Organizing Your Course

Now that you've determined what you'd like your students to be able to do after they have completed your course and as you're done with the initial planning stages, you are now ready to start building the framework for your course. Selecting the initial course settings and format allows you to organize your course. In this section, we'll learn how to build a structure that accommodates your course content, activities, resources, information, and assessments.

In the previous article, Planning Your Course, you learned how to plan your course with learning outcomes in mind. Now, as we start adding content, thinking about how students will demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and attitudes, these next steps will help us effectively organize the course.

As we start to develop the framework, we will include some of the most commonly used elements in Moodle courses. Keep in mind, however, that we're not including everything. Instead, we're aiming to build a basic framework in a step-by-step manner so that by the end of this series, you will be in a position to add the content and activities in your course in a clear, coherent way, all the while keeping the overall learning outcomes in mind.

In this article, we'll discuss the following topics in terms of organizing your course:

- Course goals
- Course settings
- Course format
- Customizing the appearance of your course

A great way to start thinking about the best structure for your course is by reflecting upon what you want your students to be able to do by the end of the course and the course material that you'll need to include for them to demonstrate that they've achieved the learning outcomes.

Keep in mind that it's best to keep your list simple and focused on the essential items rather than on all the potential supplemental or optional material, which might enrich your list but isn't vital.

At this point, you may feel a bit overwhelmed as you review your list and wonder, "what am I going to do with all this material?".

Moodle makes your decisions fun and intuitive because it comes with a number of options that will help you both organize and design your course at the same time.

Our goal in this article is to create a course framework that we can use as a template with which to create functionally consistent courses and what we are doing in this section of the series represents a very important step towards achieving it. So, if we keep the big picture in mind and consider the needs and ultimate objectives of the stakeholders, from the university administrators to the curriculum teams, instructional designers, professors, and students, we will be in a better position to make good decisions as we select the settings and options in Moodle; this will help us make sure that our course is well designed and functional, resulting in a positive learning experience.

As mentioned in the previous article, eLearning has several pre-designed course frameworks that are available in Moodle. These frameworks are designed similar to the courses created by iDesign for the RN to BSN degree program. Contact eLearning if you would like to review the pre-designed course shells. After reviewing, eLearning can also create a new course shell for you to use for your course. Using these university course shells can save you time with course development.

Looking at your course goals and the big picture

Let's start by keeping the big picture in mind, not just in terms of learning outcomes and course content, but also in terms of your students and fellow instructors in your department. After all, while you build your course, you may also be developing a demo course or a template that could be used across an entire curriculum and with a broad array of users or by other instructors in your department (dual enrollment faculty members, Visiting Lecturers (VLs), etc).

Since both instructors and students have a very diverse range of skills, abilities, and attitudes, it is important to keep their needs in mind as we begin to organize a new course and follow the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

Then, as you start creating or editing the structure, consider what your course's dashboard will look like when students log in. Keep in mind that many students will use more than one device to access your course and the screens will vary in terms of their size and what they can display. eLearning has found that most students at McNeese access their courses from mobile devices and tablets.

The following are a few tips for making sure your course structure works well in today's environment of laptops, tablets, smartphones, and desktops, all with varying display sizes:

- Make sure the most important links and information are on the course's home page and that they are visible on the screen of any device.
- Test the appearance of your course on the devices that your students and Teaching Assistants will be using.
- Make sure the navigation through your course is simple and consistent and that you use concise, descriptive text for links, and not just "click here" or "click on this link". The McNeese course shell templates have navigation built into the course for you.

Having a clear, clean course home page and dashboard will help your students develop confidence as they navigate the course. They will know where to find the materials they need and when and how to access them. In addition, make sure that the links on the course's home page take them directly to the materials they need. This way, your students don't have to click multiple times on multiple drill downs, and they will not feel lost and confused.

As you consider how the organization of your course will help your students perform, and do what they need to do, you can also begin to envision how they will interact with the learning materials and assessments.

Course settings

Now we will begin to build the course. Most of the initial course setup will be done through the course settings screen, which you may access through the Course administration menu. Remember that when you make changes in the Course administration menu, your changes affect only the course you're developing. In our case, it might be a demo course or a template.

As you begin configuring settings, it is a good idea to take a moment to remember the goal to be clear and concise as you select names, create links, and develop content.

The following course settings appear after clicking on Edit settings in the Course administration menu:

- General, Description,
- Course format,
- Appearance,
- Files and uploads,
- Completion tracking,
- Guest access,

- Groups
- Role Renaming.

