Seattle Pacific University

Guidelines for peer review of online courses

Seattle Pacific University

2014

# Introduction to peer review of online courses

Educational Technology & Media

A course review is not a judgment; it is a recognition and an acknowledgement of work in progress. The purposes of peer course review are to highlight the positive qualities of an instructor’s design, and to offer suggestions for future improvement. It is intended to be a formative process that will affirm, guide, and encourage a colleague as he or she ventures into online instruction. As such, the tenor of a good peer review is always balanced, supportive, and developmental.

There are a lot of different ways to build an online course. The feedback that you receive may vary based on the reviewer, and may be different from how you may have learned how to develop an online course. There is no one single answer, please take the opinion of your peer review as a spring board to build on.

However, courses by their very nature differ in many respects, e.g., size, level, discipline, objectives, pedagogical strategies, instructor preference, student demographic. This means that an approach to peer review should be adjusted to take reasonable account of these differences. Such adjustments are ultimately best addressed by the faculty and staff of a college, department, program, or other unit where a community of pedagogical practice has already been long established.

**The same principle applies to these guidelines for peer course review: it is a work in progress.** The guidelines have already undergone several revisions, and is likely to be revised yet again upon occasion as it is more widely used on our campus. This history is elaborated briefly below to offer a better sense of both the value and the limits of these materials.

The peer review criteria and process recommended in the guidelines originated with the peer review checklist provided in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) faculty development program for blended/online course redesign. That peer review checklist was initially developed by Tanya Joosten (UWM), and was based on her survey of analogous peer review instruments used across the country. As such, it offers a fairly broad national consensus on the manner in which online courses may be evaluated. We have permission to use, modify as long as we share the changes with other institutions.

Finally, the instrument that follows was developed at UWM with the leadership of Amy Mangrich and Tanya Joosten. The usefulness and validity of the materials was examined in a series of pilot workshops, which led to revisions. We fully anticipate that this process of learning and revising will continue as we pilot this tool at Seattle Pacific University.

The goal, in the end, is to produce a standard approach to online course peer review at SPU that will be reasonably straightforward for experienced faculty to use in their own respective areas, yet at the same time make visible for analysis the complex underlying assumptions, structures, and process of an online course.

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# How to use this manual

Here are some brief notes about how to use this manual. As a reviewer, you should expect to take approximately two hours to review an online course. It is unrealistic to expect reviewers to participate in all possible course activities, therefore it is recommended that you do a “deep dive” into one or two modules in the course. For example, go through one course module and listen to the instructor’s screencast for quality and clarity; do not try to listen to all the podcasts or screencasts an instructor may have included in their course.

After you have completed your review, you may find it helpful to meet and discuss your evaluation with your partner peer reviewer to calibrate your findings. Please meet with the instructor whose course you reviewed to discuss your findings.

For some practical tips, peer reviewers will be enrolled in courses as instructors. Be sure to review the course with edit mode off so that you can see the course from the student’s perspective. Please remember that as per FERPA guidelines, student grades past and present are confidential and should only be used to give feedback to the course’s instructor.

There are three steps in the peer review process. Step 1 elicits a broad, general familiarity of the reviewer with the syllabus and course website. The purpose of Step 2 is to evoke specific details that may be used to support the reviewer’s remarks and suggestions. Each of the five elements in Step 2, in checklist form, speaks to known best practices for online courses. As the reviewer reviews these practices, s/he may note in the checklist that they are present, absent, or not relevant to the course design. There is also space provided for more detailed comments.

Step 3, the final element (“other remarks and suggestions not included in step one and two”) recognizes that every course and reviewer bring unique perspectives which are not readily captured by a checklist, and thus provides an opportunity to document the course, and the reviewer’s approach, more comprehensively.

# Step 1: Exploring the course overview materials

As a reviewer, it is necessary for you to have a thorough introduction to the course being evaluated. Taking some time to understand the overall course structure, organization, and outcomes from the instructor’s point of view will make the review process much more transparent. Please read through all the questions below and then begin searching for the answers. You may find many of these answers in the course syllabus, which is a good place to begin. However, you are likely to find some of them in other documents located in the course site or in other areas of the course site altogether.

