THE CHECK

The Check: A Guide to Online Course Design

The Check was created by CEHD's Digital Education and Innovation Team

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The Check is a guide to help CEHD instructors create instructionally effective and user-friendly online learning environments for students (online courses, hybrid courses, and sites that augment face-to-face courses). **The Check** can be used at any point in the course development process:
- ▪ When designing a new course to help guide good design.
- ▪ To evaluate an existing course (self-assessment or peer review).

To begin using **The Check**, start by reading through the entire guide to get a sense of the different areas to consider.

- ▪ When creating a new course, use this guide when designing and building a course site to make sure each area is addressed.
- ▪ For existing courses, use this guide as a checklist to identify those items that are already included or addressed, or those areas that need improvement.

Reflect and revise. After teaching the course, review **The Check** again to identify areas for improvement.

Summary

- **Course Information**: Students can quickly and easily find essential course information about instructor, class sessions, course requirements, policies, etc. To effectively orient students to the course it is important that this information appears in a prominent location on the course site as well as in a downloadable syllabus.
- **Course Design**: The structure of the course and the course site are organized for student success.
- **Graphic Design**: The course site is clean, consistent, and clearly branded.
- **Student Support**: Student support resources are prominent on the course site. Consider placing links to these support resources in a single location on the course site.
- **Learning objectives**: Learning objectives are clear, thorough, and accurate.
- **Activities & Assignments**: Activities and assignments are appropriate for the course and course type (face-to-face, hybrid, or online); are presented to the student in a manner that clearly explains how and why they support the course; and present a clear understanding of the instructor's expectations of the students.
- **Assessment / Grading**: Measures of student progress are consistent with learning objectives.
- **Materials & Media**: All materials and media are current, working properly, available in multiple formats, and accurately cited throughout the course.
- **Accessibility & Universal Design**: All materials are accessible and available in a format that can be printed.
- **Course Communication**: Multiple communication avenues are provided to support interaction among the instructor and students, and an open and respectful learning environment is established.

Course Information

Students can quickly and easily find essential course information about instructor, class sessions, course requirements, policies, etc. To effectively orient students to the course it is important that this information appears in a prominent location on the course site as well as in a downloadable syllabus.

- □ **Course description:** The course description is a concise overview that includes course goals, topics of study, and number of credit hours.
- □ **Course Objectives:** Specific course-level objectives are listed.
- □ **Instructor information**: Instructor's contact information including name, email address, phone number, office location, and office hours is provided.
- □ **Course syllabus:** The syllabus is easily accessible on the course home page and includes information about course structure, course schedule, requirements, and assessments.
- □ **Course requirements:** Requirements for successful completion of the course are clearly stated.
- □ **Prerequisites:** Required knowledge, skills, competencies, or courses are clearly stated.
- □ **Course session details:** Meeting times and locations are made explicit (e.g., for a hybrid course it is clear when sessions are in-person or online, and for an online course any synchronous meetings times are clearly listed).
- □ **Course schedule:** A course schedule with clear due dates for all assignments is provided.
- □ **Grading policy:** The grading policy for the course is clearly articulated on the course home page.

Course Design

The structure of the course and the course site are organized for student success.

- □ **Course structure:** The course content is organized into logical segments (e.g., weeks, units, modules, topics). For courses that aren't chronological, the course structure should still be logical and easy to understand.
- □ **Hierarchy and sequence:** There is a clear hierarchy to the site that reflects prerequisites and dependencies between learning objectives, instructional strategies, activities, and assignments. Course content is logically sequenced and learning activities build on each other.
- □ **Alignment:** It is clear how the content, activities, and assessments directly address or support the learning objectives and course goals.
- □ **Workload:** The amount of work for assignments and activities is appropriate for the number of course credit hours.
- □ **Document the Process**: Course site includes documentation on processes and decisions for future reference.

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Graphic Design

The course site is clean, consistent, and clearly branded.

☐ **Identity:** The course site is recognizable as belonging to CEHD, or a CEHD department or program.

