In this podcast, we enter the mechanics of creating an online course. We have already covered the preliminary aspects that have prepared us to begin this part of the process, the Design phase. You will find that the two podcasts of this stage will be a bit longer, as I get into quite a few details. I hope that these details will be of great benefit to you.

These two podcasts for the Design aspect do not follow the exact order of the Essential Elements as presented in our text. I believe that we can order them differently and a bit more coherently. Elements 7, 9, 10, and 13 deal with the learning platform and will be discussed in this podcast. Elements 8, 11, and 12 deal more with the social learning aspects of the online arena and will be grouped together in the next podcast.

Essential Element number 7 is "Format your course so that students can focus on the content." This may sound, at first, to be an unnecessary conscience decision. Of course we should design a course that allows the students to focus on the content; that is the point of our efforts. But in the online world, it takes a bit of effort to effect this outcome. As has been mentioned before, we need to make our directions and expectations clear, because we are not available several hours week to instantly impart our intentions nor to correct misunderstandings. Just as we need to head off confusion, so, too, do we need to head off distractions.

Such distractions can come in the form of misunderstandings -- as we have previously addressed -- as well as from too many elements built into our courses, confusing collections of fonts and colors in syllabi and text lectures, and "bleeding edge" technologies that we may use but other students have not yet adopted. A classic example is the use of the most recent version of Microsoft Word that may not be not compatible with older versions that many people still use -- we need to format such documents into friendly formats that everyone can read, not just those who have purchased the same version as we have.

As we begin to design our courses, our authors have given us some very good tips to keep in mind. Let us take a look at some of them, along with my own additions.

Creating a set of templates will help us to create a consistency within the various aspects of a course, as well as to help us create the consistent look across *all* of our courses. This helps our students in two ways: first, once a pattern of assignments and expectations is established in the first week or so, they can expect that this pattern will not be significantly altered for the remainder of the course. This will positively impact our students' understanding of what we expect from them and in what order. Second, just as in the traditional classroom, those students who have had us before will have a good idea what to expect from us in subsequent courses -- and have a head start, so to speak.

Your school or department may already have a style sheet for syllabi, assignments, etc. so be sure to check with your department before recreating the wheel. But if you are able to create your own or have some leeway, here are six suggestions to ease confusion and create a sense of reliability:
1. In your syllabi, put your school logo or graphic at the top of page one. For those students who are many miles from the campus, this may help them subconsciously connect with the campus, a minor but important concept in creating a sense of community. Such a logo or graphic helps to inform your students that the course offering is not an isolated course, but an integral part of a whole academic community, of which your distance learning students are an important part.
2. In your syllabi and assignment directions, use an easy-to-skim format, such as bullet

points, tables, blank lines between sections, plenty of white space, etc. You want your students to be able to quickly find the information they need as they skim your syllabus and instructions. Forcing them to slog through paragraphs to find a simple due date or page length can easily create frustration and confusion.

3. It is also important to use a consistent and uncluttered font style. Limit the different types of fonts you use to one or two, and choose those that are easy to read and common the world over -- such as New Times Roman, Arial, and Tahoma. Keep your usage of boldface, underline, italics, size, and color to a minimum -- only using such formatting options when necessary. I shy away from using boldface text to emphasize important instructions as this tends to distract the eye of the reader into ignoring all the text around the boldfaced parts -- the contrast tends to indicate that the non-boldface text is unimportant in comparison. I also pretty much limit my use of emphasis with color, larger size, and underline for titles of sections, to indicate headings, and such -- but rarely ever within regular text.

4. Within the Course Management System, such as Blackboard or Moodle, it is a good idea to order your materials in the same manner for all modules or weeks. In all of my weekly containers, for instance, I list the required readings first, then the necessary discussion forum assignments, and finally any papers or turn-in assignments that are due.

5. Constantly remind your students of due dates. Most of our distance learning students have other full-time obligations, so they likely have all sorts of dates floating around within their minds. It is a safe bet that they need us to consistently remind them of *our* due dates.

