



Developing the Online Course in Stress Crises and Coping: A Low Stress Curriculum Design Model

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Professional students are increasingly bombarded with numerous forms of negative stress or distress in their pursuit of graduate studies and studies in general. In addition to rigorous course learning expectations and educational institutional stress, students have numerous situational and external stressors. Creating curricula and online delivery mechanisms that maintain the focus on educational pursuit and the achievement of advanced professional competencies, skills, and behaviors is more a matter of curricular design and forethought than a naturally occurring condition within the course. This manuscript is about curricular design intended to reduce negative stress on students engaged in graduate professional education. Developing course delivery to ease learning related stress does not occur, using traditional curricular development approaches. What follows is a student informed approach to creating a low stress online course on Stress Crisis and Coping as an essential skill set needed to function in most aspects of professional work and in human service delivery.

Keywords: higher education, online education, curriculum design, stress reduction

Introduction

A question may be posed as: What do students find stressful and why? Of course, there is no absolute or definitive answer, as stress is in part a perceived phenomenon that varies from student to student. Some of the more common stressful situations identified in the professional and popular literature may include: a decline in civility in and out of the classroom, time pressures to complete assignments while working or caring for family, stresses associated with student role, such as economic pressures (Sloan, 2002), and competing deadlines and responsibilities, as well as, learning curve issues or lack of skills, social isolation and overwork and reduction in perceived status and personal power. A related stressful lifestyle phenomenon for students is alienation from a healthy lifestyle and environment such that personal needs like healthy eating, sleep, or even access to fresh air become unmet.

Technology poses an additional and common source of stress (Goodyear, 2002) for students as technology becomes an embedded demand for advanced and online forms of modern educational curriculum delivery (Schlosser & Burmeister, 1999; Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000). To begin with, technology reliability and access issues are a common experience for most contemporary students (Greenberg, 2002). Furthermore, such communication devices and demands as cell phones, bombardments of emails, consultations on Skype and course delivery platforms, sheer information overload, and lack of personal privacy are heavy contributors to student perceptions of stress.

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Many of these stressful conditions fall beyond the domain of control of the curriculum developer or course instructor. However, the course itself may be structured even within modern course delivery apparatus to provide a diminished perception of high perceived levels of student stress. The essential element of effective course design for a low stress curricular experience is to carefully incorporate student feedback over time into the course experience (Simonson, 2000). Some awareness of the fluctuating nature of perceived stress for students is also essential.

A useful curricular development approach would be to provide and embed a stress awareness and management course into the curricular program of work for students, particularly graduate students, relevant to their unique area of professional or academic training and incorporate best practices in curricular and online curricular design to reduce the experience of stress while simultaneously training the student in improved stress management and self-care (Miller & King, 2003). The resultant goal in part would be that of creating the low stress graduate professional class online (Faculty Focus, 2013).

Literature Review

The development of a course delivery approach and essential course elements (Keegan, 1996) which provide a reduced perceived stress model for either online or in class graduate and professional work, requires considerable thought and preparation (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Though some course delivery platforms are both user friendly for the instructor and participating student, there remains a learning curve for technology mastery and familiarity in how to compose course elements in such a design as to permit ease of student involvement and approximate a supportive and engaged classroom experience (Foley, 2003).

Some of the essential instructional elements for a cohesive classroom experience will need to be addressed and present within each mode of course delivery. A number of teaching and teaching mentoring sources recommend that faculty need to begin each course by reducing anxiety though taking a masterful and positive approach to content delivery. That is, by leading, keeping the pace rapid and the students engaged (Ko & Rossen, 2003; Fischer, Reiss, & Young, 2005). Teaching and inspiring students from the first class experience is essential. The task of maintaining a positive learning environment though is difficult for some instructional faculty, as students may be passive learners, through earlier socialization and prone to avoidance of participation or even negative talks or “bullying” instructors if not socialized to be mature and self-responsible learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

The instructor must be constantly prepared to counter, negative actions that detract from the learning experience even if directed to the instructor. The responsibility for a positive learning environment then is assigned to the participating student body with incentives for participation and positive engagement and lack of these or substantial down side disincentives for exceptions to maintaining a positive learning environment. Reinforcement by way of review of the scoring or grading essentials early into the course and revisiting these each class meeting, whether classroom or online, is an instructional requirement (Goodyear, 2002).

Online Courses

Course elements for online courses will require some additional considerations. To begin, ease of course platform access (Wikipedia, 2013), usage, learning, and the sequencing or repletion of tasks and a detailed and repeated orientation to online course suite tools and features is essential. Careful attention should be paid to a

shared sequencing of tasks and assignments between the written syllabus and the online learning modules (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010).

The syllabus should include design elements that are low stress tasks both synchronously within the course meeting time and asynchronously for external student and group task working arrangements and after class homework, etc. (Boettcher, 2013). Content for the course should be personally relevant, group relevant, educationally relevant, interactive, and engaging (Mabrito, 2004). Content within the online course shell should be sequenced into learning modules with nested levels of traditional, multimedia, and external subject content.