**What are the course characteristics?**

**Level**

**Course size**

**Department**

**Is the course required?**

**What is the course format (for example, blended or online)?**

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**How are the overall objectives for the course identified?**

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**How are the students being graded in this course?**

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**How are the course modules organized? (e.g., by weeks of the quarter, by intellectual sequence, and/or by their internal structure)?**

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**How are the students expected to interact with one another?**

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**How will the students interact with the instructor?**

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**What is the primary method of delivering the content of the course?**

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# Step 2: Addressing the key parameters of review

I. Learner support and resources

II. Organization of course materials

III. Instructional design and delivery

IV. Effective use of the online environment

V. Assessment of student learning and course review

## I. Learner Support and Resources

An exemplary course contains extensive information about being an online learner and links to campus resources, provides a variety of course-specific resources, contact information for instructor, department and program, and offers access to a wide range of resources supporting course content.  *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Content/Syllabus** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** | **Evidence** |
| Contact information for the instructor(s) |  |  |  |  |
| Contact instructions and expectations for instructor support |  |  |  |  |
| Explicit expectations for the amount of online participation required |  |  |  |  |
| Tips for student success in the course |  |  |  |  |
| Essential campus services such as Computer Information Services, The Center for Learning, library resources, Disability Support Services, ELL/ESL resources and emergency response procedures |  |  |  |  |
| Basic technical information including necessary software, necessary hardware, minimum computer configuration, login information to library resources |  |  |  |  |
| Necessary computer skills for success in the online environment |  |  |  |  |
| Technical troubleshooting help files, tips and tutorials, including where to go for technical help, such as Educational Technology & Media Services |  |  |  |  |
| Students complete orientation activities such as a self-assessment quiz, scavenger hunt, group work tutorial, or online personal introduction |  |  |  |  |
| Course instructions encourage a safe, hospitable online environment for students to share thoughts and ideas |  |  |  |  |
| Course instructions encourage a safe, hospitable online environment for spiritual formation |  |  |  |  |

**Feedback to instructor (***These guiding questions are to support the reviewer in writing a summary of this section but are not intended to be answered point by point)***:**

**How have materials, activities, and resources been included to orient students to the course design and the technology? How were students provided with information about where to get application downloads, etc., and where to seek help with course technologies?**

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## II. Organization of course materials

An exemplary course is well-organized and easy to navigate. Students clearly understand all components and structure of the course. Course syllabus identifies and clearly delineates the role the online environment will play in the total course. Aesthetic design presents and communicates course information clearly throughout the course. All web pages are visually and functionally consistent throughout the course. Accessibility issues are addressed throughout the course. Each module links one or more course objectives to learning activities and an assessment of student work. Modules are well organized, clear, and complete. *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Content/Syllabus** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** | **Evidence:** |
| Syllabus and welcome materials easily located  |  |  |  |  |
| Course complies with University copyright and fair use policy |  |  |  |  |
| Basic course info (e.g., assignment schedule & descriptions, rubrics, technical support information) broken into several tightly focused documents for accessibility |  |  |  |  |
| Course objectives and course completion requirements are explicit |  |  |  |  |
| Printable course schedule with due dates/times |  |  |  |  |
| Overall grading scheme includes the value of each assessment type (e.g., quizzes 20% of the final grade) |  |  |  |  |
| Larger assignments (term papers or projects) broken into smaller pieces, and students receive feedback on each piece |  |  |  |  |
| Web site content organized in logical format, such as weekly modules, providing topics and sub-topics that are visually and functionally consistent |  |  |  |  |
| Checklist, agenda and/or learning objectives for each module |  |  |  |  |
| Assignment instructions clear, useful, and concise |  |  |  |  |
| Syllabus presented is Web-ready, e.g., short paragraphs and sentences, hyperlinks, white space and sub-headers show topic breaks (see syllabus template in Appendix) |  |  |  |  |
| Academic integrity defined for an online course (e.g., discussion forums, quizzes) |  |  |  |  |

**Feedback to instructor (***This guiding question is to support the reviewer in writing a summary of this section but not intended to be answered point by point)***:**

**Please consider the organization and clarity of the course site and the syllabus. Was course navigation intuitive and logically organized?**

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## III. Instructional design and delivery

There are two componenets of this section.

1. Promote interaction and communication

An exemplary course offers ample opportunities for interaction and communication student to student, student to instructor and student to content. Involvement in activities such as discussion forums and/or small groups is used to engage students with the course and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. The coursework is framed so that instructor and students develop their own voices. *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

1. Alignment with learning objectives and enhancing student learning

Course goals are clearly defined and aligned with learning objectives. Learning objectives are identified and learning activities are clearly integrated. Course provides multiple activities which help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