6. If you post documents within your course, such as a text lecture or your syllabus, convert your documents to a format that will keep the integrity of your formatting and can be read by everyone. If you upload a Word document, for instance, your students may have different formatting options with their Word program and can easily distort the format. What you saw on your computer screen may not be what they end up seeing -- assuming they own the proper version of Word that will allow them to open the document in the first place. To circumvent this problem, convert your Word documents to PDF format. PDF stands for Portable Document Format, a standard created by Adobe. Once you convert your documents to PDF files, your formatting is kept intact and your content cannot be altered unless your students own the Adobe Acrobat Professional version -- which is a bit pricey. The Acrobat Reader which opens PDF files has been free and ubiquitous for years, so it is safe to rely on your students being able to read PDF documents. For you, free programs exist which will allow you to easily convert to PDF (although, once you convert to PDF, you will need to purchase the Professional version or other similar product to edit the document -- I just edit the Word document and re-save the PDF version). I use a free utility called PrimoPDF (found at www.primopdf.com) which acts like a printer -- I print to it, select the resolution options, and away I go. It is quite easy and works very well. I also use OpenOffice Writer, a popular free opensource suite of office programs similar to Microsoft Office, which has an option to easily create PDF files from within the program (in fact, the text of this series of podcasts was created not within Word but within OpenOffice Writer).

Another element that will help our students focus on the course content is to allow our personalities to show within the course. This is an important aspect, as reality tells us that as much as students are concerned about learning the material, they are at least as equally concerned about the grades they earn. Having a sense of our personality and expectations helps them anticipate the type of work we expect and how we might grade. Each of us have our own personalities and priorities that affect our academic expectations, and such will impact how we grade our students' work. Therefore, allowing our personalities to shine through the computer screens of our students is important to them as they attempt to anticipate our preferences.

How do we do this? The ways are as varied as our personalities, but here are some common methods that we can all use:

- Allow your humor to affect how you write and communicate, but be cognizant of the possibility that it can be misunderstood and never allow your humor to cancel out your professionalism. Those emoticons previously mentioned can help in this area.
- Color choices can add a bit of personality. For instance, I like the color blue and so sparingly use blue lettering in titles and explanatory sections to add a bit of color that is to my liking.
- Rather than employing erudite and formal syntax in communications, I try to use the same type of grammatical structures and vocabulary in my emails and discussion forum postings as I would use in a face-to-face classroom. None of us are robots or encyclopedic organisms, so our written communication with our students should not be so structured. Academic papers and text lectures can be written to a higher standard (mine certainly are), but this is expected. Communications, however, should not be as formal -- unless that is how we really are in the real world.
- The sparing use of clip art within documents can add a bit of your personality. They can, however, be easily overused, so be careful to only use small ones that are pertinent to the text. Also be sure that you have permission to use such artifacts, either by using those explicitly stated to be free, by purchasing a program that includes clip art with a copyright notice that gives the purchaser the right to use the clip art, or using those artifacts that have conditions which you, as an educator, meet (such as for non-profit or educational use).
- Include your picture within the course. You can do this by creating a section entitle "About Your Professor" which also includes your biography and a mention of your favorite hobbies, your family, and other facts which help your students create a mental picture of you and what you might be like should they ever meet you face-to-face (such as during commencement ceremonies). You can also include such information at the end of your syllabi.
- Consider adding synchronous communication events, as I have mentioned before, especially those that utilize audio or video communication. The ability for your students to communicate with you in real time, especially via voice or webcam, will go far in not only helping your students get to know you but also create a sense of community with you and your school.

Our authors give us further suggestions regarding the creation of consistent, sensible layouts for our documents. Some of these I have already mentioned, but do make sure you take a look at the list on page 46. One item of update: today, over 90% of Internet users rely on screen resolution of at least 1024x768. So while the authors suggest that we keep the resolution of 800x600 as a standard, this has changed since the book was published. In fact, the statistic sites that I consulted show that only about 5% of people use an 800x600 screen resolution.

Essential Element 9 encourages us to re-think the type of course materials and resources we use. A combination of online *and* offline materials may work the best for two main reasons. First, there are many reliable and excellent sources on the Internet. Some of these are available from the Vatican's website, EWTN's library, open-courseware initiatives by the University of Michigan and MIT, iTunesU, Hulu, and reliable entities on YouTube. You can find Hulu at www.hulu.com. Hulu is owned by NBC Universal, the News Corporation (which own Fox Entertainment), and the Walt Disney Company. Hulu is basically ad-supported Internet TV. It offers a variety of TV shows, shorts, documentaries, and movies from National Geographic to the Military Channel, last night's TV shows to classics from the 1960s.

