In the Classroom 19

Exploring the Overview and Information Standards for an Online Course Review

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Stan Skrabut: Welcome back. Thanks for taking time to listen to my podcast. It certainly means a lot. With summer coming, I know that you can be doing other things. Maybe you are doing other things, driving or walking, but you're hanging out with me too so I really appreciate it. This week, we're going to start exploring this online quality review rubric. We are going to look at a specific tool. It's called OSCQR which stands for Open SUNY COTE Quality Review. COTE is the Center for Online Teaching Excellence. This tool has 50 standards, and it's divided into six major areas. Overview and information, technology and tools, design and layout, content and activities, interaction, assessment, and feedback.

We're going to be focusing on the 10 overview and information standards in this particular episode. What is a quality review? Information I took from the OSCQR site, basically an online course review and refresh process implemented as professional development exercise is designed to guide online faculty to use research base, effective practices, and standards to improve the quality effectiveness and efficiency of their online course design. It's not intended to be an online course evaluation or a quality assurance procedure. It's really designed to help the faculty develop better courses. That's kind of what it's for. Fortunately, we have this cool rubric that we can use. Let's dive into this.

As I mentioned, there's 10 standards. I will let you know when we're at each standard. Number one, course includes welcome and getting started content. Basically, what you're trying to do is set the stage for your whole course. This is getting out a really good welcome, and this helps to set the stage. A key component of this is it makes you human. One of the things that's showing up in course evals all over the place is that online courses typically get rated down on the human element component and what makes the instructor--

That students get to know their instructor and develop a bond with their instructor. Online course is a lot tougher because of that distance that you have between you and your students.

The other thing with this welcome and getting started is it allows you to tell your students what to do next. You can not only welcome them to your course but you can also guide them on what's in the course, where things are located, how to find them, what they need to do next. Some of the things that you may want to consider in doing this, video introduction. Video overview of your course I think are tremendously powerful. That, one, it really humanizes you, that you would get up in front of a class face to face and introduce yourself. You really need to do this in an online course too.

For some reason, the faculty are really hesitant to do this but the power it brings is immense.

A couple of tools that you may want to consider; Vidyard GoVideo or Screencastify. These are quick down and dirty tools that you can put on your Chrome toolbar and allows you to just create some videos. We're not looking for production quality. If your cat walks across your keyboard while you're doing intro, I think you will connect a lot more with your students. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure of it. They will definitely remember that. They will definitely comment on it. They will definitely appreciate that. Those are a couple of tools. I'll put them in the show notes.

Another way that you can help with this "getting started" is put together a detailed instruction sheet. A quick reference guide on how to get started, what things to do in the course, and as I noted, a video orientation. Give them a guided tour of your online course. Show them where everything is at. Don't make them go hunt and search for it. Show them what's going on.

Number two, an orientation or overview is provided for the course overall as well as in each module. Learners know how to navigate and what task to do. Basically, people like to know what's going on. They want to know where they are in a course, what things are coming up, when they're due, all of those things. One of the things that you can do for the overall course, and that's probably in your syllabus, is you let them know about course objectives, required readings, guidelines for interacting with people, certain expectations and due dates. Those things are all going to be in your overall syllabus.

What you would also want to do is do that at the module level and put that information there. First, things that you can do, ideas that you can improve your course, make sure that you have really good written descriptions of the type of learning activities that they will have in the course and how you expect them to interact. Make sure that you're very clear upfront, how long things are going to take so they can set the right expectations. Create a short video introduction. Basically, you can do this at the module level also, but as part of the course, and you can reinforce those things. For course modules, an introductory paragraph about the topics that you're going to cover in the module.

What are the specific learning objectives that you're going to cover? What are key concepts that you're going to be covering? Do you have any assigned readings? Any due dates? All that, you can put that right in front in the course module. Usually, right under the title, there's a space that you can put that information. That just lets the students know what's coming up and what's going to happen.

Number three, course introduces a course information area that deconstructs the syllabus for learners in a clear and navigable way. I'm going to tell you that you also need to have a printed syllabus or a way to print the syllabus as a whole. What they're really talking about is dissecting your syllabus piece by piece and creating separate sections in this course information documents area with those items. That way, if I needed to just print out the book list, I could just print out the book list. I don't have to print out the whole syllabus to get to the book list.

If I needed to print out specific instructions on how to access specific program that you wanted me to access, then I can print that material out. Blackboard is a crazy animal that you can create items which puts it right up on in front and you end up with the scroll of death or you can create a page and make individuals click on it. I prefer the page because of this ability to print. That's just something that I have.

You need to be very clear in your naming when you do these things. When you have this course information document folder, some of the things that you probably want to put in there that you're pulling from your syllabus or expanding on, certainly your course welcome, instructor contact information, what your expectations are, due dates and schedule, required text and other materials, learning activity overviews, how you want them to do those activities, interaction guidelines, grading and assignment rubrics, policies, campus policies, resources for that, strategies for success and a forum where they can ask a question. That's something that you want to consider putting in there.

Create a folder, put all those things in there. That way, students can access them pretty easy and they don't have to sift through a whole syllabus to get to them. With that said, having a link to a printable syllabus is really important. Recommendation is use something other than a Google Doc. Not a Google Doc but a Word document file, only that, because you don't want them to not be able to edit it and be able to change things. PDF, HTML are good formats for that but something that they can print or keep for their record.

