Developing Cohort-based Courses with Teacher-Student Interaction in Moodle

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In this article, you will learn how to best set up a cohort-based course that allows teacher-student interaction and enhances student engagement. These types of instructor-led courses include groups of students who work together as a class. The group, or cohort, progresses together through the semester, and the advantage of having an individual instructor lies in the fact that he/she can provide guidance and personalized feedback to the students.

We will review the best structure to use and the best combination of resources, and activities to make sure that your course is very flexible and meets the needs of students and teachers, and also provides behind-the-scenes support, which includes Moodle administrators and instructional design help from eLearning.

We'll start by looking at the main features of an instructor-led cohort-based course, and keep in mind that the course revolves around instructor communication and guidance along with coordinated student performance.

Then, we'll look at the main sources of student and instructor anxiety. Students in an online course that is guided by an instructor are often most worried about the expectations of the instructor. Further, they want to make sure that they are not going to get lost while looking for the course material and exams, and can perform well in a timely fashion. Instructors want to be able to communicate effectively with students and provide timely and effective feedback on assessments.

In this article, we'll discuss the following topics:

- Selecting the ideal activities, resources, and assessments.
- Developing different ways for instructors to interact with students.
- Organizing course material and activities.
- Selecting effective assessments.

Characteristics of instructor-led cohort-based courses

The traditional face-to-face college course is a cohort-based course and has a fixed number of students who progress together to complete the course, and they're led by an instructor who guides them and provides feedback and assessments.

Online courses are very similar. The only difference is that there are more ways to communicate with each other, since you're working in an online environment and the students may be working together for one class or a series of classes.

The main characteristics of instructor-led cohort-based courses include the following:

- A common start and end date.
- A fixed timeline that keeps all students working together.
- Communication with the instructor, who provides guidance and feedback.
- Student interaction and collaboration, with a focus on communication.
- Assessments with instructor guidance and feedback.

It is an interesting fact that most online courses in U.S. higher education are cohort based, and they are regularly compared with face-to-face courses in terms of performance, course completion, and satisfaction.

Benefits and limitations of cohort-based courses

Many online courses offered by colleges and universities are set up to mirror the face-to-face arrangement of traditional courses, and follow, more or less, the same philosophy. The focus is on the content that is accessed and discussed by class members in an orderly fashion as the term progresses. Guidance is provided by an instructor who explains the material, provides feedback, and shows the best way to learn and perform so that students can achieve the course goals and outcomes.

The following are the benefits of cohort-based courses:

- They improve communication with peers.
- The students have an orderly progression through the resources and activities.
- They let the instructor provide proper guidance for performing well and achieving the desired course outcomes.
- They are built on a template that can be copied across multiple sections.
- They offer a sense of community and connection.

While cohort-based courses can be popular and provide support for students, there are a few limitations. Disadvantages of cohort-based courses include:

- There can be slow progress of a student through the course, if the student is very knowledgeable about the topic.
- There's some inflexibility with respect to assignments and the pace of the course.
- There are difficulties in communicating with peers if students are in different time zones or do not have continuous access to the Internet.

For many institutions, like McNeese, the benefits of cohort-based courses far outweigh the limitations, and the fact that course shells or templates once built can be copied, archived, and deployed makes it convenient to run many groups at the same time. Although it is true that courses for independent study can be copied and deployed, the user experience is not the same as that in a cohort-based course. In a well-run and successful cohort-based course, students have a feeling of community and support.

Setting up your instructor-led course

As we mentioned earlier, probably the two most important considerations in an instructor-led cohort-based course are the following:

- Clarity with respect to student performance expectations: What do I do? When do I do it? Where do I get the materials? How and when am I assessed?
- Communication with the instructor: How do I contact my students? How can I provide feedback that they will see in a timely way? How do my students expect me to communicate with them?

We can make sure that we achieve the goals of clarity and communication by selecting a framework that gives us the ability to customize the appearance of the course. This knowledgebase has articles recommending classroom communication here.

Configuring your course

The more consistent McNeese can make our courses, the better. There may be a bit of a learning curve the first time a student takes a course, but if the second course has the same look, feel, and functionality, chances are, the student will feel more confident. The students' user experience is very important. We can make sure that our courses are consistent by using the pre-designed course shells provided by the university. Several shells are available to review and you can request one for your course from the eLearning Department by emailing Wendi Prater (wprater@mcneese.edu).

Course settings

Let's take a look at the course settings. The following are the ideal settings:

1. In the ADMINISTRATION block, go to Course administration.
2. Click on Edit settings.
3. In the Course format section, select the Topics format menu from the drop-down menu in the Format field, and then, add at least two additional topics to the number of sections (in addition to those that will be units in your course). As in the case of the independent study course, which we will cover in a separate article, you will probably use one of the topics for the instructional materials that you'll be using in the entire course. The other topic will probably include practice tests, or other types of assessment such as discussion, forums, presentations or written assignments.
4. In the Appearance section, for Show gradebook to students, select Yes from the drop-down menu.
5. In the Completion tracking section, for Enable completion tracking, select Yes from the drop-down menu.
6. In the Groups section, make sure that you include groups, if you plan to divide students into working groups or to case manage students in class for live instructional sessions using BigBlueButton or Microsoft Teams. So, select Visible groups from the drop-down menu of Group mode. After that, click on Save changes.

