

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE CLASSES

Useful definitions and terminology

- *Academic Technology*: technology specifically used to facilitate and augment instruction in an active learning environment. At COCC, this includes Canvas, third-party tools integrated into Canvas, and external tools supported by the college that improve the design, development, and delivery of instructional content.
- *Digital Content*: content delivered through technology including Canvas Pages, electronic documents, audio and video, and websites.
 - e.g.: the Microsoft Word *program* is academic technology; a Word *document* is digital content.
- *Getting Started Area*: colloquially, a dedicated space within the course where instructors make clear to students how to get started and where to find various course components. This area also commonly includes essential course documents, instructor contact information, and other relevant course policies and information.
- *Course Outcomes vs. Unit Objectives*: outcomes are the broad statement of expected learning at the course level, and which are standardized by COCC. Objectives are specific, observable, and measurable demonstrations of student learning at the unit level and are written by faculty.
- *Accessible*: refers to the concept that people with disabilities can access and use a product or system, product or system, including with the help of assistive technologies.
- *Regular and Substantive Interactions*: interactions which are instructor-initiated, occur at regular intervals, and are academic in nature.

What to look for in the Canvas learning environment

Below are six areas summarizing recognized best practices in online course design. Under each is a general summary of what is broadly being addressed, and questions to ask when looking for representation of that area within a Canvas course.

A bobcat track (🐾) indicates the recommendation is linked directly to COCC general policies, accreditation standards, or federal requirements for meaningful interaction, regular assessment and proactive engagement in student success.

1. Course Overview and Information 🐾

The course contains appropriate and adequate information for a student to successfully access course material, navigate content, and participate. The expectations for students are transparent and readily available.

- Is a current syllabus present, in a format students can view easily online and download/print? Partial – pdf posted in module. Due to Canvas reset unclear if it was also originally posted in Syllabus area. Includes a table without headers and colors that do not meet contrast requirements
- Are the course objectives clearly stated? Do they match the objectives listed in the college catalog? Yes – in syllabus only
- Is a course schedule of due dates and major events (holiday closures, course events such as exams) provided? Partial – course dates and exams, no information about holiday or Friday campus closures
- Is it clear for students where they should click to begin the course? Yes – Home is Modules list, top Module is titled “Start Here”
- Does the class have a ‘Getting Started’ area? Partial – a module titled Start here, but no welcome message and intro video requires opening.
- Does the instructor provide an introduction and contact information outside of the syllabus? (Recommended in the Getting Started area.) Partial introductory Video – requires opening in a new tab. Video captions are auto-captioned and missing many capitalizations (Towne, COCC, Canvas, etc.) and spelling (Newburg). Encourages email or zoom contact. Navigation video – includes where to find Zoom link and instructions how to set an appt.
- Is it stated what technology tools and skills students will need to be successful in the course? Partial – Aktiv Chemistry and Smart Sparrow Virtual labs are referenced in the required materials of the course without system requirement details.

2. Course Structure and Organization

The course is designed and organized in such a way that navigation is intuitive and consistent. The learning materials are up to date and any tools included are functional.

- Is the course easy to navigate?
- Does the course have a consistent structure (page color, font, graphics, page layouts)?
- Are modules and elements of the course named so their purpose is clear to students?
- Do all course links work? Are the hyperlinks descriptive? (For example, instead of: “to learn more about photosynthesis [click here](#) for a video” -> “here is a [video explaining photosynthesis](#) if you’d like to learn more.”
- Are students given information about and links to COCC student resources early in the course materials? (Recommended for the Getting Started area.)

3. Communications and Interactions 🐾

The course encourages interaction between the student and instructor, between students, and with the content itself. Regular and substantive interaction is evident.

- Does the instructor make regular announcements about course content, activities, or assessments?
- Are the expectations for netiquette, means of address, and formality and grammatical standards for writing communicated to students?
- If discussion boards are used, are expectations for contributions clearly stated?
- Does the instructor provide guidance on when students can expect responses to email, voicemail, or Canvas Inbox messages? – in syllabus
- Are there multiple opportunities for students to engage with their peers throughout the term? (Recommended to provide using a variety of tools – collaborative assessments, discussions, group activities, etc.)
- Does the instructor communicate how they will participate (examples could be: moderator, facilitator, observer, etc.)
- If the instructor participates in discussions do their comments encourage one or more of the following: deeper learning, exploration of the topic, further student engagement with the material or each other?

4. Learning Materials and Instructional Content

The course offers resources to support the stated objectives, to facilitate student learning and collaboration, and to promote higher-order analysis, problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

- Are unit (week, module, etc.) level objectives present, easy for students to understand, and measurable? (Can they be used by students to check their own knowledge and skills?)
- Are connections between unit level objectives and course outcomes made clear to students?
- Do the learning materials included align with listed learning objectives?
- Does the instructor provide context for learning materials – what is it, why it is included, how students should use it?
- Are course learning materials presented in multiple formats? (Examples, textbook readings, multimedia, web content, etc.)
- Do course learning materials include content with differing representation of ideas, perspectives, or imagery?
- Is the original authorship of course materials clearly displayed? Does the instructor model attribution of materials?
- Does it feel like the amount of content/time to complete the course is roughly similar to that of an in-person course?

5. Assessment and Evaluation

The course provides multiple means for students to demonstrate achievement of the course learning outcomes and unit objectives. The course assessment policy and expectations are clearly stated in advance. Regular and substantive feedback is provided for submitted work.

- Do course assessments align with unit level learning objectives and course outcomes?

- Are students given clear explanations of how to complete assignments and how to submit them?
- Are grading rubrics or information about points possible included in the assignment instructions?
- Does the course include a variety of formative and summative assessments?
- Has the instructor communicated to students when feedback will be given and where to find it?
- Does the instructor provide detailed and timely feedback on assignments?

6. Digital Accessibility 🐾

The digital content and tools used in the course are accessible.

- Does the course include accessibility information for external tools or technologies required to successfully complete the course? (This could be included in the syllabus or Getting Started area and could be a link to a 3rd party accessibility statement or to the COCC Academic Technology catalog. If no external tools are used this does not apply.)
- Are specific directions included to help students contact COCC's Office of Services for Students with Disabilities?
- Is the course content easy to read? (Consider font size and color contrast between text and background.)
- Are documents in the course legible? Does the course avoid scanned pdfs or images of text?
- Do videos in the course contain accurate captions?
- Do images in the course include descriptive alternative text?