Create Online Courses That Make It Easy to Learn (Apr 15)

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This article examines some intersections between instructional design (ID) and web content strategy and shows how you can start using techniques and tools from content strategy (CS) in your own day-to-day ID practice of online course website design.

Content strategists work behind the scenes on web content production, curation, and maintenance to develop processes that help content creators maintain fresh, relevant, useful content. Although "web content" may seem unrelated to instructional content, if you create online courses, the two have more in common than may meet the eye.

To begin with, just like content strategy (CS), the work of instructional design is a largely behind-the-scenes discipline; students will get to know the instructor over the course of the learning experiences but never meet the instructional design (ID) team. Yet the "invisible" work of the IDs is directly responsible for the successful student experience in online course websites.

In this article, we focus on the "back end" of the course website—the creation, organization, and maintenance of a group of digital assets and how these decisions ultimately affect the front-end student experience.

What is content?

Our favorite content strategist and writer, Erin Kissane, describes content as "anything that conveys meaningful information to humans." She also distinguishes between content that's public facing and content that is used to *plan for* public-facing content but which the public will never (or should never) see.

We have these distinctions in instructional settings as well. Student-facing content is any digital asset that comprises the course website: documents, assignments, interactions, learning objectives, competencies, quiz questions, images, and other multimedia.

There also are those course-related assets that students might never see: teaching objectives, planning documents, and metadata. Just as with the content that is visible to students, these "hidden" documents require a plan for creation, retrieval, and archival, as both the visible and hidden content affects online course design and impacts the learner experience.

Steal these techniques from content strategy

Here we offer five techniques, borrowed from web content strategy, to help ensure efficient workflows, consistent organization, and exceptional relationships with your subject matter experts (SMEs). Each of these techniques has direct implications for the front-end experience of the student who interacts and engages with instructional content in an online course website.

1. Maintain a content inventory

What it is

A content inventory can help you take stock of all the assets that comprise your course website, previously defined as all those instructor-created documents, images, journal articles, multimedia, external websites, readings, syllabi, quiz questions, and assignments. You can also use a content inventory to ensure and track alignment between course assets and learning goals.

How to do it

Start small with information that is useful to you. You can do this in a simple spreadsheet that tracks asset properties such as:

- Title
- Source / citation
- Keywords
- Licensing
- Learning objectives

Even if you are not starting a project from the beginning, you can still implement a content inventory practice, and in this case, not worry about dead or inactive assets.

No matter the size of your project, be it a five-minute presentation or a 15-week fully online course, tracking content assets will serve you well now and into the future. When it is time for you to revise your project; you will know exactly what assets the course website contains and where each one came from. Should you want to share your resources with a colleague, you will be able to point them to the location's source. Should you have resources that might be useful in other projects, you will have a complete and sortable repository in which to search.

How it improves the user experience

In a course environment, students benefit from materials that are current, relevant, and essential, no matter how many times the course has been taught or by how many different instructors.

2. Streamline and unify content creation with templates

What it is

Content templates encourage consistent format for core content, as well as help ensure consistency across content that may have multiple authors. IDs can steal this technique to help instructors create multiple pages efficiently. Templates also ensure completeness of information, since they act as a subtle checklist for the SME to remember to include information on all aspects of the project or lesson.

How to do it

First identify your main content categories, for example, assignments, group projects, or resource pages. Next, create a template for each content type, and strive to maintain consistent look and feel across your templates.

For example, an assignment template would offer a consistent and complete presentation structure for every assignment that appears in the course. The template for a set of learning guides would include the main section headers that you would include in each of the guides.

How it improves the user experience

Learners become familiar with the way you do things, a phenomenon known in the web-usability community as "learnability," which increases the speed with which they will be able to navigate your course website to find the information they need.

