

## Podcast for Module 3: Preparation, Part 2

Welcome to the Podcast for Module Three. In the last podcast we covered the first three Essential Elements: Prepare to teach online, Build a course outline, and Create a course schedule with clear guidelines. In this installment I will be discussing the remaining three essential elements found in Section One of our text, Plan for ongoing quality assurance, Ensure support from your administration, and Provide technical support.

Essential Element 4 tells us to plan for ongoing quality assurance. One of the most common tools to evaluate courses is the standard end-of-course evaluation form that is completed by the students. Our authors address this tool but also provide us with a few others. Let us take a look at these.

Create standards is the first tool. Our authors suggest that we create "design and delivery standards." Regarding standards for content, as teachers of the Faith, we will be held to a high standard by the Lord. Therefore it is imperative that we judge not only the efficacy of our online pedagogy, but the quality and accuracy of our religious content and our role within the Universal Church. Standards that we can use in this regard can be obtained from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (the *National Directory for Catechesis* and *Program of Priestly Formation* come to mind), as well as standards with Magisterial authority such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Ex Corde Ecclesiae (On Catholic Universities)* and *Donum Veritatis (Instruction on the Ecclesiastical Vocation of the Theologian)*.

The next two tools can be combined into one -- student feedback. We can encourage student feedback by the creation of an open discussion forum for ideas and the airing of frustrations, encouraging students to email us privately with their ideas and suggestions, and through an anonymous in-class survey. When doing so, of course, we may need to explain that we may not incorporate all good ideas into our methods of online teaching, but that all suggestions will be appreciated.

Another tool we can use is to welcome a mentor or peer to review our course. We can begin in the preparation stage of course creating with our newly created outline or ask that this person sit in on a live course throughout the semester.

Our authors suggest that we keep a journal of our online teaching experiences. As I teach each class I keep a file called "Suggestions" that I will use the next time the course is taught. Small things such as how I worded an announcement, the order of assignments, or new resources that I discover after the class starts are put in this file -- and examined before the next offering. Some suggestions I toss, some I incorporate, some become stale with subsequent events, but I always find this file useful.

The fifth Essential Element encourages us to ensure support from our administration. One caveat that I would like to mention here is that the age of this text occasionally shines through -- this topic is one such instance. When this book was published in 2002, fewer schools and far fewer courses were available online than is the case today. Surveys of institutions of higher education since the publication of the book show a huge increase in the number of schools, degree programs, and courses that are offered online. In other words, the support for online courses was not as common in 2002 as it is today, so much of this Essential Element may be a moot point for you. Therefore, I will only mention a few that I have found to be important and applicable to most everyone, no matter the year.

One of the important items mentioned by our authors is the idea that we should not try to develop

and manage our courses all on our own. While we are experts within our fields of theology, philosophy, literature, etc. we need to allow ourselves to rely on experts in the fields of online course design, programming, multimedia applications, Internet resources, and the particular Course Management System that hosts our courses. Such experts can assist us with the technical means to best transmit our materials. Remember that the traditional chalk-and-talk method did not require much technical know-how to operate, but the new pedagogical paradigm utilizing computing and telecommunication technologies requires expertise in areas with which we may not be familiar. I have been involved with computers since I was twelve years old -- over three decades ago, have been online since 1990, and have worked as a governmental computer network analyst, email administrator, and technical troubleshooter. Now I work in the academic world assisting professors with their courses, managing Blackboard, and teaching educational technology courses. Yet I still rely on the technical staff at Webster University for a variety of issues with my courses. And I talk to others in my field to gain new ideas, learn new skills, and find resources that I did not know existed. Our authors make reference to the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child, and so it also takes an administrative team -- and a technical team, I would add -- to properly support online courses. I heartily agree with them, and so encourage you to think of yourself as a very important member of a team -- but a member of a team, nonetheless. Let people like me give you a hand.

Our authors also mention the issue of supplying materials for our students. Because section 133 of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (PL110-315) requires that schools who participate in the Federal Student Loan Program make available a list of texts and retail prices along with course registration information (in other words, long before they have access to the course syllabus), you may already be on top of this issue. But here are some tips that may make your work a bit easier in this regards, as well as assisting your students in obtaining the necessary materials. Unless all of our students live near the campus and can then rely on the college bookstore, we need to think about how our students will obtain the necessary materials. For this, we can easily turn to the Internet. I frequently purchase books from Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) and the used book broker ABEBooks (ABE stands for American Book Exchange) found at [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) ([a-b-e-b-o-o-k-s.com](http://a-b-e-b-o-o-k-s.com)). Both allow a one-stop shopping experience. The former owns many warehouses across the country and one can purchase books directly from Amazon or purchase used materials from other companies through Amazon. ABEBooks does not own warehouses but links it customers to small bookstores throughout the world, with a one-stop shopping experience. I have spent thousands of dollars through these two organizations and can personally recommend them. Another excellent source is Barnes & Noble, [www.nb.com](http://www.nb.com) which has comparable prices to Amazon (I use Barnes & Noble to compare prices, but am rather partial to Amazon).

