

Course Layout and Design

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Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses

Some Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses, based on prior experience with teaching online courses through MLC and student feedback from various courses.

Length of lessons

Weekly or every 2 weeks. In EDU9502: Designing and Constructing Online Courses, everyone learned that course material should be "chunked" into small segments within a lesson and that lessons should normally be only one or two weeks in length. Students prefer new lessons beginning on the same day of the week throughout the course.

Which day of the week should a lesson begin/end?

During the fall and spring terms, most students in the graduate program are teaching full-time, which gives them little time to work on their grad course on school days. Therefore, they complete the bulk of their work for a given lesson over the weekend. For this reason, many of them indicated that in the **spring and fall** they prefer that new lessons begin on a **Wednesday** and end on a **Tuesday** since it places the weekend in the middle of the lesson time period.

However, **during the summer term**, they prefer that lessons run from the typical **Sunday** through **Saturday** (or Monday through Sunday) since they prefer to do the bulk of their work during the week and not on the weekends. Some instructors simply prefer to run courses from Sunday through Saturday even during the school year, which is okay. Ultimately, it is up to the course instructor.

Preparing to teach a course during the 8-week summer term

When transforming a regular semester-long online course (15-16 weeks) and teaching it in the summer term (8 weeks), there is no need to redo or combine any of your lessons. The idea is to simply take each two-week period from the fall or spring semester offering and cover the same material in one week in the summer term. For most instructors that means they cover two lessons per week in the summer, often running one lesson from Sunday-Wednesday and the other lesson

from Wednesday-Saturday. (Remember, in the summer term most students prefer a Sunday-Saturday "week", as explained earlier.)

Keep all students working through the course at the same pace

Typically, some students prefer to work ahead while others seem to wait to do things at the last minute. In an online course, it is important that students are working on the group aspects of the lesson at the same time. One good method to attempt to satisfy both extremes is to make the "lesson guide sheet" document visible to students about a week prior to the start of the new lesson, but don't make the posting or submission areas visible until the official start date of the lesson. If following a "Wednesday-Tuesday weekly format," some instructors make the next week's lesson guide sheet available on a Friday evening, so students that want to work ahead can use the weekend to do so, but they can not submit their work until the lesson officially begins on the following Wednesday. (Also, see the sections on Post due dates... and Group discussion forum due dates below.)

Post due dates to inform and pace student work

A schedule of activities can be posted in a variety of ways. Some instructors provide a document listing all of the activities and the due dates at the start of the course. Others provide general dates for lessons in the Moodle heading areas of topical blocks, and specific activity due dates within the instructions for the activity, or in the activity set up in Moodle. Others make use of the Moodle calendar. Many instructors use more than one method. If your lesson is spread across more than a week, it is wise to make some activities due before the end of the lesson so students cannot save everything for the last minute. (Also, see the suggestion below on Group discussion forum due dates.)

Group discussion forum due dates

Set a posting due date for the original contribution to a forum, and then a later posting due date for replies. For example, if a new weekly lesson starts on Wednesday, some instructors set a due date of Saturday for the initial post and a due date of Tuesday for all reply posts. This forces all students in a group to make their initial contribution to the forum by the middle of the weekend, which allows those that want to take care of their reply posts obligations on the second half of the weekend and without having to stay up late into the evening to do so.

Provide a "Student Expectations" document

Different online instructors have different expectations of students. It is very helpful to your students if you post your expectations of them at the very start of the course. It is also a good idea to include what students can expect from the instructor!

Use the Moodle Grade Book

Students are used to seeing grades, and comments, on various activities posted to the grade book in Moodle. The current grade book can accommodate many different methods of grading. However, if you have not used it before or recently, getting it set up can be confusing. However, Rachel is always able, willing, and happy to assist you in setting up your grade book and understanding how it works. Simply let her know how you would like grades to be calculated and she will set up the grade book for you!

Use "Choice" for students to select activities

The "choice" activity feature in Moodle is very good at allowing (forcing) students to select from a list of possible choices for a given activity so you do not have more than one student selecting the same project or activity in a given lesson. It can also be used to get student feedback (vote) on a particular question.

Use "Groups" for discussion work

Small groups are often used in discussion forums to greatly cut down the amount of reading and posting that students need to do during the course. At the end of a group activity, it is a good practice to set the group setting to "Visible groups" so all participants will be able to view the discussion that occurred within other groups. When the change is made, it is a good idea to add some text in the forum introduction such as: *Please note: The setting in this forum has been changed from "Separate Groups" to "Visible Groups." To see the work from a different group, select the group by using the "Visible groups" button located below.* Generally, viewing or reading these additional posts should be optional.

