

Chapter 1

Creating Standards for Online Courses

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We have all heard the reports about how much online learning is growing each year. However, despite this growth, many faculty remain skeptical of online learning. In the fall of 2008, questions were raised in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences regarding the quality of the online courses taught in the college. Due to these questions and overall skepticism about online learning, the Department of Communication asked me to review the literature on online education and write a report on online pedagogy. The report addresses several myths about online education, such as “online education is not as effective as face to face instruction” and “online education cannot effectively teach communication courses,” citing studies by Bernard, et. al (2004), Brooks (2009), Meyer (2002, 2004), Phipps & Merisotis (1999), among others. [A copy of the report can be downloaded at [online](#)] The report culminates in the identification of some minimum standards of quality that all online courses in the Department of Communication should meet.

Faculty at the University of Colorado Denver value diversity and tend to resist the evils often associated with standardization. While we don’t want “clones” of our online courses, we believe there should be certain *minimum* standards that each online course should meet in order ensure quality pedagogy and consistent design.

Therefore, as of Fall 2009 the position of “Online Pedagogy Coordinator” was created. As the Online Pedagogy Coordinator, I am responsible for reviewing all online courses in our department to ensure that they meet the minimum standards we have established. Beginning in Spring 2010, all online courses offered by the Department of Communication must meet the following minimum standards:

Department of Communication *Minimum* Standards for Online Courses*

Syllabus <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> List overall course outcomes<input type="checkbox"/> Explain your specific grading policies
Course Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> All readings and assignments should be contained within the course management system (CMS); students shouldn’t be directed to the leave the CMS for course readings. Direct e-links to outside articles should be provided<input type="checkbox"/> Include a section under the Course Home to provide tips for succeeding in your online course.
Weeks / Units <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> List the learning objectives for each week/unit<input type="checkbox"/> Provide references at the end of each week / unit.
Threaded Discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Include regular threaded discussions throughout the semester<input type="checkbox"/> Establish instructor’s presence in the discussions in a “woven” manner
Grading <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Include grading rubrics for all assignments and discussions

<p>Submission of Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> All assignments should be turned in using the Dropbox. Assignments should not be submitted by email
<p>Office Hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct Virtual Office Hours to answer general course questions
<p>Welcoming Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Include a welcome page on the Homepage of the LMS
<p>Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate graphics to make pages more visually appealing <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that all course materials have a professional and consistent appearance (e.g., color choice, font, background colors) <input type="checkbox"/> Use textboxes to provide strong contrast for all units, announcements

*[A printable version of these standards can be accessed online.](#)

The instructors in the Department of Communication have embraced the standards. We have had several meetings to share information and ideas in order to ensure the quality of our online courses. The list of minimum standards has become a “jumping off” place for us to use as we discuss and improve our courses. We have shared ideas about the use of video to supplement course information, how to conduct peer reviews of student work, how to set up and manage group projects, and so forth.

I have been asked to share these standards with several other departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Science at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD). While these standards may seem to be a very elementary and a minimum list, students have reported that they have taken many online courses that did not even meet these very minimum standards. Therefore, it is suggested that each department construct a list of minimum standards to ensure that all students taking online courses in their department receive a consistent experience. Currently the UCD Faculty Ethics Committee is investigating how to ensure that all online classes meet minimum standards. One of the possibilities the committee is considering is the creation of more “Online Pedagogy Coordinator” positions—either in each Department, or in each school. Another possibility the committee is considering is requiring that all online instructors receive certification in online pedagogy and design before teaching online for UCD. With the University at large initiating an investigation into how to ensure quality and consistency across all online courses, it is time for us to construct at least a list of minimum standards within each Department and provide a means to ensure that the standards are met.

References

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Bio

Kathy Pounders earned her Master of Arts in Communication at the University of Colorado Denver. She is currently working on a second Master of Arts in Informational Technology Pedagogy and Design through the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. In the Fall of 2009 she was appointed to the position of Online Pedagogy Coordinator in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Denver. Kathy is a member of the University of Colorado Denver Online Faculty Advisory Committee. Prior to joining the world of academia in 1993, Kathy worked as Training and Development Manager in the business world.