to-learner (L-L) or peer-to-peer dialogue; dialogue between students and faculty is expressed as faculty to learner (F-L) dialogue. Examples of learner-to-learner activities include participation in team or group meetings, study or review sessions. Examples of faculty to learner (F-L) dialogue include participation in review or presentation sessions as well as all the asynchronous monitoring and commenting. Thus it is important to set aside a specific time for these kinds of activities as well.

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SECTION THREE: GETTING STARTED WITH QUESTIONING

Rider Tip #1-D: The Why and How of Discussion Boards – The Online Campfire!

This tip answers questions such as

- Why are discussion boards so important in an online course? Are there any other tools, such as wikis and blogs that can be used for similar purposes?
- What types of learning goals are discussion boards good for?
- How are questions for online discussions different from questions in class discussions?
- How many discussion questions should be posted in a course each week?
- Are there guidelines or requirements for student responses to discussion questions?

The purpose of discussion boards or forums in an online course is similar to planned discussions in a classroom-based course, only much more so. I like to think of discussion boards as the “campfire” around which course community and bonding occurs, as well as content processing and knowledge development. Discussion boards are designed so that the discussions are “threaded, meaning that learners post their comments and respond to one another asynchronously.

What role do discussion boards play in learners’ processes of developing knowledge? Discussion activities provide an expressive space for learners to process, analyze and make

connections among ideas. A large percentage of course activities are receptive or passive activities in which students are reading, listening, watching, and "paying attention."

In the online classroom, discussion activities give all students a chance, and in fact, generally require, students to reflect on the ideas and issues in the course resources and those expressed by other students, and then write about what they think and know and reason from those ideas. Blogs and wikis are increasingly used for these purposes as well. It is with this cycle of "read, reflect, consider, connect" that the knowledge structure inside the learner's brain actually changes. Often it is only when students are responding to a question or to another students' posting do they begin to know what they think or know, or sometimes, more importantly, what they don't know. (We only know what we know when we actually write or state it in some way, making it external to our brains.) Discussion activities give students a chance to integrate incoming knowledge with their existing knowledge structures. The discussion boards provide time and opportunity to explore and develop ideas collaboratively, to recognize and build shared values. These expressive activities often help crystallize students' thoughts and increase confidence in what they think and why.

Research (Swan, 2005) suggests that discussions that focus on particular readings may not elicit as personal responses as those discussions asking for participant's opinions on issues or practical experiences. This means that paying attention to how we design questions can encourage or discourage the building of social presence and community.

Remember that learners are often very economical in how they respond to discussions and discussion topics and other assignments, so when your rubrics recommend the use of references and logic to support arguments, providing models of excellent responses is another way of providing direct instruction in your expectations.

Best Learning Goals for Discussion Boards

One distinction between online discussion questions and class discussion questions is that the instructor generally plans out the online discussion in more detail with more specific goals in mind. One reason this is important is that it is difficult to modify the posted questions and the planned assessment rubrics once a discussion has begun. Planning questions in advance also helps the course to have a more explicit mapping to the desired performance goals and desired skills and behaviors of the course. A good design approach is to focus the weekly discussion questions on a topic that focuses the student's thinking on the core concepts of the course. Rather than asking questions for which answers are readily

discovered, students can be directed to the application of concepts in various scenarios. This helps students build knowledge frameworks around the core concepts, and link this new knowledge to existing knowledge. In the process they can also personalize and customize their learning. (Recall how unique learners are and how each builds their own knowledge structures.)

The Number of Discussion Questions Each Week

As with many questions, the answer to "how many" is that "It depends." It depends on whether questions are short answer essay questions that require students to apply core concepts in specific professional situations. It depends on the level of complexity of the questions and if the questions require students to think deeply about what they think. It depends on whether the questions are problem-solving questions that require students to search out new relevant information and develop or work with scenarios.

Another consideration is the number of other assignments and activities due in that particular week. For short-answer essay questions, a general rule of thumb is no more than three discussion questions per week, if there are no other assignments due in the week. For more complex questions, one or two discussion questions per week is probably realistic. For those weeks when major projects or exams are scheduled, there may be no discussion questions requiring reading or much research. In those weeks, students may use the general class posting areas for giving and receiving help on their projects.

Requirements for Student responses to Discussion Questions

First, a point about scheduling and writing responses to questions. Learners should be encouraged to post as early in the week as possible in order to maximize the opportunity for peer and faculty response. For example, one strategy for short answer essay questions is for learners to be required to post a response to the question and then respond to the posts of one or two peers. In this scenario it is often useful to require students to post their initial personal responses by Wednesday, providing time in the latter part of the week for students to respond to student postings.

Here are some additional guidelines that some faculty have found useful for guiding student responses to discussion questions. These guidelines can be posted to the discussion area as reminders to students.

- Postings should be evenly distributed during the discussion period, rather than concentrated on one day or at the beginning and/or end of the discussion time.
- Postings should be a minimum of one short paragraph and a maximum of two paragraphs (This applies to short-answer essay questions.)
- Avoid postings that are limited to 'I agree' or 'great idea', etc. If you agree or disagree with a posting then say why you agree by supporting your statement with concepts from the readings or by bringing in a related example or experience.
- Address the question or topic as much as possible, keeping on topic and not letting the discussion stray
- Incorporate where possible, quotes from the articles that support your postings and include appropriate reference and page numbers.
- Recognize and respond to others' responses to create threads of thought in a discussion, showing how ideas are related and linked.
- Weave into your posting, where possible, related prior personal knowledge gained from experience, prior coursework or work experience, discussions, and readings, etc.
- Use proper etiquette when posting, including proper language, spelling, grammar, etc. similar to the tone, etc. that you would use within a professional environment. (Recall the netiquette resources.)