In Moodle, it is less confusing to students to have them in only one group at a time. If students are members of more than one group at a time, students need to exercise additional care so that they post to the correct group for each activity. They need to specify the correct group prior to selecting the "Add a new discussion topic" button.

There is not a perfect group size, but groups of four or five seem to have worked well in discussion forums for many instructors. If one person is late in posting, the others still have two or three

different people they can make their reply post to.

Grading discussion forums

It is important that students understand the grading rubric that is being used for discussion forum work. A convenient way to assign points is to use the "Sum of ratings" setting in the forum setup, and then assign a certain number of points for the initial post and a certain number of points for each reply post. It is also good to include a general message in the forum introduction area so students understand the rating being used, such as *(This forum is worth 10 points. You will receive up to 5 points for your initial post and up to 3 for each reply post.)*

Use the "Folder" resource to allow students to see work produced by others

If you want to share work produced by class participants with others in the class, the "Folder" resource is the best way to accomplish this.

On the course homepage, create a "Folder" resource and then upload student files into it. (You may zip student files into a single file, upload the zipped file into the folder, and then unzip.)

Instructor participation/presence

It is important to let students know that you are actively reading their work and checking in on the course on a nearly daily basis. This is especially important in discussion forums. A least one instructor makes a post during the week of the first group discussion forum similar to the following:

Instructor participation/presence: Generally, I will not actively participate in small-group discussion work. Think of these discussions as they might occur in a regular face-to-face classroom. The instructor walks around the room and listens in on the various groups, but does not necessarily participate in the discussion. If I am asked a specific question in a group discussion, I will always respond. Please realize that I normally check in on the course numerous times each day, 7 days a week. If I am going to be off-line for more than a day or two, such when attending conferences, I will let everyone know ahead of time.

Be consistent in how materials are to be turned in

Most instructors make use of the assignment activity upload features in Moodle to receive student work and provide comments back to the students. Others might use a different method. There is no

one method that needs to be followed, but it is good to be consistent throughout the course.

Scanned files

Scanned pages from books should be scanned directly in a PDF (not jpg) format with multiple pages combined together in a single document. This will greatly reduce the overall file size, make the text and/or images clearer, and be much easier for the students to work with. (Feel free to contact Rachel for assistance.)

Lesson Feedback after each lesson/unit

Waiting until the end of the course for summative feedback is not as useful as gathering feedback after each lesson. You can use the **Feedback** activity at the end of each lesson where students are asked to complete 3 statements;

The most useful thing in the lesson was...

The most challenging part of the lesson was...

The lesson could be improved by...

Although this is still gathering information after the fact, such feedback can be very useful information for the next time the course is offered and sometimes even useful for making adjustments to future lessons in the current offering of the course.

Faculty assistance

Many useful screencasts and documents have been placed here on KnightHelp. Also, feel free to contact Rachel for assistance.

Layout and Navigation Basics

Course Layout Explained

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/y12xYdGOq0s>

Turning Editing On

1. Enter the course site you want to edit.
 2. Click the blue **Turn Editing On** button in the upper right corner.
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Adding Course Content

1. Turn editing on for the course site.
2. Click **Add an activity or resource** in the topic where you want to add content.
3. From the resulting window, choose the activity or resource type you'd like to add and follow the prompts.
4. Clicking each choice will show a description of the activity or resource on the right side of the window.
5. After making your selection, click **Add** and follow the prompts for the activity or resource.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/dQSfNX0EIMY>

Deleting Course Content

1. Turn editing on for the course site.
2. Click **edit** underneath the content or activity you want to remove.

3. Choose **Delete**.

4. Choose **Yes**.

[Image from Gyazo](#)
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Using Topics

MLC courses use collapsed topics by default. These topics can be used to organize course content, help students locate assignments, and efficiently hide and show groups of content to students.

Tips for Using Topics

- Topics can be thought of like file folders. Each topic can contain a variety of activities and resources.
 - Topics can be used to organize a course in numerous ways, depending on the type of course and instructor preference.
 - By week - each week of the course gets one topic containing the information and activities needed for the week.
 - By unit/chapter/lesson
 - By content type
 - Showing/hiding a topic also shows/hides all the content within that topic in the student view.
 - New courses have a default number of topics added automatically. Topics can be added or deleted to fit the course content.
 - If content is imported from a previous course, topics can be imported as well.
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Working with Topics

Editing Topic Names

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
 2. Scroll to the topic you want to edit and either
 1. Click on the pencil at the end of the topic name, type the new topic name, and press **enter**.
 2. Click **Edit** at the end of the topic box and choose **Edit section**. Edit the section name and click **Save changes**.
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Showing/Hiding Topics

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
2. Click **Edit** at the end of the topic name.

