

Defining Features: Online Courses

Key Features

The easiest way to define an online course is by what it lacks: meetings in a physical location at a designated time. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defines online courses as those that use technology “to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously.” The HLC separates online courses from blending courses by stating that if 75% of the “instruction and interaction” of a course is delivered online, the course is considered an online course.

Key Design Considerations

Designing an online course is both different and similar to designing an on-ground course. The learning outcomes of an online course should be identical to the same course offered in the traditional method. How students achieve the learning outcomes will differ in several ways.

Content Delivery In a traditional classroom, the instructor can plan a 50 minute lecture, breaking it up with short breaks for discussion or active learning exercises. Online courses need a different strategy for presenting content, as there is a very small likelihood that a student will watch a 50 minute lecture. By splitting your lecture into shorter segments of eight to fifteen minutes, and asking students to perform a task in between segments, attention, memory and recall of the information is improved.

Interaction A common misconception about online courses is that the instructor and students won’t get to know each other in the same way they potentially do in an on ground course. Instructors often approach online courses worried that they will not be able to do the same kind of discussion and active learning as in their “regular” course. Actually the opposite is true and even required. Let’s go back to the HLC definition presented in the introduction of this resource guide. It uses the term “regular and substantive interaction.” The HLC is very clear that that they consider an online course to have interaction between the instructor and student, and between the students. Otherwise it is a correspondence course and not eligible for accreditation. Using tools such as the discussion board for case studies, peer review, and small group work will help foster interaction.

How much is enough? A typical problem when developing an online course is seat time equivalency. Does your online course contain enough or too much content and work for the number of credit hours it is assigned? Based on federal requirements Saint Louis University has defined a credit hour as being one hour of direct faculty instruction every week for 15 weeks and 2 hours of outside student work each week for 15 weeks. If you’re concerned about this issue, please reach out to the Distance Education Office at SLU for help with the formula they use. There are also some online resources that are not SLU specific but can be a useful starting place. Penn State has one such tool, which we’ve linked to in the resource section.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.

Contextual Variations

Contextual variations in online courses often deal with whether the course is situated within an online degree program or if it is a singular course students might take during the summer or winter session to meet a core requirement. With singular courses, students might come with little or no experience with the learning management system and online courses in general. Instructors will need to pay special attention to orienting these students to the performance standards required of online students.

Another contextual variation is the length of the course. Online courses are more typically offered in an accelerated format (8 weeks, 6 weeks, 4 weeks) rather than a 15 week semester. The length of the course does not mean the learning outcomes will vary from a 15 weeks semester, but the instructor has to pay special attention to issues such as content overload.

At SLU . . .

SLU has devoted resources to help instructors develop online courses and to ensure the quality of such courses. Instructors wishing to teach online participate in an online seminar entitled Introduction to Online Teaching through the Reinert Center. The University has also instituted a peer review program, utilizing a faculty developed rubric defining eight standards of quality for distance courses.

Selected Resources

Vai, Marjorie, and Sosulski, Kristen. Essentials of Online Course Design. New York, New York: Routledge 2016

HLC Guidelines for Evaluation of Distance Education (Online Learning) Retrieved from http://download.hlcommission.org/C-RAC_Distance_Ed_Guidelines_7_31_2009.pdf

HLC Glossary Retrieved from <https://www.hlcommission.org/General/glossary.html>

Saint Louis University Distance Education Retrieved from https://www.slu.edu/provost/distance_education/index.php

Penn State Hours of Instructional Activity Equivalent Retrieved from <https://weblearning.psu.edu/resources/penn-state-online-resources/HIA/>