The learning or online class milieu should be inclusive of rapid consultation or response as questions or inquiries emerge. Learning strategies should be task-based. Tasks then should allow for multiple learning attempts and timelines or due dates (see Figure 1).

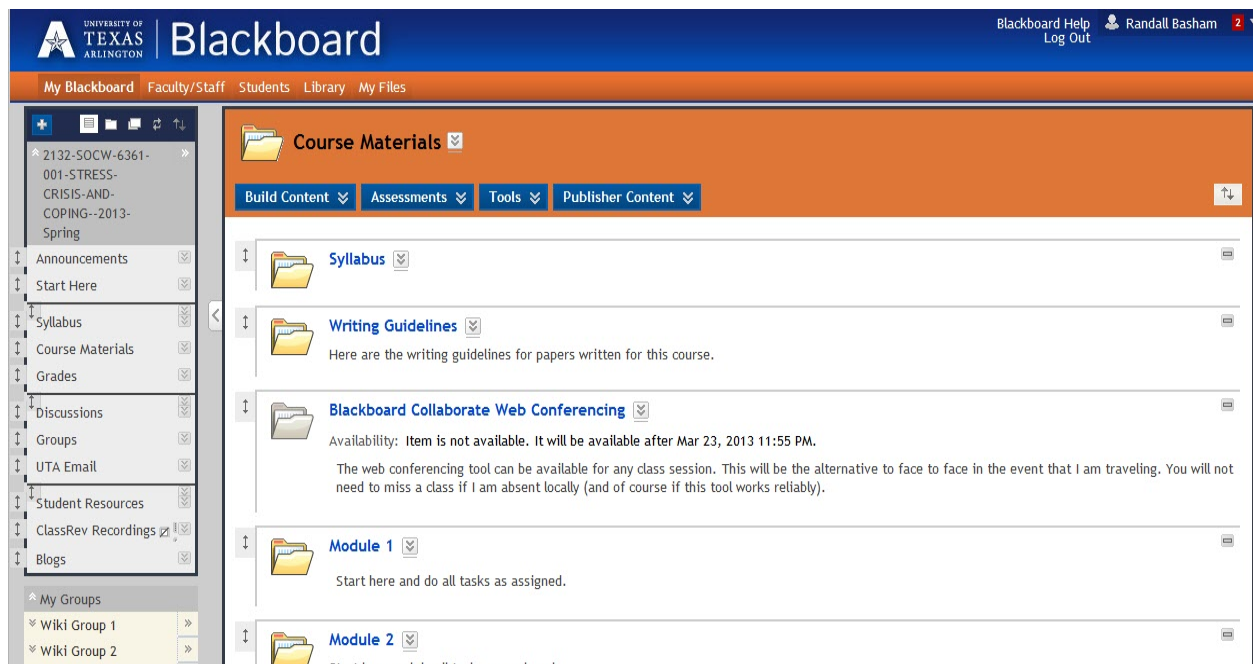


Figure 1. Sequenced course modules.

Using Technology for Low Stress Course Delivery

A combination of passive and active learning methods may be employed to create a lowered stress level for course participants through the supportive use of technology. Passive and non-stressful though potentially non-engaging internal to the course shell, online learning methods would include the varied but sequenced use of videos, readings, slides, notes, and perhaps other multimedia, including audio files on occasion (Clark, 1983). External but passive methods might include links to pre-prepared class session summaries or other material posted by instructors to YouTube, blogs, etc. for additional personalized support. Active learning methods then would include the in class (online) skill building content and interaction with faculty and other students (Sorensen & Baylen, 2000).

The combination of course activities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) would be directed toward the goal of increased self-awareness, relative to stress management knowledge (Seaward, 2011). Such embedded individualized (Maeroff, 2003) and passive learning content might include: stress management or reduction

inventories, self-monitoring plans or links to external programs, and information on regulating stress responses and symptoms. Self-awareness, relative to stress management and reduction could further be facilitated through a combination of cohort-based passive and active non-judgmental feedback discussions, opportunities for clarification and sharing opinions, and shared responsibility for maintaining a positive learning environment and zero tolerance (expressed) for bullying.

Technology-Based Course Content

Technology-based course content will of necessity be themed to subject or specialty of the specific course to include stress management, crisis management, or coping skills development if the development of effective stress reduction methods are the objective for the course (Seaward, 2011). Both the technology learning curve for the course delivery system and the curricular content should be organized from simple to complex content and skills training (Greenberg, 2002). Content may on occasion be entertaining, but the course should not be focused on entertaining but rather informing and training (see Figure 2).

