

Nine Online Course Development Tips

By: [Rob Kelly](#) in [Instructional Design](#), [Online Education](#)

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As an instructional designer and online instructor at the Community College of Baltimore County Catonsville, Dionne Thorne has worked with many instructors as they develop their online courses. Based on this experience, she offers the following advice on the course design process:



1. Take advantage of the opportunity to work with an instructional designer. Not all instructors will have access to an instructional designer. If you are able to work with an instructional designer, understand his or her role in the online course development process. Contrary to what some instructors may think, instructional designers are not merely there to load the course. Rather, the relationship between the instructional designer and faculty member works best when viewed as a collaboration that brings together the instructor's content expertise with the instructional designer's knowledge of pedagogy and technology. "It's not going to happen in six weeks. I'd like to have three to six months to load it, test it, and have time for feedback," Thorne says.

As an instructional designer, Thorne asks a lot of questions: What are the big ideas? What will students walk away with? What can you do online? What have you done face to face? What do you think will work online? What tools are you comfortable with? How much time do you have to invest in the course?

"I'm here to look at the course from the student perspective," Thorne says.

2. Collaborate with another instructor. Regardless of whether you have the opportunity to work with an instructional designer, look to peers for ideas and advice on designing your online course.

"Talk to other faculty to see what they're doing, what works, and what doesn't," Thorne says.

Another faculty member can help you spot mistakes or navigation issues that might not seem obvious to you. Having a peer review your course can help determine the source of a problem—the course design, the facilitation, or the students.

3. Make sure you are addressing the learning objectives. Always have the course objectives in front of you and match each objective to elements of the course as you design the course. "If you can't justify or explain how [an element] meets the course's learning objectives, it needs to go," Thorne says.

4. Match the content to the appropriate format. For variety, workload considerations, and good design, be sure to consider how to best to engage students with the material. "For example, you can't have five discussions in one week," Thorne says. Consider self-graded assignments, journal entries, and even optional assignments.

5. Provide a variety of ways to communicate with students. "Some students want to talk online only. Some need to hear your voice or meet you in person. Give them a variety of ways to contact you. People forget the telephone. When you ask them to introduce themselves in the discussion forum, also ask them to include their contact information

—email, phone number, etc.,” Thorne says.

6. Maintain consistent course design. For each module, Thorne has five or six learning objectives that she explains in an introduction. This helps students understand what they’re doing and why.

7. Minimize the use of online lectures. Thorne does not include online lectures in her courses. She includes PowerPoint slides but does not narrate them. (Students tell her that they do not like narrated PowerPoint presentations.) For instructors who want to include lectures, Thorne says to limit them to five- to seven-minute sessions. “Don’t put a 45-minute lecture online,” she says.

8. Try to remain within the learning management system. When you introduce course elements that reside outside the LMS, you create the potential for technology support issues. Not all students have the same comfort level with new technologies. If you can avoid taking students outside the LMS, you have more control of the support they get. Also, from a navigation standpoint, having a single place to go helps ensure that students will not get lost in the course. Thorne advises adopting the three-click rule—having all the course content accessible within three clicks of the course home page.

9. Revise your course every semester. In addition to the expected content-related course updates, online courses also involve the technology component. Online courses evolve over time. Don’t expect to get everything right the first time. Expect it to take at least three times of teaching it and revising it to get it to the level you would like.

Avoid including too much content and technology in an online course. Faculty often do this because they’re not convinced of the efficacy of the online learning environment and they need to ensure that students meet the learning objectives. This can actually backfire, resulting in an unreasonable faculty workload—the so-called course-and-a-half syndrome. “Take baby steps,” Thorne says.

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