Further Considerations for Curricular Updates

Depending on organizational priorities, online course curricular updates may occur at various intervals. Some of these updates deal with issues of maintenance, while others derive from a desire to improve value-added learning. The following table differentiates between updates needed for every term, each academic year, as needed.

The Frequency of Online Course Element Updates

	1. Adherence to Legal Guidelines and Relevant Policies	**2. The Information Quality, Timeliness, and Domain-based Digital Contents**	**3. The Course Curriculum and Teaching and Learning Methodologies**	**4. Relevant Updated Technologies**
Every Term	Syllabus – guidelines and policies Scheduling Connections to relevant campus resources	New sample student assignments (with student releases) Correction of "dead links" to learning resources	Updated assignments (to head off plagiarism or academic dishonesty from prior terms) Curricular fixes during the course	Updated file types The portability and transferability of digital objects The usability of digital objects in various technological systems/socio-technological systems Integration of open-source resources Integration of virtual/immersive worlds (in alignment with new assignments) Anything that needs updates for functioning (staying ahead of technological obsolescence)
Every Academic Year	Relevant new laws, state policies, and campus policies	Third-party publisher-created contents E-books Published	The integration of relevant imagery into the curriculum The enriching of a curriculum through more	The integration of new technologies Remaking of some lecture captures Building usability into online data repositories and resources

		articles	customized assignments and more learner feedback and choices on the topics of study Improved student interactivity Improved instructor feedback loops	
As Needed	Intellectual property corrections Accessibility retrofitting for machine readability, textual annotations, and other accommodations Media rights releases for video/audio/digital still image and other captures of student learning and activities Universal design retrofitting	SME guest speakers' presentations and resources	Scaffolding for novices/amateurs and experts (with learning aids, games, opt-in help, and other elements) Value-added learning Extra credits Field trips Case studies Digital labs Research opportunities Student publications Student gallery shows Student e-portfolios	The add-on of tech-intensive learner experiences The uses of a richer array of tech-enabled research streams (as relevant)…such as with remote sensing, geographical information systems, digital repositories and referatories (like the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching from MERLOT), and so on The addition of metadata to learning objects for findability and accurate labeling

In addition to the many dimensions of curriculum redesign already discussed, several other considerations merit brief mention.

Instructor Inheritance of an Online Curriculum

Many online courses, modules, and digital learning objects are not built with instructor inheritance in mind. "Inheritance" refers to the acceptance of the curriculum by other faculty who will teach to the established and formal standards of that course, module, or learning object. Instructor manuals rarely accompany such courses. The assumption is that experts in the field will be able to intuit the curriculum creator's intentions through the course's syllabus, assignments, assessments, lectures, and other elements.

The creation of a basic packet for inheriting instructors, with insider tips about instructional methods, strategies, and resources, ensures the smoother transition of a course from one professor to another. Also, building a curriculum with an eye toward eventual inheritance can reduce the idiosyncratic elements in course materials.

Beyond a simple instruction packet, full documentation of the entire course is also a necessary component of optimal curriculum design. Those who inherit a course will have a clearer range of choices and motion if they know the provenance of all the contents, if the digital materials are properly annotated and reasonably accessible, and if the original pedagogical plans are shared. The better an online course build is documented, the more easily it is preserved into the future. Also, the easier it is to update.

The documentation may include legal documents, such as contracts, grants, formal letters of support, memorandums of agreement or understanding, media rights releases, copyright releases, and permissions. It might also include raw files from photo shoots, videography sessions, audio sessions, *machinima* captures, and lecture captures. Because raw digital data captures tend to be the "least lossy," they must be protected for potential later use and possible editing into different file types and digital learning objects.

Adult Learner Retention

Research suggests that adult learners prefer practical learning that benefits their work lives. They need to have a clear sense about why they need to learn a particular thing. They need grounded learning that taps into lived experiences[1] and are motivated by the usefulness of information and skills.[2] These factors underscore the need for measureable and clear learning objectives and also suggest attributes that should be part of any course that will have adults as students. Instructors and course designers can enhance the online learner experience and make it more real and engaging through applications of rich, multimodal, multimedia, and full-sensory (visual and sound) immersive learning.

While learners base their decisions to continue in or drop out of a course on a range of reasons, only some of which instructors can influence, instructors do play an important role in helping learners, including adult students, acclimate to an online classroom. Instructors help connect learners to the campus, which can improve retention.[3] They play a critical role in connecting learners to resources on campus. They set a professional and respectful tone by adhering to applicable laws and policies. They provide academic advisement. They have a major responsibility to create a rewarding learning experience that actualizes learner skills and knowledge. Instructors should identify at-risk learners (based on their communications and their submitted work) and provide tailored support for their learning.

Continuous Information Streams

Faculty in online courses benefit from information streams with learners and other stakeholders. One feedback loop involves learner participation in the online course. Instructors who maintain a course revision journal to capture the suggestions can apply these ideas to new designs, or they can integrate them immediately in the master course. Another strategy is to create formal and informal (back-end) channels for learner feedback.

Formal channels usually involve learner surveys that are part of student satisfaction feedback. Instructors sometimes solicit informal feedback from learners at the end of the term. Students will often communicate directly with instructors and offer ideas via e-mails and telephone calls, all information-rich ways to capture suggestions.

For shared, inherited courses that a group of instructors teach, the faculty may share their notes about lessons learned from their hands-on use of the curriculum and the experiences they had while teaching the course. Responsiveness to learner feedback both during and after the course may ease student frustrations, both by addressing their challenges and concerns and by respecting their voices.

Back-end data mining in the learning/course management system can also be highly instructive. For example, the system may capture patterns of when students participate in class. The system might also note which files learners access and what class-related message boards and activities they like the best, data that can spark ideas for enhanced student participation. As one practical example, data that show that students are hard-pressed to submit work in particular times of a learning term can help the professor schedule heavier work at a different time.

Endnotes

1. Daniel C. Edelson and Diana M. Joseph, “The Interest-Driven Learning Design Framework: Motivating Learning through Usefulness,” in the *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Learning Sciences*, held in Santa Monica, California, 2004, pp. 166–173.

2. Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer, *The American Community College*, 4th edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2003), p. 63.
3. William A. Kaplin and Barbara A. Lee, *The Law of Higher Education: A Comprehensive Guide to Legal Implications of Administrative Decision Making*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 113.