POCR: Subsection "B"

Unit-Level Objectives

This portion of the OEI Course Design Rubric deals with interaction, focusing on the ways courses can support student success by building in opportunities for instructor-initiated interaction and student-initiated interaction. The foundation of the section is the requirement for regular and effective contact and the belief that online learners have greater success when they are not isolated learners--isolated from their peers, isolated from their instructor, or isolated from activities that aid higher-order learning.

B1: Pre-Course Contact

Pre-course contact may not be evident in a course that hasn't launched yet, but we'd like to make the case that it should be. Pre-course "Welcome" letters are an ubiquitous element of online teaching. These letters are designed to get online students in the course and participating in the first week, and they often contain important information about the instructor, the CMS, the course, and initial activities. However it is sent to students, this letter should be archived in the course in an easy-to-locate spot. While the information will be redundant to most students, it may be critical to late adds and other students who did not receive the pre-course email.

Instructors may choose to archive the letter in their first announcements, in their orientation, or with their syllabus, but they should be encouraged to recognize this pre-course contact is an important part of their course. Aligned courses include pre-course contact, while exemplary courses provide essential resources within the contact that help students successfully start the course.

B2: Regular Effective Contact

This item focuses on the instructor's plan for interacting with students within the course. Aligned courses will demonstrate a clear plan for consistent instructor-initiated contact using CMS tools. Exemplary courses build on this by offering many opportunities for contact through a wide range of communication tools, such as announcements, discussions, online conferencing, and others.

When you're looking for evidence of this in the course, your first strategy should be looking for low hanging fruit--the obvious places you would expect to find **communication policies**--for example, the syllabus, the home page, or a page in the orientation unit with "contact" or "communication" in the page title.

B3: Student-Initiated Contact

When students experience difficulty in the course, whether it be technical issues, learning issues, or simply a need for clarification, they need quick resolution for the problem or their learning may be affected. Section B3 provides guidelines to ensure that students can get help when they need it.

To encourage student-initiated interaction, instructor contact information should be readily accessible to students. In aligned courses, the instructor's contact information is easy to find (e.g., on the home page, in the syllabus, and/or in an orientation module) **and** must also included expected response times. In exemplary courses, instructors consistently encourage students to

contact them, and offer a variety of tools to do so (e.g., email, Canvas Inbox, office hours, web conferencing, phone, text messaging, Q&A discussions, etc).

We often focus on the instructor's presence in an online course. However, successful course design includes opportunity for **student presence**, as well. Continuing research illustrates that online students are more likely to be successful if the course is designed to support learning communities.

The last three items in Section B focus on including opportunities for student engagement in our course design, and look specifically at how interaction is used to create a mutually-supportive learning environment.

B4: Student-Initiated Contact with Other Students

B4 supports the development of a learning community by providing opportunities and tools for students to contact one another. One of the clearest examples of this is a "Q&A" style discussion that allows students to initiate interaction that is not in response to a prompt and invites students to interact with each other, such as answering a classmate's question. In the case of exemplary courses, you will find a variety of tools provided to students to interact with each other. When assessing this criterion, you may need to look in the discussions, syllabus, orientation unit, and assignments, as these opportunities may not be evident at first glance.

B5: Regular Effective Contact Among Students

The most common space where we might find regular effective contact in a course is in the discussions, so this criteria may be easy to assess in most courses. In addition, reviewers may also look for explicit references to building a learning community or team, as well as how the instructor has planned interaction in the course to *develop community*. In addition to regular discussions throughout the course, this may also include an initial ice breaker or other "getting to know one another" opportunities. Exemplary courses include activities that are culturally responsive and designed to engage the variety of communication styles in the class.

For courses with limited discussions, the instructor may be using tools or assignments creatively to support this criterion. In addition to looking for discussions, check for collaborative activities, peer review, and/or other opportunities for student interaction. Remember, this may look very different from course to course, or from discipline to discipline. If faculty are being creative or innovative, reviewers may need to think outside the box as well.

B6: Participation Levels

This last item in Section B focuses on setting expectations for students so they know how their contributions to class interactions will be graded. At minimum, courses should *consistently* include an explanation of both the required **quantity and quality** of interaction. This may include instructions and grading criteria in discussions, a statement in the syllabus, and/or, in the case of exemplary courses, a well-developed rubric or grading document.