I encourage you to search for these, and other, organizations for source material. These different types of sources will give your courses a rich feel to them and appeal to the different learning styles of your students. Just be sure to verify the links to such online sources before and during the semesters in which you reference these sources. I have found excellent sources and created solid activities based

on online sources only to find that the hosting website later removed the artifacts completely. I have learned to use at least one Internet source for an assignment. This way if one disappears, there will still be others for the students. Conversely, I prefer to create courses that do not rely solely on one hard copy text, for books do not stay in print forever and I want to be able to modify a course based on this fact (as well as the potential of finding a newer book to use). I would rather not have to completely scrap a course and create a new one from scratch. You may point out the hypocrisy in these podcasts as I rely on one text, *Essential Elements*. Yet I also have added many other ideas into these and am not completely following the book's order. Should this book go out of print, I would certainly need to modify these podcasts, but I could do so to follow a new book, or more likely, these would be modified to stand on their own as much of the material I use in these is from my own experience and research.

Secondly, while excellent resources exist online, not all material is available there. Texts still under copyright protection will assuredly not be available for free usage via the Internet, so students will need to purchase these texts. A combination of such hard copies plus resources on the Internet can give your students a plethora of voices and perspectives, as well as providing you with a variety of pedagogical artifacts.

As was discussed in the Preparation stage, be sure to give yourself plenty of time to gather and evaluate your resources. I have found more out there than I could ever use for a course, and very much enjoy going through the possible sources. But it also takes quite a bit of time to do so.

Essential Element 10 brings us to a very practical consideration, one that will do much to define your course in the mind of your students: how to present the activities to your students. As you consider the steps to doing this, be sure to keep in mind the suggestions our authors give us under the heading on page 58, "As you convert or develop activities..." It is important that you divorce yourself and your knowledge of the topic from how you present the various materials and activities. Your students will not have your level of expertise and you must not assume that they can make the leaps in logic and relation that you can. While this may seem to not need to be stated -- because it is our business to help our students create these links of knowledge -- it is very important that we look at our courses from the eyes of our students, and have our colleagues evaluate our courses -- ideally both colleagues with a knowledge of the topic and those without such knowledge. I use my friends who are professors and my wife (who is a middle-school teacher) as my guinea pigs.

The basic idea our authors present in Essential Element 10 is the creation of a coherent and reliable structure that our students will come to know and rely upon. I have mentioned the benefits of predictability before, and we see it again here. We need to create a structure of course content and activity schedule that works to impart an understanding of the content and eliminate confusion. Unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, I always recommend that courses be created in a weekly format. This helps our students rely on a calendar and plan their course work along with the rest of their lives. It also helps us to do the same with our responsibilities.

Within this weekly schedule we will need to insert assignments that bring our students into contact with us, the content, and with each other. While your courses will undoubtedly be different from mine, allow me to give you a more fuller picture of my courses than what I have already presented as an illustration of what I know works well.

Each week starts on a Monday, but I open up the assignments a couple of days early for those who want to get a head start.
Number One: Content Oriented assignments. First, students are assigned a video that introduces that week's topic. I am the presenter in this video where I give an overview of the topic along with my

own interpretations of what they are about to study. This takes about eight to ten minutes. I follow this with a short description of the assignments and a reminder of when they are due. This video -- basically a narrated PowerPoint presentation -- is what I consider my mini-lecture. If you would like to know how I create these, drop me a line at dharrison@holyapostles.edu.

Number Two: Content-oriented assignments. These include relevant chapters from the course text and online resources that expand upon the topic. Some of the readings offer contradictory viewpoints while others delve more into a particular theme presented in the text. Videos are then sometimes assigned which help to add images and other voices to the topic. As it must be assumed that not all students have access to videos -- whether because of their national location or access to high-speed Internet service -- I try to make sure that the videos are not make-or-break assignments. In the rare cases where they are (and I have one that is, the documentary "Digital Nation" by Frontline of the PBS family), I have in mind alternative assignments in case a student approaches me with an access issue.

Number Three: Discussion board posting. By Wednesday at Midnight my students must have absorbed the materials from Number One and Two above and answered a seed question on the discussion board. Most weeks give the students a short list from which they can choose, offering usually three choices of questions to answer or issues on which to reflect. These are drawn from the content-oriented assignments and are broken down into three parts: Summarize, Analyze, and Apply. Students are to summarize the issue, summarize their interpretation, or engage in some other version of summary. The point here is to have them internalize the content and then explain it to me and their fellow students. The analyze portion of their posting asks them to compare and contrast different sources or agree or disagree with opinions and conclusions of the sources. The final aspect asks them about the application of the sources to their own situation or to create methods of how they can use the sources in their own lives.

