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Essentials of Online Course Design

A Standards-Based Guide

SECOND EDITION



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Kristen Sosulski



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Foreword, from the First Edition

When I pick up a new book in my fields of language education and technology-mediated learning, I am sometimes struck by bad thoughts.

If the book is really good, I wish that I had written it, and I had thought of this new approach to teaching and learning. Thankfully, rare are the books that engender such wicked thoughts.

But this is one of those books.

Essentials of Online Course Design explains how to design, build, and implement online learning solutions, to ensure that learners receive high-quality educational engagement. The book aims to meet the needs of different groups of readers and practitioners who are anxious to learn more about the design of successful online learning courses—and what makes them successful.

As an experienced geek myself, and having spent many years melding the technical and the pedagogical, I have bought many books and attended many courses that purported to explain how online learning worked, and how I should design a course.

In many cases, these offered me technical solutions while ignoring the pedagogical issues. Others gave me pedagogical theory but no support in implementing it in a way that learners could enjoy. Few of them focused on the impact that visual design and user experience would have on the learning process.

That is why this book is so important. I know of no other book that combines a focus on pedagogical learning design and all

that entails, with technical background and support, with expert insights into the world of visual design and optimizing the user experience. This provides an added dimension for the online course designer—the melding of key standards of course design but seen from new angles and with added depth and breadth.

The book aims, as the authors state in the Preface, to “model simple and intelligent design and provide abundant examples of good online design.” Throughout the book, this is exactly what they do.

One of the beauties of this book is that it can be read and utilized practically and successfully by a wide range of education professionals, not all of whom are geeks or Blackboard experts or devotees of Moodle (or even know what that is).

It is aimed at a broader, nontechnical readership and yet maintains an intellectual discipline that demands much of its readership.

The focus on the practitioner shines through from every page—the inclusion of personal statements from practitioners about how they have learned and taught, along with screenshots and real-world examples of course design in action, help the teacher internalize the skills and competencies needed for successful design.

The book offers practical advice that is, in the words of the authors, “informed by theory but not about theory”—precisely what a professional practitioner needs. It also offers a supporting website where practitioners can find further guidance and resources such as templates.

The book helps teachers move, in Argyris and Schön’s terms, from “espoused theory” to “theory in use”—from what we say we believe we should do, to what we actually do.

The authors are uniquely qualified to produce this book. Marjorie Vai has been an innovator in language teaching for many years, and has always been a leader in the application of technology to learning. She published innovative software

Foreword, from the First Edition

solutions for language learning long before most publishers and teachers had begun to appreciate the benefits to the learner of a technology-mediated learning resource. Marjorie has designed and implemented a groundbreaking online Master's program in TESOL for The New School in New York (full disclosure: I wrote one of the modules) and launched a new style of learning (and opened new channels of access to that learning) for TESOL professionals globally.

Kristen Sosulski has a solid grounding in online theory and practice, and oversees the online program in one of the most respected universities in the USA.

For me, a crucial focus of the book is how to engage the learner. This is the basis of constructivist learning theory—that learning must be an active process—and at the heart of every successful teacher or trainer's toolkit. Teachers must know how to engage learners, to motivate, involve, and guide them to learning success.

I hope this book helps teachers and course designers worldwide achieve more for their learners and clients. I am certain it will support the raising of standards in online learning across multiple disciplines and academic fields.

Michael Carrier

Director, Strategic Partnerships,
Cambridge English Language Assessment,
University of Cambridge, UK
Former Head of English Language Innovation,
British Council, London, UK

Preface

This book has proven to be useful and popular because it is easy to use, practical, and clearly linked to standards of good online course design. Consequently, there are key features that have not changed. However, this update has allowed us to reflect upon and improve this guide. We have revised the second edition in several ways:

- **Expanded Information.** We have expanded some areas to give readers a sense of what else is possible or how else to build knowledge. We have tried to do this without further complicating the topics. So, for example, in Chapter 3, we have added audio/video to uses of language that before focused primarily on writing. We have also expanded the section on practice exercises to help teachers evaluate how they might best be used.
- **Improved Content.** In general, we have sought to improve the quality throughout the book. It seems that no matter how many times one reads and revises, there are always new ways to improve content and support materials.
- **Technology.** Details and topics have been added, enhanced, or removed to reflect the continual changes in technology.
- **Clarity and Simplicity.** This book claims to elevate clarity and simplicity. We believe that we succeeded in doing this—for the most part—in the first edition. We have edited and re-edited to further clarify and simplify.
- **Better-Designed Illustrations.** The many illustrations and examples in the first edition enhanced understanding and provided real-world models. We have improved the look and design of screenshots by putting them in the context of a real LMS. We thank Instructure, the company behind the Canvas LMS, for helping us with this. (*Note:* Scott Thornbury, one of our featured teachers, actually teaches his course within Canvas at The New School.)

Preface

- **Quotes.** We have quoted from some of the best thinkers in the field of online education, as we should. Given the emphasis on design in the guide, we have also quoted great designers. However, we have been very struck by the fact that so many great thinkers from the past have articulated approaches to learning and education that support many of the ideas in the book. It is especially interesting to see that some ideas about education that we imagine are relatively current go back thousands of years!

The Routledge Essentials of Online Learning Series

Learning

It's not about technology, it's about learning.

—Stephen Anspacher

This quote could be the mission statement of this series. Educational innovations, whether technological, pedagogical, philosophical, or sociological, come and go. Too often, we embrace new technologies and approaches to education while missing the point—that it's all about learning—or at least it should be.

Technology itself will not solve our educational shortcomings. For example, buying hundreds of iPads for a school system will not improve things unless we first ask:

- Why?
- How will they improve learning?
- How might they be used?
- Are they better than other alternatives?
- How will the logistics work?
- Is there anything we are missing regarding the relationship of the technology and those who we intend will use it—teachers and students?

All of the books in this online teaching and learning series place learning first. Online learning can be every bit as good as on-site learning provided we keep this focus. The standards we have provided stress this commitment. The rationale for each standard is provided.

Practicality

Teachers need simple, straightforward guidance on how to create an online or blended course so that subject matter remains the central focus of their efforts. They need to understand how to engage students as easily with online teaching as they do in the classroom. The books in the series are hands-on and practical. They are informed by theory, but not about theory.

Simplicity and Design

For the foreseeable future, complicated technologies will continue to invade our homes and workplaces, thus simplicity is bound to be a growth industry.

—John Maeda

Consumers can usually find an array of easy-to-follow books on computers and technology. Educators have not been so lucky. Simplicity of design helps cut through the technological mire and save time. It opens the mind and pleases the eye.

The series models simple and intelligent design, and provides abundant examples of good online course design.

Introduction to This Guide

To design is much more than simply to assemble, to order, or even to edit; it is to add value and meaning, to illuminate, to simplify, to clarify, to modify, to dignify, to dramatize, to persuade, and perhaps even to amuse.

Paul Rand—author, graphic designer, teacher

To borrow some words from Paul Rand above, this guide aims to simplify, to clarify, and to illuminate. We hope you find that it helps you to do the same in your online course.

i.1

A Unique Guide for Online Course Design

This is the only book on this topic that has all these qualities:

- A clearly outlined set of **online course design standards** establishes the core principles. They first appear in context then are repeated twice. At the end of each chapter, they support the summary and serve as a reflective tool. Lastly, they all appear in a standards checklist in Appendix B. This list serves as a reflective evaluation tool once the course is designed.
- The **guide itself serves as a model** of many of the design elements espoused.
- The writing is **concise and clear**, and avoids jargon.
- The content focuses on **practical application informed by theory, but not about theory**.
- **Examples and illustrations of good online course design** are provided throughout the book and on the book's website.

- **Learning abilities and preferences are emphasized** modeled in examples, and in the way the guide itself is written and designed.

WEB

- The book's **website** (www.essentialsofonlinecourse.com) provides additional reference and resource materials, templates for units, instructions, and models of good online course design. Look for the website icon, at the left, throughout the book.

i.2

Who Are the Guide and Website For?