☐ **Site Layout:** The course site layout is uncluttered and clear.

☐ **Consistency:** The graphic design of the course site is visually consistent:
  ▪ The same fonts and font sizes are used consistently throughout the site.
  ▪ There is a clear reason for variations in color, font, or other visual elements.
  ▪ The quality of graphics and media is consistent.
  ▪ Navigation aids (graphics/text) and cues (color, underline, text directives) are used consistently throughout the course site.

Student Support

Student support resources are prominent on the course site. Consider placing links to these support resources in a single location on the course site.

☐ **Instructor support:** It is clear who students should contact for questions about the course (instructor or teaching assistant).

☐ **Tech support:** It is clear where students should go for technical support with the learning management system and other learning technologies used in the course.

☐ **Accommodations:** It is clear how students can request accommodations, if needed.

☐ **Other resources:** Resources that support student success are provided (e.g., tutoring, writing, research, library, mental health) and integrated into course activities where appropriate.

☐ **Policies:** UMN institutional policies relevant to student success (e.g., grade disputes, ADA Compliance) are available and easy to find.

Learning objectives

Learning objectives are clear, thorough, and accurate.

☐ **Adequate**: Learning objectives are provided for the course and each activity/unit/module.

☐ **Clear**: Learning objectives are stated clearly and written to the student (e.g., "after completing this course or activity, you will be able to…").

☐ **Consistent**: Learning objectives at the course, module/unit, and activity levels hold together conceptually and support each other.

☐ **Measurable**: Learning objectives are observable and measurable (e.g., instructors are able to assess student mastery of the objectives).

☐ **Reinforced**: Learning objectives are referred to throughout the course as appropriate.

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Activities & Assignments

Activities and assignments are appropriate for the course and course type (face-to-face, hybrid, or online); are presented to the student in a manner that clearly explains how and why they support the course; and present a clear understanding of the instructor's expectations of the students.

- □ **List:** A comprehensive list of activities and assignments is provided for each unit/week/module.
- □ **Labels:** Activities and assignments are clearly labeled (e.g., assignments, quizzes, readings).
- □ **Descriptions:** Each assignment or activity is clearly described, easy to understand, and includes all necessary information (e.g., relevant technology, format, due dates, level of participation, how to submit).
- □ **Variety:** A variety of instructional strategies are used for students to practice and master learning objectives (e.g., reflective writing, role play, lecture, demonstration, simulation, case studies).
- □ **Engagement:** Activities and assignments, including discussion forums, engage students on a deep level (e.g., students are encouraged to analyze, negotiate, synthesize, apply new knowledge and skills).
- □ **Expectations:** Expectations for synchronous and asynchronous activities are clearly defined (e.g., discussion posts by a certain time, instructor's role is clearly defined).
- □ **Instructions:** Assignment instructions are explicit and complete. Self-directed independent learners will be able to successfully complete the assignment without aid.
- □ **Assessment:** Standards for student work are clearly communicated (e.g., through rubrics, examples, or modeling).
- □ **Feedback:** Instructor's plan for providing feedback to individuals, groups, and the entire class is clearly defined.
- □ **Rules:** Rules for group work and roles are clearly stated.
- □ **Collaboration**: Activities foster interaction and collaboration among students.
- □ **Participation:** Expectations for individual and group participation are clearly stated.

Assessment / Grading

Measures of student progress are consistent with learning objectives.

- □ **Multiple strategies:** Multiple types of assessment strategies are used to measure student progress (e.g., quizzes, portfolio, peer review, projects).
- □ **Alignment:** Assessments are aligned with course-level and assignment-level learning objectives.
- □ **Rubrics:** Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for evaluation of student's work (e.g., rubric for each assignment).
- □ **Monitoring progress:** A way for students to check their progress throughout the course is provided (e.g., a grade book).
- □ **Grading:** The grading policy is communicated at the course-level (see Course Information). Grading method and criteria are clearly stated for each assignment.

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Materials & Media

All materials and media are current, working properly, available in multiple formats, and accurately cited throughout the course.

