Distance Education Effective Best Practices
Johns Hopkins School of Education
Center for Technology in Education

A. Effective Best Practices for Design

1. **Design for Active and Effective Learning**
   - Context fits online instruction.
   - Needs, learning goals, and learning styles are considered in the design.
   - Appropriate instructional strategies and technologies are used to fit the content.
   - Desired learning outcomes are stated in the syllabus, or in each learning unit.
   - Specific assessments for each learning outcome are stated in the course outline and in the LMS.

2. **Design for Usability**
   - Include a glossary defining unusual or technical terms used in the course.
   - Provide links to sources of supplementary information.
   - Universal accessibility: Consideration is given to learners who may have physical or learning challenges.
   - The layout is appropriate for the content and intended audience.
   - Navigational icons or cues are used consistently.
   - The format is uncluttered and includes white space.
   - Buttons or text links depict clearly the content.
   - Unused buttons or links are removed.
   - Needed tools are included as part of the main menu for easy access (i.e. Discussion Board, Groups, Live Class)
   - A Course Banner with the course title and number is included to differentiate courses and give them a personal appeal.

3. **Design for Effective Organization**
   - The introduction lecture gives an accurate indication of how the material is arranged.
   - The organization or sequencing of the content is appropriate for the subject matter and the intended audience.
   - Topics of instructions within each course are divided into units, sessions, or modules.
   - Units are related to main topics stated in the syllabus.
   - The organization of the units is consistent throughout the course. For example, each unit may have the following sections: introduction, objectives, readings, lecture, activity, discussion, and unit assignment.

- References to other parts of the material are correct.
- Links to other parts of the course or external sources of information are accurate.

4. **Design for Consistent Language**
   - Language used is clear and direct.
   - Clear directions are given in each unit or module.
   - Sentences and paragraphs used are brief and to the point.
   - Bullets or numbers are used for instruction or directions.
   - Language used is supportive and encouraging.
   - Terms used are consistent, for example if the instructor refers to a component of the course as a Unit, the word Unit is be used throughout the course.
   - Abbreviations and symbols are defined or rarely used.
   - Bullets, dashes, and numbers are used consistently.
   - Spelling and grammar are consistent and accurate.
   - References to assignments and is consistent within the courses of one program in order to avoid confusion.

5. **Design for Effective Discussion**
   - The discussion board includes one section separate from the classroom discussions for socialization; call it (Café, Water Cooler etc.)
   - The discussion board includes one section separate from the classroom discussions for asking questions; call it (ask the professor etc.), this way all students benefit from the answers given.
   - If an area for social connections is created, it will allow serious discussions to be conducted in the main discussion areas.
   - Provide rubrics to ensure that posts are complete and thoughtful.
   - Allow students to respond to each other, with complete and constructive responses.
   - Instructor may want to reply to discussions when needed and if to put the topic back on track. Instructor may also want to add a general reply to the discussion in the end, offering good insights and encouragement. During an active discussion, the instructor may want to offer words of encouragements and guide the discussion.

6. **Design for Collaboration**
   - Create a private area for group work.
   - Include three to five students in each group.
   - Make sure each group is working with specific assignments and roles.
   - Make sure that all groups come back together on the main discussion board to discuss their findings.

B. Course Learning Outcomes and Objectives

1. **Objectives and Learning Outcomes**
   - Objectives are clear and state what must be done in each unit.
   - Learning outcomes state expectations for the course that are clear and measurable.
   - Assessments are mapped to each learning outcome.

2. **Course Content**
   - Content is directly related to objectives and learning outcomes.
   - Content is appropriate to the students' learning styles, level of maturity, prior knowledge, and experiences.
   - Content is accurate, relevant, current, and divided into small incremental units.
   - Readings are included as attachments, pages from a book the students purchased, scanned pages of books or journals, e-journals, e-books, or trusted Web sites. (refer to copyright laws)
   - Include videos, audios, images, interactive exercises, Reusable Learning Objects, whenever possible or available.

3. **Learning Resources**
   - Materials and technology chosen are appropriate for the learners and the subject matter.
   - Various technologies and learning resources are used to ensure compatibility to different learning styles and abilities.
   - Specific technology and multimedia is used only if specified in the technology requirements and the students are expected to have acquired it at an earlier date.
   - The format of multimedia, technology, and software is clearly stated and a proper link is provided for download.
   - Technology is used to support learning and not for technology's sake.

C. Plan for Sociability
   - Make sure students create their own homepages. Ask them to add some personal information and to be consistent with the identity they project. Participants are more comfortable and more likely to respond and bond with other participants with a trusted persona.
   - As an Instructor include a bio with some personal information.
   - Use of activities, collaboration and student profile is a must for creating community.
   - Activities
     o are designed for collaborative learning
     o facilitate peer to peer interaction and help students learn from each other
     o encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving
     o are introduced in order of difficulty
     o can be performed within the time frame given. Constructive, relevant, and frequent feedback is provided to promote clarification, elaboration, and transfer.

- The number of activities is not overwhelming and in anyway a hindrance for the natural progress of the class; they are sufficient for supporting learning.

D. Course Management

Timely and positive feedback is one of the most important components of an online course.

- Respond to emails within 24 hours if longer let the students know.
- Grade all discussions threads.
- Give timely feedback on all assignments graded or ungraded.
- Give private and constructive feedback.
- Make sure students apply what they learned: 1) Through group activities, 2) Individual projects, 2) Presentations, and 3) Leading asynchronous discussions.

E. Assessment

Assessing student work
- Learners are given clear expectations and criteria for credit assignments. Examples of assignments that meet the criteria may be included for students to review.
- The number of assignments and their due dates are reasonable.
- Evaluation and grading procedures are clear and explicit.
- The relationships between course learning outcomes, evaluation strategies, and course assignments are evident to the learner.
- The relationship between individual assignments and the final course grade is clearly specified.
- Detailed step-by-step instructions are provided for each evaluative exercise.
- Guidelines for submitting assignments are provided.
- Students are informed about the criteria that will be used to evaluate their participation in online activities such as discussion groups.
- Rubrics are included for all assessment pieces and made available to the students.

F. Evaluations

1. **Informal Course Evaluations**
   - Is conducted by instructor within the course and is intended for information gathering about the effectiveness of the course and student satisfaction.
   - Is conducted mid-semester, and prompts the instructor or design team to make changes in the course according to the results.
   - Instructor may want to perform informal end of semester focus group and discussion for course evaluation. The results will prompt a redesign of the course if needed.

2. **Formal Course Evaluations (College)**
   - Is conducted online.
   - Is uniform to all graduate courses conducted online.
   - It reflects institutional goals and simulates face to face evaluations for content, but not for method of delivery.
   - Reflects the nature of online instruction.
   - Results from course evaluations may prompt appropriate action: 1) Course redesign, 2) Change of activity, 3) Student training, and 4) Faculty training.

G. Course Update
   - It is advisable to pilot the course before implementation in order to redesign if needed.
   - The course is reviewed by experts in content and design.
   - In following semesters, the course is updated in order to stay current in both content and technical aspects.

H. Recommendations for Specific Program Needs

1. **User-Centered Approach**
   - The needs of the students and faculty are considered when creating courses and best practices.
   - Basic distance education guidelines are considered when tailoring the best practices for the program.
   - Students are surveyed mid-semester to ensure that needs are being met.
   - Results of evaluations are applied to modifications if deemed crucial or important.

2. **Needs of Students and Faculty**
   1.

3. **Solutions**
   1.