There is another level of sites that you can use are called metasources. These sites search Amazon, Barnes & Noble, ABEBooks, Alibris, and other sellers, providing a list of stores, prices, and editions on the same pages -- thus providing you with a valuable comparison tool. I recommend two such metasources: BookFinder.com and BestBookBuys (found at [www.bestwebbuys.com/books](http://www.bestwebbuys.com/books)). These are very useful places to start, and good resources to tell your students about. More specialized philosophical and theological materials can be ordered through St. Augustine's Press (which sells Dumb Ox Books relating to St. Thomas Aquinas) at [www.staugustine.net](http://www.staugustine.net), Our Sunday Visitor at [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com), and Ignatius Press at [www.ignatius.com](http://www.ignatius.com).

Whenever you consider using and requiring materials, it would be a good idea to see if these materials are readily available through Internet businesses. It is also a good idea, and may actually be your school's policy, to only require books that are currently in print, thus ensuring ease of purchase. If a book is too valuable to leave off the list but is no longer in print, then I would suggest you do a bit of research using World Catalog to see if the text is readily available in libraries throughout the country -- see [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org). You may also use journal articles as required readings if your school

subscribes to a database such as ATLA Serials (American Theological Library Association) or Gale Cengage Learning. But make sure with your library staff that your distance learning students are covered under your school's subscription, otherwise they may not be able to access the assigned articles.

The sixth Essential Element, Provide technical support, echoes my words just a few minutes ago: online learning requires more technology and technological prowess than the traditional face-to-face paradigm. Our authors suggest that we become familiar with the particulars of the Course Management System that we will be using. Each has its own way of carrying out similar tasks, and some offer features that others do not. If your school has introductory courses, take them. If not, inquire into the possibility of creating a "play" course in which you can experiment. This is an excellent suggestion, and an activity that I have dabbled with on more than one occasion.

Our authors suggest that we practice patience when it comes to technical problems. Having been on the receiving end of this issue, that is, listening to frustrated users, do please be nice to your technical people. A saying that sums up that business is that we would go from hero to zero in ten seconds flat -- we were blamed for many problems right after fixing others. People would often blame us for that which they did not understand. Most of the time we did not cause the technical problems (on occasion, sure), but were more than willing to solve whatever problem came up. Your technical team can be your best friend if you try to cultivate a good and mutually respectable relationship.

Regarding the technology from your students' perspective, helping your audience become comfortable with the technology may be up to you, or your school may provide an orientation course for new students. I teach such a course at Holy Apostles, showing new students how to navigate Blackboard, what a typical class will look like, how assignments may be laid out, what may be expected of them, and how to use the various functions. I also go over ethical issues such as copyright and plagiarism. Consider suggesting such a course to your administration if your school does not already provide one. With better informed students, you can up the ante in terms of course functionality.

Our authors wrote the book in an age of ubiquitous dial-up connections. Times have changed and high-speed Internet connections are the norm in most developed, and many developing, nations. Streaming video sites like YouTube and Hulu have changed the face of mass media, yet we cannot assume that all of our students will have a high-speed connection. I have had several students that only had dial-up access, for one reason or another, and so had to accommodate them. If you have assignments that require video streaming, consider offering a text-based alternative or even a podcast that can be downloaded overnight and listened to off-line.

The three parts entitled "Give good directions" on pages 38 and 39 really boil down to one concept: be specific in your attention to details. Assume that you will need to hold your students' hands as they navigate your course for the first time. You can do so in a syllabus that divides your courses into weeks, with each assignment clearly laid out in the order that you want them completed. As I have mentioned already, I create such syllabi so that my students have a good idea what to expect from week to week. I work hard to ensure that confusion is minimized and everything is laid out step-by-step, trying to anticipate confusion and heading it off.

Our authors then give us some suggestions regarding using the technology available to us. While we should take the time to learn what the Course Management System offers to us (such as with "play" courses and training), we must yet be careful not to overdo it. Do not let the features drive your content, but, conversely, be open to content that may be compatible with the features (such as assigning streaming videos and podcasts created by other academic institutions). It can be a delicate balance, but one that can be an interesting and rewarding exercise.

Finally we must allow for technical problems faced by our students. It is always a good idea to provide different methods of contact that do not rely on the course, such as a phone number and regular email address (not intra-course email), so that students can contact us if their Internet goes down, they forget their password, or a registration glitch locks them out of the course. For problems that go beyond the course, it may be necessary to refer your students to a campus technical support team, as you may not be able nor have the time to troubleshoot computer or telecommunication issues over the phone. Do let your students know how to get in touch with such services, such as in your syllabus or within the first week of class.

Now that we have discussed all aspects of preparation, the next module will look at the design aspects of online teaching.

Thank you again for listening to this podcast, and I will "see" you in the next module!