- □ **Current**: Learning resources (e.g., texts, audio, video, images) that are used within the course are current. If a resource is not current, the reason for not using a more recent resource is provided.
- □ **Multiple Formats:** Instructional materials are available in multiple media formats (e.g., HTML pages are available as PDF, transcripts and summaries accompany videos and audio files).
- □ **Copyright:** Copyright permissions are noted, when appropriate.
- □ **Citations:** All resources and materials are properly and consistently cited in the style appropriate for the course (e.g., APA).
- □ **Links:** All links to external websites and online resources are working properly.
- □ **Identity:** Media used in the course (e.g., recorded lectures or presentations) is recognizable as belonging to the course (e.g., they have a title screen).

Accessibility & Universal Design

All materials are accessible and available in a format that can be printed.

- □ **Course Site:** Essential course information is placed in a prominent location.
- □ **Course Materials:** All course materials (documents, presentations, and media) reflect best practices for accessibility: http://accessibility.umn.edu/.
  - ▪ Microsoft Word and PowerPoint materials use proper formatting styles for accessibility.
  - ▪ Images/graphics and tables have descriptive alternative text.
  - ▪ PDF files are designed for accessibility.
  - ▪ Videos are captioned and/or transcripts provided.
- □ **Printer-friendly:** All course documents (syllabus, schedule, etc.) are available in a printer-friendly format.
- □ **Screen Reader Software**: Course site has been tested with screen reader software or an emulator.

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Course Communication
Multiple communication avenues are provided to support interaction among the instructor and students, and an open and respectful learning environment is established.

Course Administration:
☐ **Expected Behaviors and Respectful Contributions Statement:** Etiquette expectations for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are clearly stated.
☐ **Grounding Assumptions**: Instructor communicates grounding assumptions in order to establish a safe learning environment.
☐ **Frequently Asked Questions:** An "Ask Questions about the Course" discussion forum is used to give the instructor an opportunity to respond to student questions so that all students in the course can view the response (e.g., clarification on assignment instructions).

Instructor-Student:
☐ Instructor-student communication begins prior to the start of course (e.g., through Course Announcements).
☐ The instructor introduces her/himself online using text, audio, images, and/or video.
☐ The instructor has articulated how he or she will communicate with students throughout the course (e.g., instructor will be in regular contact with class through email, discussion postings, or other communication tools).
☐ Instructor's time frame to respond to student messages is clearly stated.
☐ How students will receive course communications is clearly stated (e.g., updates, reminders, special announcements).
☐ Instructor models expected behaviors (e.g., in discussion forums—complete sentences, grammar and punctuation, responds in a timely fashion).

Student-Student:
☐ Student-to-student interactions are required as part of the course.
☐ Students are provided with a way to introduce themselves to each other.
☐ Activities to promote student interaction, communication, and community building (e.g., "get acquainted" forum, ice-breakers, requiring students to respond to discussion forum posts) are included.

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Learning Technologies

Learning technologies are used appropriately to facilitate learning and instructions are provided to enable students to successfully use the technologies.

- □ **Appropriate:** The course uses a variety of technology tools to support different learning styles and to foster student learning, communication, interaction, and collaboration.
- □ **Accessible:** Students can readily access the technologies required in the course.
- □ **Tech skills:** Technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated.
- □ **Tech requirements:** Information about technical requirements such as hardware, software, connection speed, and browser plug-ins is provided.
- □ **Installs:** Links and instructions for accessing and installing necessary software are provided.
- □ **Required software:** Required versus optional software is clearly communicated.
- □ **Costs:** Costs of required or optional software are clearly communicated.

Course Evaluation

Students have an opportunity to provide useful feedback about the course, course site, and technologies used.

- □ **Formative feedback:** There is a way for students to provide formative feedback during the course.
- □ **Respond:** Instructors have a plan for responding to student feedback about the course while it is in progress, making changes during the course if possible.
- □ **Summative feedback:** There is a way for students to provide summative feedback at the end of the course.
- □ **Course site:** There is a way for students to provide feedback on the course site and technologies used.

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