The Edit course settings page is shown in the following screenshot:
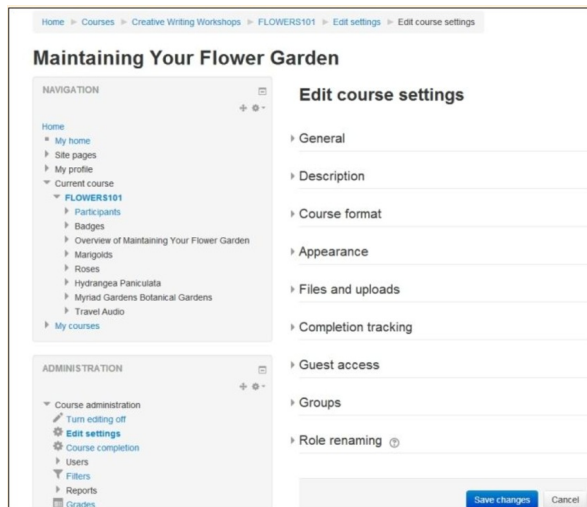
We will work through the basic menu items in the course settings that allow you to set up your course structure and organize your course.

General

The first expandable menu, General, gives you an opportunity to provide basic information about your course. Please keep in mind that at any time along the way, you may return to the course settings and edit the information.

While it is easy to edit your settings later, it's always best to plan well so that your course descriptions and listings are not ambiguous. The following steps will help you configure the General settings:

1. In the Course administration menu, click on Edit settings. The Edit course settings screen will appear.
2. If the General settings section is collapsed, click on the menu titled General to expand it.
3. Enter data in the following fields: Course full name, Course short name, Course category, Course start date, and Course ID number.
4. Click on the Save changes button.

At McNeese, course names (including the short names for your courses), the course IDs, and descriptions are consistent with the university's course catalog and with information in Banner. You will save yourself a great deal of time and frustration if you make sure that everything stays consistent at the outset, rather than trying to retrofit or revising it later. Aim for clear, concise language and terminology that is consistent across McNeese and the university catalog. Most instructors leave this information alone so that the course links to Banner as changes are made to the student information system.

Description

The Course summary box provides a brief description that captures the essence of your course. Note that the box includes a number of web-editing tools that allow you to customize the appearance of the description. This capability will be very helpful later when we look at the overall appearance of the course page.

You may also use the Course summary files box that gives you the opportunity to upload files using the Add option or drag-and-drop them. Using Course summary files gives you an opportunity to incorporate multiple modalities in adherence to the principles of Universal Design for Learning so that your course information is in text as well as audio and/or video format. By making your course information available in audio and video format, you will be making your material accessible to a wide array of learners.

For example, you may insert the link to an audio file (MP3 is ideal) or a video you have uploaded on YouTube or insert the link to an embedded player. You may also include a link to an expanded text file that includes more detailed information.

Course format

Below the Description section, you will see Course format. As you expand it, you'll see several options, which have expandable menus.

Structuring your instructional material using a format

Selecting a format allows you to develop the structure of your instructional material. This is a critical decision, and you must make it carefully. If at all possible, the format selected should be consistent across the university so that all courses have a similar look, feel, and organization.

As mentioned earlier, eLearning has several pre-designed course shells that are available in Moodle. To save time on these steps, you can contact eLearning to upload the course shells to your course and to format the settings for your course.

In the course shell, you will notice there are a number of options that automatically generate a pre-formatted set of fields, which makes it easy for you to enter data. The various formats available are as follows:

- The Topics format
- The Weekly format
- The Social format
- The Single activity format

Most instructors at McNeese will use either the Topics or the Weekly formats. For example, if your college follows a 16-week semester format, it is often useful to follow a weekly format.

However, many instructors offer the same courses over varying spans of time and may offer a 4-week, 8-week, 12-week, or 16-week term. In such cases, it is often helpful to select the Topics format and then specify the timeline by means of a link to a calendar that includes the due dates for the course term.

The number of sections of the course

The number of sections in a course corresponds to the functional chunks of the instructional material and activities that the students will work through in the course. Each department and instructor will have their own approach to delivering coursework, with terms that may vary.

If you are teaching a 4-week, 8-week, or 16-week course, it is a good idea to divide your content and activities into sections that can be either expanded or compressed. For example, you may select eight topics, and if you are in a position where you are teaching the course in 4-week, 8-week, and 16-week terms, you may easily double up and accelerate through the course's content at twice the regular pace, or simply spread the content out over two weeks instead of one.

