

Podcast for Module 6: Execution, Part 1

Welcome back to our sixth podcast as we enter the final stage of creating an online course.

Once the Design stage has been completed, we enter the Execution or Teaching stage. In truth, however, the Design stage is really never completed -- we are constantly revising our courses each time we teach them. This and the following podcast will be rather short in comparison to the previous five. The main reason is that I have worked to incorporate many of the points our authors make in Section 3, the Teaching stage, into the discussions on Preparation and Design. I have worked to help you create a solid course in the previous stages so that the Execution stage will go smoothly, without a lot of adjustments to what you have come to expect once the course starts.

Essential Element 14 encourages us to provide our students with a comprehensive set of informational materials. This set of materials is not content-oriented but practice-oriented. It will assist our students with what to expect in the course, how to work within it, what to expect from us, what we expect from them, how they will be graded, etc. One could argue that this Essential Element is really an extension of the Design stage -- a bridge between the Design and Execution stages, as we will want to create such a set of materials after we have designed the course but want it ready before the semester begins.

To create this set of materials we need to step away from ourselves and think like our students: what do they need to know before the class starts, such as the required materials, where to purchase the course text, and how much does it cost? This latter bit of information is now required by federal law for those schools who participate in the student loan program, but providing the cost of the texts has always a good idea. It also forces us to make sure that the texts are still available. Students also need to have an idea of what they need to know in the first week, and how to plan out their semester activities. Time management will be a challenge for quite a few students, so it is best to help them understand the amount of work to expect, and how each week will flow. And the sooner we can provide all these types of information, the better prepared our students will feel -- and, hopefully, be.

Our authors suggest that we create a "Learning Support Agreement for Online Pedagogy Education." Such a document may well be valuable for beginning students and those new to online learning. As more and more students learn over the Internet, however, you will likely find that many of your students already have a pretty good general idea what to expect, so such a document may not be necessary for them; they may only need specifics. I have already advised you to include much of this information in your syllabi, as the syllabi are the academic contracts that professors and students make with each other, and they are often available to students before the semester starts. I also prefer to keep it simple by having only one document to which the students can turn in answer to their questions. My own syllabi, then, are about ten pages in length. But everything they need to know can be found in one place, from grading rubrics to my email address, to the types of assignments and due dates. If you have followed my advice from the Design stage regarding the flow and structure of your online courses and what to put into your syllabi, you have already created most of, if not all of, this learning support document.

I encourage you to read through the tips that our authors provide us on pages 74 through 80, and create your own documents that work best for you and your students. Whether you decide to create a separate document or use your syllabus for these elements, the basic idea here is to try to anticipate any questions and confusions that may arise and treat them before they occur. It can be difficult trying to anticipate all the problems and clarifying things beforehand, but it is worth it in the saved time and grief that can happen if you do not make the effort before the semester starts. This goes back to what I mentioned in earlier podcasts that we are not able to stand before our students several

hours each week, allowing us to deal with questions and problems on the spot. As online instructors, we must head them off ahead of time. A comprehensive set of informational materials will be a powerful tool to do just this. And one last thought here, sending an email at the beginning of the semester as a way to welcome everyone is a great idea; this is the same idea that I mentioned in the last podcast, Tip number 5 -- starting off with the right tone.

Essential Element 15 dives into the techniques of using the social aspects of online learning to our advantage. Our authors recognize that just because we have created discussion forums and assignments to facilitate student-to-students discussion, meaningful usage of such areas will not necessarily happen. We need to structure our expectations so that the students are "encouraged" to participate in a meaningful way. In other words, as in the face-to-face classroom, just because we have a room in which to meet, at the same time each week, does not automatically mean that students will all meaningfully participate. Tip number 11 from our last podcast, structuring discussion forums and topics around andragogical principles, will help us create the type of discussion forums that our authors suggest.

In the departments of "Structure your communications" and "Encourage collaboration" on pages 82 through 87, I would encourage you to include the following actions into your weekly schedule -- some of these will sound familiar:

- be active in all of the discussion forums as well as post announcements when appropriate
- create unique videos addressing current issues or provide kudos if the class did awesome as a whole on a recent assignment
- use mass emails to remind students of upcoming events or clarify directions
- respond within 24 hours to private emails from students
- call students on the phone for serious issues
- and any other actions that you find useful to keep that line of communication with your class open and active

In other words, our students will know that we are present and active throughout the semester. Your students will need you to be obviously present, just as your face-to-face students would expect to see you present at every class session. In my various roles as student, educational technician, and instructor, I have observed many courses with a variety of requirements regarding discussion forum postings, student involvement, and instructor involvement. From my observations, those courses that require student participation in discussion forums and have active instructors see the most lively discussion boards and exchanges of information and viewpoints. It is not unusual for such classes to have hundreds of postings throughout the semester -- I have seen numbers as high as 1,400 posts. Conversely, those courses that have areas for student discussion but do not mandate such, combined with a lack of instructor involvement, typically see fewer than 20 posts for an entire semester, often none at all. While I have not personally researched the connections between student-to-student discussion to learning outcomes, in my capacity as educational technologist where I analyze end-of-semester student course evaluations, I have seen overwhelming evidence that student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction greatly affect student satisfaction. And this, in turn, has an effect on attrition rates.

In our next, and final podcast, we will look a bit more at the techniques that we should follow as we interact with our students.