A Rule of Thumb for the Length of Discussions

One week is the most common length of time for discussions, although, of course, a discussion board or conference involving an external expert may be shorter, such as 3-5 days. On the other hand, discussions boards with complex topics might be open or run for longer, up to two weeks.

For specifics on dos and don'ts for good discussion questions, there are a number of tips online at www.designingforlearning.info. Three of these tips are in the list of references. Enjoy!

References and Resources for Section Three on Questioning

E-Coaching Tip 3 (Spring 2006) Developing Great and Effective Questions

http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip3.html

E-Coaching Tip 18 (Summer 2006) Questions and Answers -- Upside Down and Inside Out http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip18.htmlE-Coaching Tip 23 (Fall, 2006) "Making Your Students' Knowledge Visible" --Three Questions to Ask Your Students http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip23.html

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SECTION FOUR: DEVELOPING AN ASSESSMENT PLAN

Rider Tip #1-E: Assessment: Designing Projects that Matter to the Learner

This tip answers questions such as

- When should course projects get started?
- Should course projects be individual or group projects?
- What are some guidelines for designing projects and tasks that really matter to the learner?

Tip Introduction – The Importance of the Task for Assessment and Projects

Assessment of learning in an online course shifts from a focus on a few proctored tests, quizzes, or a final project to multiple assessment points that include low and high stakes assessment experiences. The most important of these assessment experiences are the creative projects. Some online courses are designed around a project that the students are to design and complete during a course, including a focus on the processes of design. This assessment approach has much in common with an apprenticeship model. Major assessment tasks such as course projects generally have three to four or even more major milestones.

The Assessment Plan

As noted earlier, your course assessment plan is generally a section of your course syllabus. The purpose of the assessment plan is to summarize the points of assessment and how the learning outcomes of each learner will be assessed. Assessment plans generally have at least four (4) types of experiences that "count" toward evaluation. Here are common types of experience:

- Participation in discussion posts — the class conversation
- Automated low-stakes quizzes
- Individual projects that include analysis, such as critical thinking, and communication of that work with a project of some type
- Team projects of various sizes and purposes

Example of a Project that Matters

Balanced design stresses a goal of designing an assessment that matters to the student. This generally means designing enough choices to provide for personalized and customized knowledge for students and a project that requires some innovative thinking. One excellent example of the importance of the "task model" is from David Gibson, who directs an ongoing NSF-funded project called "The Global Challenge." This project — while actually designed for high-schoolers — is designed around a fundamentally subtle, but profound shift in assessment. In our usual approach to assessment plans, we use a process similar to the three -step process later in this tip, developing guidelines and directions for the projects and experiences that learners will use to demonstrate the discipline performance goals for competency. By contrast, the Global Challenge describes for learners the required features and characteristics of the response — the Task Model — but leaves the processes, and tools unspecified.

How is that different? A task model focuses on the "required features and characteristics of a response" cycles us back closer to the model of apprenticeship. As faculty, we very likely "overdesign" our course projects, consistent with our role of "directing learning." We often assign projects that match our knowledge structure and our favorite tools and concepts.

The Global Challenge project focuses the work of the teacher-mentors on designing a Task Model for students that enables and encourages wide-ranging *discovery, teamwork, analysis and global awareness*. It is a project in which learners are assigned to solve a problem of social, economic and global significance for which we need innovative, creative thinking, such as global climate change.

In summary, three key features recommend themselves to our assessment practices — (1) Do not overdesign a project; leave ample room for learner exploration and processes, always being ready to provide support and guidance and challenge as appropriate; (2) Focus on problems that need innovative ideas and solutions (3) Encourage work on projects that students like and want to do, rather than projects that might be important to faculty.

Background - A Three (3) Step Process for Planning Assessment

Here is the three-step process for planning your assessment. (McTighe & Wiggins, 1999.)

1. Identify results that you want for your learners. These results will probably include "enduring understanding" (similar to concepts), knowing the vocabulary and syntax of a discipline domain and being familiar with the "exemplars of a discipline." The exemplars of a discipline might include the most famous representatives and case studies, etc.

2. Determine the "acceptance evidence" by which the learners can demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and integration of ideas.

3. Design the learning experiences to ensure learner accomplishment of these understandings and the processes for demonstrating their learning.

This three-step process can guide us all in the development of an assessment plan that reassures us that we are focusing on knowledge and effective use of core course content.

References and Resources for Section Four - Assessment

E-Coaching Tip 10 (Spring, 2006) Assessing Group Projects, http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip10.html

E-Coaching Tip 44 (Summer 2007) How Do I Know what Learners Have Learned? Planning Assessment from the Beginning! http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip44.html

E-Coaching Tip 58 (Spring 2008) Reaching the Heights of Learning -- Authentic Problem-Solving http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip58.html

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Global Challenge, teams of US high school students collaborate with international counterparts from October to May to address global climate change. Students strengthen skills in math, science, engineering, and critical thinking, while learning about global business practices. All participating students ages 14-17 have the opportunity to win significant college scholarships and other awards and recognition.

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