Resources

Organize your resources around your topics. For resources that students will use in the entire course, create a module topic and name it Course Materials. Other resources can be added to each topic.

Folder

You've already configured your course to contain a specific topic in which you'll include the texts for the entire course. For example, you may include a link to an e-book that will be used as your course textbook. However, let's collect the files used in each topic in a separate folder using the following steps:

1. On your course dashboard, click on Add a an activity or resource
2. Select Folder.
3. On the Adding a new Folder screen, add the name and description.
4. On the Description screen, describe the contents and the course topic.
5. Drag-and-drop files to add them to the folder.
6. In the Completion tracking section, select Students can manually mark the activity as completed, so that students can track their progress.
7. Click on Save changes.

Student-created files

In the previous article, we discussed the ideal format for files your students will download. However, you may be wondering how will your students make files and collaborate with each other? At McNeese, all students have access to tools in Office 365, this includes SharePoint. There are also a number of open source word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation tools, which also allow integrated file sharing, like Google Drive and Google Docs.

Word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation tools

As mentioned previously, all McNeese students also have access to tools in Office 365, through the MyMcNeese portal. Students can use Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Notes, SharePoint, Microsoft Teams for virtual meetings, etc.

Users can also create materials such as presentations, documents, and spreadsheets within the cloud-based Google Docs, which allows cloud storage and collaboration. Visit http://docs.google.com for more information.

Activities and assessments

As you build your course, you'll need to configure the settings so students can upload assignments and you can provide feedback and update the grades in the gradebook. See additional articles about setting up your Moodle gradebook here.

Assignment

There is an activity called Assignment. Assignment can be easily configured so that students can upload files or copy and paste text that you can grade and return. To work with the Assignment activity, perform the following steps:

1. From the course dashboard, select "Turn editing on".
2. In a course module, select "Add an activity or resource".
3. On the adding a new Assignment page, click on the General section.
4. Fill in the following fields: Assignment name and Description.
5. Open the Availability section and fill in the required fields.
6. Then, in Submission types, be sure to select File submissions and Online text. Selecting Online text will allow students to copy and paste text if they do not have a file format that is compatible. You may also wish to include Online PoodLL if you want an online audio editor for audio recording submissions by students and you'd like to tie it to a whiteboard for presentations. Remember that this is a third-party plugin and the Moodle administrator must download and install it if it is not already installed
7. In Feedback types, be sure to select Feedback comments, and Feedback files.
8. There are other fields that give you options. The Grade settings are of particular importance because they give you a chance to tie the assignment to the gradebook, set the standard grade points or display of units, and select how you'll grade the activities.

Grades

Now, let's take a look at how we can configure the grade reports within the course by performing the following steps:

1. In the ADMINISTRATION block, navigate to Course administration | Grades.
2. Now, again in the ADMINISTRATION block, click on Grade administration.
3. Click on Course grade settings and review the settings on its page.
4. Review Letters in the Grade administration menu to set grade ranges and other settings.

Remember that whether or not an item shows up in the gradebook, the grading criteria for each item is determined when you add graded activities (which include activities such as Quiz, Workshop, Forum, and Assignment). See additional articles about setting up your Moodle gradebook here.

Course backups for cohort-based courses

A simple way to back up or archive courses for the future is to move the courses after they have been taught to a different place in Moodle. For example, you can move the courses from the current semester or term to a new location in your Moodle installation, link from the front page, and then change the settings so that they are not visible to anyone except administrators. The courses can then be backed up and purged of any student or instructor information when appropriate and serve as templates or cloneable shells for courses in the future. Read more about copying your course here. To copy resources and activities from another Moodle course, read this article.

Summary

In this session, we've learned the best way to develop and configure your course for instructor-led cohorts, which are the most commonly found online courses at McNeese. We have chosen cohort-based courses because they are very popular when students are working together on a topic that requires time to develop skills and knowledge.

In this article, we have learned how to configure the course settings so that instructors are able to communicate in a number of different ways, given that students may have different social networking preferences and habits. Then, we reviewed how students will work and how to help them take advantage of open source software for the work they will submit both individually and collaboratively. Finally, we looked at the best ways to set up resources and activities so that students feel comfortable and how to set up forums to encourage student interaction and instructor feedback.

At this point in the series, we highly recommend that you read articles about classroom management strategies if you have not read them already. Also, check out recommendations for transitioning your on-campus class to an online class fast.

Next Steps? > Continue by reading the next article in this series Designing Self-Paced Independent Study Courses. Or return to the previous article Best Practices in Content Delivery.