The guide and website are for those involved with online teaching and training at all levels, including:

- **Higher education teachers/designers** who face the short- or long-term realities of transforming an on-site course into an online or blended course.
- **Trainers** creating online modules or programs.
- **Staff development trainers** who work through the online course-building process with teachers.
- **Massive open online course (MOOC) developers and designers** who work with content experts to design online educational experiences and courses.
- **Instructors teaching about online course design.** The standards-based models and examples reduce the burden on these instructors to provide such resources on their own.
- **Senior trainers to those learning about online pedagogical design.** Again, the standards-based models support the process.
- **Students** in educational technology programs.
- **Decision-makers such as administrators, managers, chief learning officers, and board members** who need to understand technology applications and how they should work so that they can make informed decisions about technology.

Introduction to This Guide

- Individuals within an institution, or **entrepreneurs** who work with online course development or training.
- Anyone interested in learning about, or brushing up on, best practices in teaching with technologies.

I.3

What Do Online Students Need?

After years of traditional classroom study, most students have questions about studying online. For those committing to more than one course (e.g. a program or degree), they may have even more questions. Here are some examples:

- How does an online course work?
- How does it compare to classroom study?
- Does it require special technical knowledge?
- Can I get help if I have technical problems?
- Will there be help if I find I have problems with online study?
- Will I feel isolated studying online? Will I miss out on working together with students in a classroom?
- How much of my time will an online course require compared to taking an on-site course?

Teachers should be able to answer the questions outlined above so that students feel confident about the process and its benefits. This book provides the answers and the means of following through on promises made by institutions in their course descriptions and projected outcomes. Standards of good online design are at the core of this process.

For students, signing up for an online course may be easy. Staying on track, managing their time, and being diligent are much more difficult. Give them guidance on how to:

- develop the skills to be a great online student;
- create an online presence;

- apply techniques for interaction and appropriate communication;
- work in groups and individually online;
- understand the technological requirements and how to get technical support; and
- manage their time in an online course.

(Sosulski & Bongiovanni, 2013)

1.4

A Standards-Based Approach

A great deal of work and research has been done to determine what works in an online learning and teaching environment. As a result, standards and best practices have been developed to guide course designers and teachers. Often, such standards are presented in complicated or dense formats. In this guide, the standards are introduced then reinforced in a variety of ways. Finally, they are presented as a checklist that teachers can use to reflectively self-evaluate their online course.

We present standards in three stages:

1. In each chapter as they are covered. At this stage, they look like this:
 - ☒ Content elements are presented in a logical sequence.
2. Next, all standards covered in a chapter are listed in summary form at the end of the chapter. Use this to review the points covered in the chapter, or as a focused checklist when working through the chapter topic. At this stage, the boxes in front of the standards are open—waiting for you to check them.
 - ☐ Content elements are presented in a logical sequence.
3. Finally, Appendix B is a standards checklist for you to use when you have developed your course and need to evaluate your work. This also serves as a standards index

Introduction to This Guide

so that you can easily find where the standard was covered, and review where and how each was presented. Each standard is followed by the page numbers where it comes up so that you can review as needed. Again, they appear with unchecked boxes.

- ☐ Content elements are presented in a logical sequence.

The redundancy built into this small guide reinforces your understanding of the essentials of good online design.

Underlying Principles

These standards have been culled from a number of resources and our own experiences with online education. They are presented and reinforced in a straightforward and constructive way. Some of the major resources we have used are:

- Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (1987) Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *The American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, March: 3–7.
- Horton, S. (2006) Design simply. Universal usability: A universal design approach to Web usability. Retrieved from: www.universalusability.com.
- Lynch, P.J. & Horton, S. (2009) *Web Style Guide* (3rd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Maeda, J. (2006) *Laws of Simplicity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mayer, R.E. (2001) *Multimedia Learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Palloff, R.M. & Pratt, K. (2007) *Building Online Learning Communities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Quality Matters (2013) Inter-institutional quality assurance in online learning. Retrieved from: www.qualitymatters.org.