3. Maintain a style guide

What it is

Style guides are used by content strategists to help ensure that materials produced by a team of individuals maintains some level of consistency, because there are both team-based and temporal challenges to creating content. These challenges can even be present when one person creates content for a course over an extended period of time, switching, for instance, between listing the assigned readings about x-rays as any of:

Read Chapter 1 on chest x-ray imaging, pp. 1-56

Read Ch1, CXR, pages 1-56

Read chapter 1, chest X-rays, p1 - p56

Any of these options would get the job done communication-wise, but the resulting formatting inconsistencies tend to add up and potentially distract the learner.

When content strategists talk about style guides, they're talking about a document that does more than just agree upon spellings and methods for listing things like chapter titles and page numbers. The style guide also can contain:

- Strategies for cross-linking content throughout the course site,
- Plans for metadata and versioning,
- The colors, typefaces, and typeface weights you will use to emphasize important material, and
- Plans for consistent labeling of information.

How to do it

The bigger the team and the bigger the project, the longer and more detailed the style guide. However, it can be a hard sell to ask your busy SME to write down their preferred methods for referring to common vocabulary, and especially in getting them to adhere to established guidelines.

But making decisions, both large and small, about the way that you present content and display it in an online course, can exponentially decrease confusion on the part of the learner, particularly the novice learner.

Consider taking the initiative to compile the skeleton of the style guide for the SME at the start of a project, after you've had time to familiarize yourself with their content, and populate it with some of the inconsistencies you've noticed as you've been working on their site. Obtain the SME's approval of the document (and, therefore, buy-in) prior to making changes across an entire course site.

A style guide returns exponentially increasing rewards: the earlier the SME commits to adding to, maintaining, and referring back to it, the more decisions they will be able to offload as their content corpus grows.

How it improves the user experience

A style guide results in a more structured, consistent experience for the learner.

4. Establish an editorial calendar

What it is

Strictly speaking, a content strategist's editorial calendar is the primary vehicle to generate new content or refresh existing published content. For example, when time-sensitive information is posted to a site's homepage, the editorial calendar will alert the web team once the content has become outdated.

How to do it

Consider adding another column to the content inventory spreadsheet you've already started using. This column can be used to keep track of such key dates as:

- Course launch
- Unit hide/unhide
- Course maintenance
- Assignment deadlines
- Hyperlink tests

You might also use the calendar to encourage the scheduling of regular strategy discussions between the SME and the course development team.

How it improves the user experience

IDs can capitalize on this idea to ensure that course websites remain accurate and relevant semester after semester.

5. Establish a metrics plan for evaluation

What it is

A metrics plan helps the CS evaluate and plan for continuous improvement. But, like all assessment activities, it is helpful to define at the outset of a project what you mean by success.

Kissane suggests identifying "victory conditions" at the start of every project—that is, having a clear picture of what success will look like and how you will measure it.

For academic content, you will likely measure victory conditions via learner achievement of learning goals using traditional summative assessment techniques like quizzes and other graded activities, but success also could be measured using data from formative and summative evaluations.

How to do it

Build into your ID workflow a service process by which you gather and report user data to the SME, such as how many times an asset is accessed, and how long students are spending on certain activities. Consult your LMS support team to find out what level of learning analytics your system can capture.

Help the SME understand the implications of that data. For example, if a critical asset is not being used, you can advise investigating why. In all cases, you can help explore the question: what about the course design needs to change to create an optimal user experience?

How it improves the user experience

Learners might be having difficulty locating the resource within the structure of the course. Or they might be abandoning a course video halfway through due to poor production quality or frustration with playback issues.

Instructional Designers as content strategists and advocates

Perhaps the most important part of our jobs is as *advocates* for the people who interact with course websites—both instructors and learners. We can advocate for both groups of users by:

1. Reminding instructors what it was like to be a novice with content and helping build in clarity and consistency so they can focus on the content of the course.
2. Helping instructors organize and navigate their own course sites. They should be comfortable with where and how their content is stored.

These techniques will ensure for the students—via all the methods we've discussed here—that the learning environment is welcoming, clear, and consistent so that the focus can be on learning and engaging with the content.

References

Wiggins, Grant P., and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. ASCD, 2005.

Kissane, Erin, and Kristina Halvorson. *The Elements of Content Strategy*. New York, NY: A Book Apart, 2011.