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| **Announcements** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** | **Evidence:** |
| Instructor’s language supportive and friendly |  |  |  |  |
| Welcome message as introduction to the course, such as announcement on Blackboard, video welcome, e-mail message |  |  |  |  |
| Consideration for timely and appropriate announcements |  |  |  |  |
| **Discussions** |  |  |  |  |
| Social discussion forums for introductions and non-class related discussions |  |  |  |  |
| The instructor develops a presence in the discussion forums (e.g., facilitates discussion, encourages “quiet” students, redirects off-topic students) |  |  |  |  |
| The instructor encourages the development of new ideas, prompts provocative responses, includes higher level questions, and discussions do not encourage one single correct answer |  |  |  |  |
| Discussion assignments include word limits, style, tone, points to be included, deadlines for original postings and responses |  |  |  |  |
| Netiquette rules are provided |  |  |  |  |
| The instructor demonstrates faith integration into the discussions and fosters openness to different perspectives |  |  |  |  |
| **Content/Discussions/Groups** |  |  |  |  |
| Link between each learning objective, assessment, and learning activity is clear |  |  |  |  |
| Assignments incorporate active learning and critical thinking (e.g., case studies, applications, simulations or role-playing) |  |  |  |  |
| Assignments encourage peer-learning community (e.g., small groups perform collaborative exercises, initial team-building activities encourage group effectiveness) |  |  |  |  |
| Assignments encourage students to engage with course content (e.g., digital media and interactive learning objects) |  |  |  |  |

**Feedback to instructor (***These guiding questions are to support the reviewer in writing a summary of this section but are not intended to be answered point by point)***:**

**How has the instructor attempted to establish an online peer learning community through the use of asynchronous discussion forums or small group work? How has the instructor created a hospitable environment for group participation and monitored the discussions to achieve this aim?**

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**What techniques does the instructor use to establish her/his own presence or voice in the course? How are students afforded opportunities to establish their presence or voice online?**

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**How do learning activities develop higher-level critical and problem-solving skills as well as the retention of more basic information?**

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## IV. Effective use of online environment

An exemplary course uses a variety of technology tools to appropriately facilitate communication and learning. New teaching methods are applied and enhance student learning, and interactively engage students. A variety of multimedia elements and/or learning objects are used and are relevant to student learning throughout the course. Course optimizes Internet access and effectively engages students in the learning process in a variety of ways throughout the course.

The course content, activities, and assessment take advantage of an online environment, instead of simply attempting to replicate face-to-face instruction in a Web-based environment. For instance, rich media and asynchronous activities are emphasized. If the course is blended, online work and face-to-face work elaborate and extend one another. *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

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| **Discussions** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** | **Evidence:** |
| Asynchronous and online synchronous activities replace face-to-face work |  |  |  |  |
| Collaborative group activities that enhance student-to-student interactions |  |  |  |  |
| Students share additional resources to enhance learning activities |  |  |  |  |
| The instructor facilitates, but does not dominate discussions |  |  |  |  |
| **Content** |  |  |  |  |
| Unit introductions and/or lectures in an audio format or in a narrated web presentation establish instructor’s presence |  |  |  |  |
| The course content is aligned with discussions, lectures/presentations and other activities for each unit of learning. |  |  |  |  |
| Streaming and/or interactive media are used (e.g., video clips, audio clips, graphic, or animations). |  |  |  |  |
| Relevant, faith-based connections integrated into the content |  |  |  |  |
| **Usability** |  |  |  |  |
| All files should open in a new window (documents, screencasts etc.) |  |  |  |  |
| Syllabus shared with students as a PDF |  |  |  |  |
| Page layout is uncluttered and includes white space |  |  |  |  |
| **Visual Design** |  |  |  |  |
| Sans serif font is used, type size is large enough for all students, images and graphics are easy to see, there is good contrast between text and background |  |  |  |  |
| Underlining is used only for hyperlinks |  |  |  |  |
| Bullets and numbers used to set apart items that can be listed, headings and subheadings are used consistently to logically organize content, color is used with purpose, bold and italics used sparingly/intentionally |  |  |  |  |
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**Feedback to instructor (***These guiding questions are to support the reviewer in writing a summary of this section but are not intended to be answered point by point)***:**

**How does the instructor use the online learning environment to improve instructional delivery?**

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**How does the use of rich media engage students with the course material?**

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**If the course is blended, how do the online and face-to-face components of the course reinforce one another?**

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## V. Assessment of student learning and course review

An exemplary course uses a variety of technology tools to appropriately facilitate communication and learning. New teaching methods are applied and enhance student learning, and interactively engage students. A variety of multimedia elements and/or learning objects are used and are relevant to student learning throughout the course. Course optimizes Internet access and effectively engages students in the learning process in a variety of ways throughout the course.

The course content, activities, and assessment take advantage of an online environment, instead of simply attempting to replicate face-to-face instruction in a Web-based environment. For instance, rich media and asynchronous activities are emphasized. If the course is blended, online work and face-to-face work elaborate and extend one another.

An exemplary course has multiple timely and appropriate activities to assess student readiness for course content and mode of delivery. Learning objectives, instructional and assessment activities are closely aligned. Ongoing multiple assessment strategies are used to measure content knowledge, attitudes and skills. Regular feedback about student performance is provided in a timely manner throughout the course. Students' self-assessments and peer feedback opportunities exist throughout the course.