3. Click either **Hide section** or **Show section** from the edit menu.
 4. Hiding a section will remove both the topic and all the content in the topic from student view. To indicate this, the topic name will appear in italics and a **Hidden from students** message will appear under the title.
-

Highlighting Topics

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
 2. Click **Edit** at the end of the topic name.
 3. Click either **Highlight** or **Remove highlight**.
 4. When a topic is highlighted, a thin blue line appears to the left of the topic content.
-

Adding Topics

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
 2. Scroll to the bottom of the course page.
 3. Click the blue + underneath the last topic currently in the course.
 4. A new topic will appear at the bottom of the course. It will automatically be called **Section #** (whatever number comes next). Follow the additional directions on this page to edit the topic.
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Deleting Topics

There are two options for deleting course topics.

Option 1

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
2. Click the **Edit** menu next to the topic you want to delete.
3. Choose **Delete section**.
4. If prompted, click **Delete** on the confirmation screen.
5. Note that if a topic is deleted using this method, all activities and resources within the topic will also be deleted.

Option 2

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
2. Scroll to the bottom of the course page.
3. Click the blue - underneath the last topic currently in the course.
4. The last topic in the list will be removed.
5. Note that if a topic is deleted using this method, all activities and resources within the topic will be tagged as orphaned and will not be visible to students. The content must be

moved to an existing topic in order for students to see it.

Rearranging Topics

1. Enter your course and [turn editing on](#).
2. After turning editing on, compass arrows will appear to the left of each topic.
3. Click the compass arrow next to the topic you wish to move and drag it to the proper location

Using Blocks

Course blocks are the boxes of information on the right side of the course page. These blocks can be edited to fit the needs of the course. Many of these blocks can also be added to your Moodle Dashboard.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/_16BZyQSP7U?si=xjnyMaEWfv5IJQSS

Adding New Blocks

1. Log into Moodle and enter your course site.
 2. Click on the **Edit mode** toggle in the upper right corner to turn editing on.
 3. Click the arrow button on the right side of the page to expand the blocks drawer.
 4. Click the name of the block you want to add to your course
 5. The block will be added to the list of blocks on the right side of your course page.
- Information on specific blocks can be found below.

Editing Existing Blocks

- Log into Moodle and enter your course site.
- Click on the **Edit mode** toggle in the upper right corner to turn editing on.
- Click the arrow button on the right side of the page to expand the blocks drawer.
- Click on the **gear** in the block you wish to edit and choose the appropriate option.
 - **Configure block:** access the options for the particular block.
 - **Hide block:** the block will no longer be visible for students.
 - **Permissions:** change permissions within the block.
 - **Check permissions:** view the permissions within the block for specific users.
 - **Delete block:** remove block from the course site.


Instructor Information Block

Students find having a block with information about the instructor on the course home page is helpful, especially in an online course. Please follow these instructions to **add** this block to your course. If you already have an instructor block but need to update it, please see the next section.

1. Log into Moodle and enter your course site.
2. Click on the **Edit mode** toggle in the upper right corner to turn editing on.
3. Click the arrow button on the right side of the page to expand the blocks drawer.
4. Choose **Text** from the list.
5. A block with the title *(new Text block)* should appear at the top of your course blocks.

6. Click the **Gear** in the HTML block and choose **Configure (new Text block) block**.
7. On the next page, enter the title for the block. *Your Instructor* is typically used.
8. In the *Content* textbox, enter the information you'd like your students to see. This could include your name, photo, email address, preferred method of communication, etc. See the sample below. Use the toolbar in the textbox to format your text.
9. Scroll to the bottom and click **Save changes**.
10. Repeat steps 6-9 to adjust the formatting as needed. Note that some formatting will depend on the size of the screen the student is viewing your course from.

Your Instructor



Prof. Rachel Feld
MLC Director of Online Learning

Email: feldrm@mlc-wels.edu
Cell: 507-407-4010

Send me an email or text with any questions.

Updating the *Your Instructor* Block

1. Log into Moodle and enter your course site.
2. Click on the **Edit mode** toggle in the upper right corner to turn editing on.
3. Click the arrow button on the right side of the page to expand the blocks drawer.
4. Click the **Gear** in the *Your Instructor* block and choose **Configure Your Instructor block**.
. Note: If your block is named something different, the **Configure** option will include the name of the block.
5. In the *Content* textbox, edit your contact information.
6. Scroll to the bottom and click **Save changes**.
7. Repeat steps 3-5 to adjust the formatting as needed. Note that some formatting will depend on the size of the screen the student is viewing your course from.