Number five, course includes links to relevant campus policies on plagiarism, computer use, filing grievances, accommodating disabilities, et cetera. Basically, what you're doing is you have an area in your course information documents that has all these policies that you're linking to them, they're right, they're clear, they know what the expectations are. You're just providing links. If you use a course template--

We have a course template where I work, and we have an area specifically for those policies that we have put together. It makes it easy for us to update it and we can add additional policies. That way everybody is on board. Check to see if your institution has a template that you can use. I would recommend using that.

Number six, course provides access to learner success resources, technical help, orientation, tutoring. You want to make it as easy as possible for them to find out help based on whatever program that you are having them use. This is a great place to put that technical help information, information on anything that would hold them back. You want to get that information upfront, but if you have tutoring services or a learning center, you want links in there so they can get to those resources as easy as possible.

Ways that you can facilitate this is having short video overviews on where to locate and how to access these resources. Usually, at the beginning of the term, technical help is often needed. We have links on our learning management system where individuals can get help, but having a video pointing them in the right direction, that could make things a little easier. Any services that you have, you may want those services to create their own videos and have those as part of your course, so they

know the people that they need to reach out to and contact information and all that. That just helps them get them on the right track faster.

Number seven, course information states whether the course is fully online blended or enhancement. This is actually a pretty easy thing to do. On your syllabus, all you're doing is making a little note that this is an online course. For fully online courses, students need to know how to access the materials and what specific time frames they have to do this in. That basically they don't have to be in the same place at the same time. That's kind of important for asynchronous class, such as ITV class, which we teach, interactive TV or face to face class. Then they need to know when and where they need to be for those particular courses.

Number eight. Appropriate methods and devices for accessing and participating in the course are communicated. This is mobile, publisher websites, secure content, pop-ups, browser issues, microphones, webcams, et cetera. We have a lot of students trying to do online courses with their phone. This is not a success strategy but they still try.

I think a lot of it is because instructors are not as clear as they could be on letting them know what works and what doesn't work with the learning management system. It's good to go and find out these things ahead of time and make students aware of what issues that they may have or in some cases, that a mobile device is not going to be good. You want to make sure that you communicate this. This may require a little exploring on your own.

Going into student mode in your learning management system and trying to access it with mobile devices to see what features work or don't work. Check with the IT department or your instructional designers, see what guidance that they can provide. Once again, in the template that we provided, we talk about technologies and what can be successful or what's not successful. Ask the learners themselves at the end of the course, what issues that they had and some strategies to get around that and just catalog those and that can be very useful also.

Number nine. Course objectives or outcomes are clearly defined, measurable and aligned to learning activities and assessment. You should be really building your courses around learning objectives. Learning objective tells the students exactly what you want them to be able to do at the end of the course or those learning outcomes and your learning objectives are really the very specific things. By doing this, this helps you build your assessments. It helps you build find the activities that you want students to use. It also helps you find the content that you want to put in the course and get in front of them.

Objectives should address what learners need to know, when they complete the module course or program. Align activities and assessment should showcase how learners have achieved those objectives. Important stuff, you should be able to map those out. If somebody like me, went through your course and mapped it all out, identified all the different content you had, all the different activities and all the different assessments in your course, we should be able to map those to very specific course objectives and outcomes. If we do that, great.

If you can't point a specific thing in your course to a learning objective, then you have to either ask yourself, why isn't the objective there? If the objective is not needed, why do I need this content? Maybe you are giving them fluff and you don't really need to do that. Bloom's Taxonomy is a very powerful tool for building great objectives for your course. Have once again, some resources in the show notes that talk a little bit about that.

Coming up to number 10. Number 10, course provides contact information for the instructor department and program. Basically you are giving them information where they can get ahold of you. You want them to be able to somehow get ahold of you in their time of need. A lot of different ideas that you can use. You can have a digital card or just information on the learning management system with all your contact information. Something maybe that they can print out and have handy. You definitely want to have your instructor, your department--

When Teaching for the University of Wyoming, we always also had the administrative assistant for the department on our syllabus and a way to contact that person. Another great idea is developing a key contacts list and link to it from the course homepage. That way it's easy for students to download and have available if they need to get ahold of somebody. Having those key contacts, those key contacts could be the learning center.

They could be the instructional, the help desk. It could be instructional designers if you want those folks on it. Anyone that you think is necessary for their learning put on there and certainly your name. If you want to, you also could create a video which introduces a lot of these different people.

Those are the 10 items. Let's get a quick recap to those 10 items. One, course includes welcome and getting started content. Two, an orientation or overview is provided for the course overall, as well as in each module, learners know how to navigate and what tasks to do. Three, course includes the course information area that deconstructs the syllabus for learners in a clear and navigable way. Number four, a printable syllabus is available to learners in PDF or HTML. Number five, course includes links to relevant campus policies on plagiarism, computer use, filing grievances, accommodating disabilities et cetera.

Number six, course provides access to learner success resources which are technical help, orientation, tutoring. Number seven, course information states whether the course is fully online, blended or web-enhanced. Number eight, appropriate methods and devices for accessing and participating the course are communicated. This talks about mobile, publisher websites, secure content, pop-ups, browser issues, microphones, webcams, those kind of things. Number nine, course objectives and outcomes are clearly defined measurable and aligned to learning activities and assessments.

Number 10, course provides contact information for instructor, department, and program. There you have it. That is the 10. That is everything that is outlined in the rubric for overview and information section. When we come back, we are going to look

at the next section, which deals with technology. In the meantime, here's a quick plug for my book.