Keep the following points in mind:

- Make your sections consistent in terms of the amount of content each contains
- Try to keep the amount of time needed to complete each task consistent

Hidden sections

Hidden sections allow you to avoid distracting your students with too much information on the screen. There may be a few situations where you may wish to make all sections visible. Such cases may occur in a very brief course that requires the students to have all the information while working through the course.
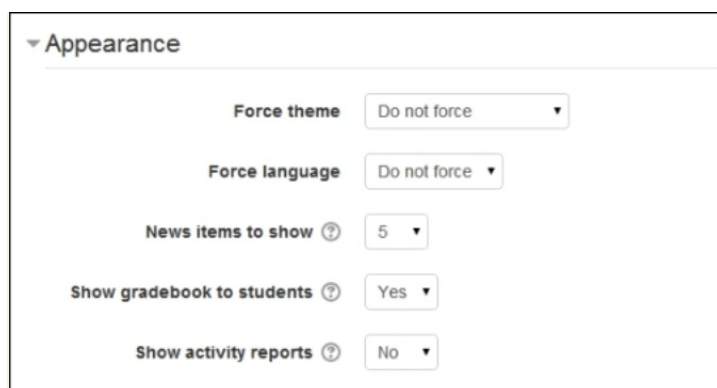
Course layout

You may either show all the sections on one page, or choose to show one section per page. If your course only contains two sections, you may wish to show them on a single page.

However, in the interest of clarity, it is often a good idea to show one section per page. Again, be sure to think ahead and consider what you'd like your students to be doing as they navigate through the course and what they should be able to do by the end of the course. Make sure that the structure of your course guides them along a clear path. Keep in mind that the course introduction topic will be visible on each page, even when you have one topic per page.

Appearance

The Appearance menu, shown in the following screenshot, allows you to create a universal look and feel for your entire course:

The options are self-explanatory, but there are a few key points to keep in mind as you organize your course:

- Force theme: This option allows you to apply a specific theme across the entire course, rather than giving your students an opportunity to modify it if the option is selected. If you choose Do not force, the theme that McNeese has selected site wide will be used.
- News items to show: This option gives you a chance to create announcements in a special box on the course page. Include this if you have important announcements, key dates, and reminders for your course. Avoid including too many items, because they can be distracting and also chew up valuable digital real estate on your course page.
- Show gradebook to students: This option helps you to allow your students to check their grades, which can be

extremely motivating and a key to their success.

- Show activity reports: This option permits students to see their own activity reports, which can be quite helpful.

Files and uploads

You may select the upper limit of files and uploads. The upper limit has been set by McNeese's Moodle administrator in University Computer Services (UCS) in accordance with the needs of McNeese. Our recommendation is to set the limit to the maximum allowed and to use best practices in web design such as file compression to keep file sizes to a minimum. For larger files, we recommend using repositories that integrate with Moodle such as YouTube, Dropbox, and SharePoint in Office 365. For example, instead of uploading large files, such as videos, it's much better to use an HTML5 friendly video player, which you may embed. If your students are creating large files as part of their coursework, you may encourage them to upload those files to SharePoint or SoundCloud (if they're audio files), YouTube (if they're video files), and Google Doc or SharePoint (if they're PowerPoint presentations, and especially if they contain large graphics).

For maximum accessibility and to comply with Universal Design for Learning, keep in mind that HTML works very well with assistive technologies that convert text to voice for individuals with impaired vision. If possible, convert your presentations and documents to a format that can be used by assistive technology.

For individuals with impaired hearing and/or cognitive disabilities, providing a written script to accompany audio files can help you achieve the goal of using multiple modalities for optimizing student accessibility to the course content. See student accommodation articles to assist with speech-to-text and text-to-speech recommendations.

For student papers or projects, a maximum upload size of 2 MB is often sufficient, especially if they use ZIP files.

Completion tracking

Along with the Show gradebook to students option, the Completion tracking option can help students maintain their levels of motivation and develop a positive, "I can do it!" approach, which translates to self-efficacy and self-determination.

By being able to track when they complete their units and/or activities, students can stay motivated, organized and continue to set and meet their personal goals.

Groups

Moodle allows you to set up student groups while you are developing the framework of the course. It is often a good idea to set up groups, even if you have collaborative activities, or you'd like to give individuals a chance to work and share in informal teams. Groups can also be very effective for peer reviews of papers or projects. They are also helpful if you plan to use BigBlueButton for student group work and assignments.