Available Blocks

The most commonly used blocks are listed below. Please follow the link for more information on the block.

- [Activities](#)
- [Activity Results](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Comments](#)
- [Course Completion Status](#)
- [Course/Site Summary](#)
- [Courses](#)
- [HTML](#)
- [Latest Badges](#)
- [Latest News](#)
- [Logged In User](#)
- [Online Users](#)
- [Pearson MyLab & Mastering \(Block\)](#)
- [People](#)
- [Random Glossary Entry](#)
- [Recent Activity](#)
- [Remote RSS Feeds](#)
- [Search Forums](#)
- [Self Completion](#)
- [Upcoming Events](#)

View Course as Student

This feature allows instructors to see the course home page and activities as if they were a student.

Instructions

1. After logging in to Moodle, enter the course you'd like to view as a student.
 2. Click the down arrow to the right of your profile picture in the upper right corner and choose **Switch role to...**
 3. Click **Student**
 4. You can now view your course from the perspective of a student. This is visually indicated by the blue word [student](#) under your username.
 5. To return to your normal role, click the down arrow to the right of your profile picture in the upper right corner and choose **Return to my normal role.**
- Note that the view is not a perfect replication of some items like viewing grades. For a completely accurate student view, please use a [sample student account](#).

Course Organization Tips

Having an organized Moodle course site can go a long way in helping students succeed in online learning. Some things to consider:

- Use sections to organize your course in Moodle rather than having one long list. Think of these sections like file folders -- all the materials for one lesson (or week, depending on how you're organizing your course) should go in a section.
- Number your assignments to help students locate them and keep track of what they've done. Then, if there are handouts, direction pages, or other parts that go with an assignment, label them similarly. For example, in week 1, you might have assignment 1.1 that goes with handout 1.1a.
- Put due dates at the end of the assignment name in Moodle so students can quickly see what's due each day without having to open everything.
- Create a checklist of what students are expected to do for each lesson or week.
- Add a discussion forum for questions to your class for students to post questions in. This will help reduce your email volume, let students check for questions that have already been asked, and let students answer each other's questions.
- If you have lots of files, consider setting up folders to hold related files.

Fixing Orphaned Content

Orphaned content can appear when the number of sections in a current course does not match the number of sections from an imported course. To fix this, follow the directions below to change the number of sections in the course.

Interactive Tutorial

*** Best experienced in Full Screen (click the icon in the top right corner before you begin) ***

9 STEPS

1. The first step is to open **your course** and click to turn on **Edit mode**

Step 1 image
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2. Scroll and click **Close all**. This will make scrolling to the bottom of the page faster.

Step 2 image
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3. Scroll down to the bottom and find the last orphaned section. In this example, it's section 10. **Remember this number.**

Step 3 image
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4. Click **Settings**

Step 4 image
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5. Scroll and click to expand **Course format**

Step 5 image
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6. Scroll down and click the dropdown menu next to **Number of sections**

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7. Select the number of sections you made note of in the previous step. For this example, choose **10**

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8. Scroll down and click **Save and display**

Step 8 image
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9. That's it. You're done.

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Showing Hidden Content

Hidden content cannot be seen by students. Content needs to be made visible before students can see it.

Instructions

1. Log into Moodle and enter your course site.
2. Click the gear in the upper right corner and choose **Turn editing on**.
3. Locate the hidden item you wish to make visible.
4. Click the **Edit** menu to the right of the item.
5. Choose **Show**.
6. The item will now be shown to students. There is no save button.

Using Master Copies

Master Copies of courses are used in both the undergraduate and graduate programs to help keep track of the most current course content and also facilitate sharing content without compromising student data. They are similar to a backline master used to make worksheet copies, except for a whole course. The following information will help you successfully navigate and work with your course master copy.

- You should have one master copy for each course you teach and each way that you teach it. For example, someone might teach EDU0001 during a regular semester and also online during a summer semester. Each of those courses will have a unique master copy.
- Master copies should be updated prior to the semester starting, with the exception of due dates. Currently, due dates do not transfer well and should be changed after the course import.
- Master copies are not linked to semester copies, so changes that get made do not get transferred automatically. You can make needed updates throughout the semester or if significant changes have been made that you'd like to retain, fill out [this form](#) so the support team can assist.
- Master copies will never be removed, while semester copies will be regularly removed after a set period of time.
- If you need to share your course with another instructor for review, collaboration, or other purposes, please share the master copy. This protects student data.