Note: A full list of sources and references can be found on pages 220–222.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized as follows:

- The **Introduction** provides an overview of the book, with time spent on basic issues, including notes on the terminology used in the book, and a brief description of the website and how it relates to the book.
- Chapter 1, **Orientation to Online Teaching and Learning**, introduces aspects of and priorities for online teaching and learning that may be new to you.
- Chapter 2, **Elements of an Online Course: A Tour**, is an illustrated tour through the elements of a learning management system (LMS), using real examples from an online course.
- Chapters 3 and 4, **Language and Writing Style** and **Visual Design Basics**, cover two elements of effective communication that are not unique to online. Teachers must be aware of the critical importance of adapting these to online.
- Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, **Engaging the Online Learner**, **Activities and Tools**, **Resources that Engage**, and **Assessment and Feedback**, cover the essential elements of the presentation and design of the course, such as introducing new knowledge, activities, resources, and assessment.
- Chapters 9 and 10, **Building the Course Foundation** and **Structuring the Course Content**, begin by using the standard elements of a classroom syllabus as a point of departure to create an online syllabus. After a series of guided steps, this evolves into the online course framework with special attention paid to presentation development in Chapter 10, where we again use examples from an online course.
- Appendix A, **Writing Learning Outcomes**, reviews the essential points of writing good learning outcomes.

- Appendix B, **The Standards Checklist**, lists the standards with page references. This can be used as a final checklist to evaluate your online course.

WEB

The accompanying website provides many models of good online design, and additional references and resources.

Adaptable templates help readers to conceptualize and develop the substance of each learning unit. Again, all concepts and elements in this guide are reinforced through models and examples that emphasize online course design standards. The organization of the website mirrors that of the book. So if, for example, you are guided to Web materials in Section 9.2 of the book, you will find them in Section 9.2 of the website.

1.6

How to Use the Guide

Before you begin, scan the book to get clear on the topics and their organization.

Depending upon your time frame and/or what you may already know, you may find one or more topics that you can bypass. If you have taken online courses and are familiar with time considerations and learning management systems, you may want to skip those sections.

A great deal of time and space in this project has been devoted to assembling the models and examples of good course design that appear in the book and on the website. Familiarizing yourself with these examples will strengthen your skills in online course design.

1.7

This Guide as a Model

Standards are modeled in the way this guide is written and designed. The modeling in the guide, of course, is limited to the elements a book and an online course share. Flip through the pages and notice what has been done in the following categories.

EDUCATION / TECHNOLOGY

"If I had to choose a single book to share with a faculty member about how to design and teach an online or blended course, or with an instructional designer partnering with that faculty member, that book would be *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide, Second Edition*. In this concise, clear, and well-written volume, Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosulski provide a methodology for online and blended course design that is informed by learning theory and seasoned by practical experience. This is the standard reference guide that those of us involved in online and blended learning will be keeping close at hand."

—**Joshua Kim**, Ph.D., Director of Digital Learning Initiatives, and Blogger for Inside Higher Ed—Technology and Learning, Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL), Dartmouth College, USA

In spite of the proliferation of online learning, creating online courses can still evoke a good deal of frustration, negativity, and wariness in those who need to create them. The second edition of *Essentials of Online Course Design* takes a fresh, thoughtfully designed, step-by-step approach to online course development. At its core is a set of standards that are based on best practices in the field of online learning and teaching. Pedagogical, organizational and visual design principles are presented and modeled throughout the book, and users will quickly learn from the guide's hands-on approach. The course design process begins with the elements of a classroom syllabus that, after a series of guided steps, easily evolve into an online course outline.

The guide's key features include:

- a practical approach informed by theory
- clean interior design that offers straightforward guidance from page one
- clear and jargon-free language
- examples, screenshots, and illustrations to clarify and support the text
- a checklist of online course design standards that readers can use to self-evaluate.
- a Companion Website with examples, adaptable templates, interactive learning features, and online resources: <http://essentialsofonlinecoursedesign.com>

Essentials of Online Course Design serves as a best practice model for designing online courses. After reading this book, readers will find that preparing for online teaching is a satisfying and engaging experience. The core issue is simply good design: pedagogical, organizational, and visual.

Marjorie Vai has been directly involved with online education and training for 25 years. She founded the English Language Studies department and most recently designed and developed the online graduate program in Teaching English at The New School, USA. She is the editor of the Routledge Essentials of Online Learning Series.

Kristen Sosulski is Director of the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning and Clinical Associate Professor of Information Systems at New York University, Stern School of Business, USA.

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