However, if your course does not include collaborative/team activities or peer reviews, setting up groups can add an unnecessary level of complexity to your course.

Customizing your course page

Now, let's return to your course's home dashboard page. Are there a few items that we need to include that we were not able to customize when we edited the course page? This section discusses a few items you may wish to consider.

The Calendar block

Including a calendar which demarcates course events can help your students stay on track. To add a calendar, you will first add a Calendar block as shown in the following steps:

1. Click on the Turn editing on button.
2. In the Add a block menu, click on Add….
3. Click on Calendar in the drop-down menu. A Calendar block will appear on the course page.
4. Click on the Actions icon in the Calendar block and select Configure Calendar block to configure the options you wish to have displayed.
5. Click on the Save changes button.

To add events, just click on the month of the event in the Calendar block, and then click on New event. The new event can apply to the course, the user, or the website. If you use a calendar, you may wish to include the following items: course start date, course end date, key due dates, and also any administrative issues that could be of value. You can add each of these items in the individual course calendars for courses.

Instructor links

You may wish to use an HTML block to include a quick link to your contact information. This information should also be included on the course syllabus. In the McNeese course shell templates, the course syllabus is included in the Course Orientation book. See these instructions for editing the book.

Student success links

McNeese includes for you links to student success resources. These links are located in the Moodle menu bar at the top of the page.   Please encourage students to use these links and resources for help. From the Moodle menu bar at the top of the site, select Student Help > Resource Page. Students can also get help from the McNeese student knowledgebase, select Student Help > Get Help. This link is also available outside of Moodle and we encourage students to bookmark the site.

Additional elements to customize the appearance of your course

We've discussed the general appearance of your course, but there are a few additional items that will allow you to customize it further. As you make changes, you may wish to keep accessibility in mind and use the guidelines of Universal Design for Learning.

Fonts

Moodle gives you many options for design, and you may notice that web-editing boxes pop up almost every time you add content. While it's very tempting to use a wide array of colors, fonts, and symbols, it is usually best to keep it simple. The following are a few key points:

- Choose fonts carefully and use them consistently.
- Please use a Sans Serif font, such as Arial or Helvetica. They are easier for people with impaired vision to read. They will be displayed uniformly in most browsers and on most devices.
- If you are using graphics with text, be aware that magnification software often results in highly pixelated text and can be hard to read.
- If you code in HTML, use relative sizes rather than absolute sizes for the font. If you use absolute sizes, you essentially "lock down" the sizing and it is not possible for magnification software to enlarge it then.

- Avoid using too many colors. Again, it is easier for people with impaired vision to read content that is consistent.

Images

Images can be a very powerful way to add personality and individual branding to your courses. However, it's also easy to add too many images or to overwhelm the students with large, potentially irrelevant images. For this reason, be sure to keep in mind the following points:

- Use meaningful graphics.
- Place them so that they add and reinforce meaning (rather than distract or add confusion).
- Optimize the size of images so that they load quickly, especially when students are using a mobile device or tablet, which most students use.
- If you need to use large graphics, create a clickable thumbnail that expands to a large graphic (for example, a map).

Theme considerations

Let's return, for a moment, to Appearance in the Site administration menu. One of the ways to change the look and feel of your course is using one of the pre-designed course themes and course shells provided by McNeese's eLearning Department. In Moodle, there are several built-in themes that can be utilized to give your course a customized look and feel, and save you time. Also, the course shells developed at McNeese work well with multiple devices and automatically displays content for tablets, laptops, smartphones, desktops, and other handheld devices.

Summary

In this session, we explored how to organize your course in terms of its structure, format, and appearance. We also learned the best way to use Moodle's built-in course settings and elements to create a framework that can be consistent and flexible for all your courses. For example, you can develop a demo course and use it as a template or guide for future courses. We also discussed the reasons for making certain decisions as we develop the framework and how to think about the best ways to make your course accessible for all your students.

In the next session, we will guide you through developing content and activities for your course. We will take a close look at how best to match your course materials with the overall purpose of the course and how to do so in a way that is motivating and engaging to students and encourages students' success. In the next article, we will now begin focusing on developing the course itself.

Next Steps? > Continue by reading the next article in this series Best Practices in Content Delivery. Or return to the previous article Planning Your Course.

We have also included articles to help with classroom management strategies to this knowledgebase. Also, check out recommendations for transitioning your on-campus class to an online class fast.