Assessments involve both basic mastery and higher-order thinking. The overall assessment plan entails low-stakes, frequent learning activities with rapid feedback.

An exemplary course offers multiple opportunities for students to give feedback on course content. Instructor offers multiple opportunities for students to give feedback on ease of online technology in course. Instructor uses formal and informal student feedback in an ongoing basis to help plan instruction and assessment of student learning throughout the semester. *Use this general principle as a guideline as you complete the checklist below.*

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Content/Syllabus** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** | **Evidence:** |
| Assessment plan includes frequent, low-stakes assessments rather than just high stakes exams or term papers |  |  |  |  |
| Learning activities document attendance or participation |  |  |  |  |
| Detailed expectations for student performance on assignments (e.g., sample assignments or rubrics, detailed instructions) |  |  |  |  |
| If groups are used, assessment defined for both groups and individuals |  |  |  |  |
| **Gradebook** |  |  |  |  |
| A combination of both quantitative (grades) and qualitative (written and verbal) feedback is given. |  |  |  |  |
| Frequent, timely, and substantive qualitative feedback for students on their performance and areas which need improvement |  |  |  |  |
| Students assessed on multiple activities (e.g., discussions, group work, quizzes) |  |  |  |  |
| **Survey/Discussions** |  |  |  |  |
| Student feedback on improvement of course (e.g., a midterm review, students complete reflection assignments) |  |  |  |  |

**Feedback to instructor (***These guiding questions are to support the reviewer in writing a summary of this section but are not intended to be answered point by point)***:**

**Give examples of how the students are graded through a variety of methods, including the timely use and descriptive feedback.**

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**How does the instructor use rubrics or other clear and explicit instructions that helps students to understand the instructor’s expectations for their coursework?**

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**Describe how the instructor uses classroom assessment techniques (CATs), progressive surveys, or anonymous forums to gain student feedback during the course to make mid-course adjustments.**

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# Step 3. Other remarks and suggestions not included in Step 1 or 2

This section should be used for free-form comments and suggestions which may occur to the reviewer or seem especially relevant to the course, but do not fit comfortably into any area already covered by parts 1-2above.

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# Appendix: Useful Links and Resources

**Books**

[*Essentials in Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide*](http://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/SPU%3ACP51194052810001451)by Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosulksi

[*E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*](http://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/SPU%3ACP99130429930101847)by D. Randy Garrison

[*Adding some TEC-VARIETY : 100+ activities for motivating and retaining learners online*](http://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/SPU%3ACP71212044280001451)by Curtis Jay Bonk and Elaine Guat Lien Khoo

**SPU Online Learning Guiding Principles**

<http://blog.spu.edu/etm/files/2014/10/GuidelinesforEffectiveOnlineLearning-DRAFT.pdf>

**Recommendations Regarding Credit Hours, Last Day of Attendance, Authentication** http://blog.spu.edu/etm/online-learning-environment/

**Quick Start Guide for Online Teaching**

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1K6Ovnr-bqdP\_Oj7en2GzPLX36h3AVuhxG0twn1Ou0/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1K6Ovnr-bqU-dP_Oj7en2GzPLX36h3AVuhxG0twn1Ou0/edit?usp=sharing)

**Consider Adding the following to your syllabus**

Adding Contact info: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2011/01/06/adding-staff-information/>

Tips for student success in online courses: <http://connect.spu.edu/p4p2yuicg7u/>

Campus services

CIS: <http://spu.edu/cishelpdesk/>

Center for Learning: <http://spu.edu/depts/cfl/>

Library Resources: <http://spu.edu/library>

Technical Information

Hardware: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2010/07/30/recommended-hardware/>

Software: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2010/07/30/recommended-software/>

Troubleshooting: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/>

Academic integrity: <http://spu.edu/acad/GRCatalog/20134/policies.asp>

**Instructional Design and Delivery**

Announcements: <http://www.screencast.com/t/F8Pc6KN3jRc>

Discussions: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/student-discussion-boards/>

**Effective Use of Online Environment**

Student Sharing: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/using-google-docs-with-blackboard/>

**Assessment of Student Learning and Course Review**

Groups: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/student-groups/>

Student Feedback (surveys): <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2014/04/22/tests/>

**Learner Support and Resources**

Campus Resources: <http://www.spu.edu/acad/campusresources.html>

Download Center: [https://wiki.spu.edu/display/HKB/Download+Center](https://wiki.spu.edu/display/HKB/Download%2BCenter)

Help with Course Tech: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/student-resources/>

**Assessment of Student Learning and Course Review**

Surveys: <http://spuonlinelearning.wordpress.com/2014/04/22/tests/>

**Fair Use and Copyright Information:** <http://spu.libguides.com/copyright>