Number Four: Interactive dialogue. Once the students have posted their discussion board postings by Wednesday night, they are then to read each others postings and comment on them. I require responses of substance, not those that simply state "I agree." Any attempts to advance the conversation, throw out new questions, give reasons to agree or disagree with the original posting, etc. are given full credit in my grading scheme. These response posting are due by the end of the course week, Midnight on Sunday.

Number Five: Halfway through the semester I assign the capstone project. It is divided into four parts, each part due a week after the other (remember that I teach within 8-week semesters, so my courses are accelerated). These sections are due by Midnight on Sunday.

The final Essential Element that we will discuss in this podcast in number 13, "Provide equal accessibility to all students." I touched on this concept earlier by mentioning how I use different media for the course content to accommodate different learning styles. Our authors do not go into details regarding the type of accessibility required, nor suggestions on how to meet accessibility needs, instead providing us with a list of resources in this section and in Appendix A. Allow me to add flesh to this discussion.

There are two types of accessibility referred to here: one, that which is required by people who cannot permanently access content (such as those with permanent visual impairments or hearing loss, or an inability to use a keyboard or mouse due to a physical handicap); and, two, those who cannot temporarily or transitionally do so (such as those whose loose the ability to use a keyboard or mouse due to a broken arm, those with temporary visual or auditory senses, or the progress of age-related disabilities).

The National Center on Universal Design for Learning (www.udlcenter.org) provides us with a simplified explanation of how to meet the challenges of accessibility in three stages: Representation, Action & Expression, and Engagement. What it all boils down to is providing different methods that will cover a variety of needs.

First, we should strive to provide multiple means of content representation. I strive to meet this goal by providing various sources that utilize hard-copy text, online text, videos, and podcasts.

Secondly, we should work to provide multiple means of action and expression by using different methods to manipulate the content and support our students' different levels of proficiency. I work to meet this goal by offering my students different discussion forum topics of varying complexity, allowing students to choose their own final project paper topics based on their own environments, and by using various communication tools in the forms of discussion forums, emails, live text chats, and Internet voice communication via Skype.

Thirdly, we need to provide multiple means of engagement. To reiterate the various assignments that I utilize, the reading assignments, videos, podcasts, discussion forums, written papers, and synchronous chats all seek to provide courses that are rich in multiple means of engagement that allow for visual and auditory learners to grab onto something that speaks directly to their own learning styles and abilities. The other main learning style, kinesthetic or tactile, is a bit more difficult to meet in an online course dealing with theory and morality (as my courses deal with), but it is possible for my students bring in this aspect by discussing tools that they handle at work and discuss how these fit into the theories and moralities that we discuss. But, it would still be a stretch to say that I have adequately met this learning style. Courses that deal with science would likely be better candidates for kinesthetic distance learners, with the ability to handle scientific equipment and create hands-on experiments.

The National Center on Universal Design for Learning is a resource that was not available when the book Essential Elements was written, so I encourage you to take a look at their website, to reiterate, www.udlcenter.org. Their Screening Room offers short but excellent videos that help explain and demonstrate the concepts I have discussed here. There are also various articles that you can quickly absorb which will work to create an excellent framework upon which you can build your ideas of incorporating various pedagogical tools for your courses. I have found the site most helpful and thought provoking. While it is designed for practitioners in elementary and secondary educational settings, it is very applicable to online professors such as ourselves.

A quick note on the resources provided us in our text. In the years since its publication, some of the addresses of the resources have changed. On page 71, it is mentioned that the Center for Applied Special Technology offers a service called Bobby. This program is now owned by IBM and is no longer a free service. If you are interested in finding out more about this, CAST lists several websites, including the page on IBM's site, at www.cast.org/learningtools/Bobby (the "B" at the beginning of Bobby must be capitalized, as you would a proper noun).

Looking at Appendix A on pages 95 and 96, the following sites have also changed:
- Americans with Disabilities Act Home Page is now www.ada.gov
- IBM Accessibility Center can new be found at www-3.ibm.com/able
- The Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs is now: www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html OR you can just go to www.ed.gov and use the search box to look for OSEP
- Section 508 Home Page is now www.justice.gov/crt/508/508home.php

- And the WebAIM site is now just webaim.org, no "www"

You will find this list of changes within the text of this podcast available within the CDLN course module.

I look forward to "seeing" you in the next podcast covering the social aspects of online teaching and learning.