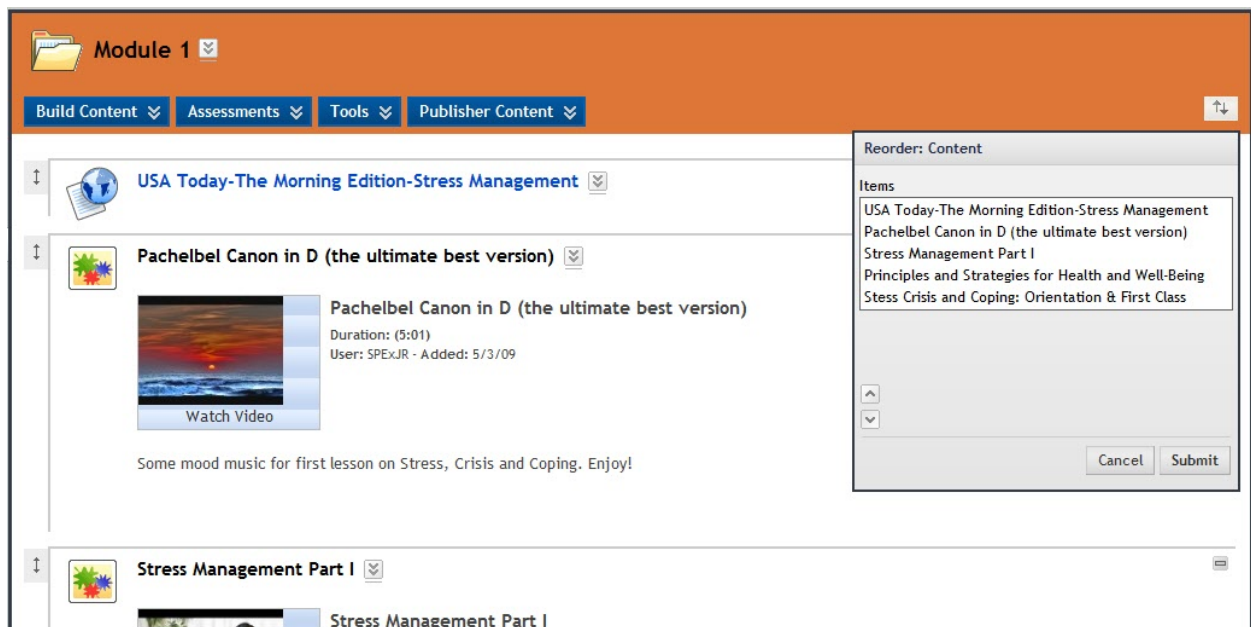


Figure 2. Themed information and training modules with limited entertainment.

Essential technological course shell components that would permit both engagement and approximate the “in class” experience would likely include a conferencing or live chat platform for synchronous course dialog or a white board for synchronous keyboarding dialog (Painter, Coffin, & Hewings, 2003). Summations as mentioned, either oral or captured video would allow for supportive reinforcement and review of online content and allow for variation and rehearsal needs among student due to differing learning styles. In an out of class discussion and projects, students allow to develop relationships and provide an additional learning experience. Blending of internal and external resources provides prerequisite variation needed for competency and mastery, including stress management skill sets (Seaward, 2011). Of course, the addition of variable commitment approaches for student engagement and effort within the syllabus and online course assignments, or variable commitment for mastery through grading contracts allow students to perform differentially and decide how much they wish to take away form a course.

Methods

The principles and guidelines to follow are derived from informal student feedback regarding the stresses of graduate coursework and online coursework and suggestions for reducing stress are listed as understood by the course instructor. No systematic or organized method of gathering information was utilized. No organized method of data collection was employed. They are provided as personal lessons learned, and possibilities for further inquiry, for this descriptive paper.

Three sections of students enrolled in a graduate level Social Work Direct Practice Course in Stress Crises and Coping, offered in the classroom (one section), as a hybrid course (one section), and as a fully online course (one section) were requested to offer their accumulated suggestions on developing a low stress classroom course delivery experience with imbedded online elements, and fully online. Each course section included from 20 to 30 students with an average of 25. These serve as an informal summation of their accumulated experience and insights on creating low stress course delivery.

The model course syllabus for “SOCW 6361 Direct Practice in Social Work: Stress Crises and Coping” may be located by accessing <http://www.uta.edu/ra/real/faculty/basham> online and seeking the latest syllabus template for the course under this authors teaching tab on the research profile page.

See course video module links in Table 1.

Table 1

A Listing of Course Subject Topics and Online Video Supplements

Stress characteristics Physiology response to stress	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQBhnTj7uDE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyP8L3qTW9Q
Stress and disease Psychology and stress	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxcTEiTrS0k https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_HOxC72Iss
Stressful emotions Stress prone personality	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isseiH9Q9Bg https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvx1nUYy8s0
Stress and human spirituality	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kyn5absDyM4
Cognitive triad and stress Cognitive behavior modification	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7T5JFEiRFI https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BbHW3H_xmo
Journal writing Expressive art therapy	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6H6qmKNwiQ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYN7nU-KT3A
Happiness and stress Creative problem-solving	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dep9KPWp3g https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqwoOpO-4k0
Communication skills Time management Money management	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpFkrD02t1A https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTugjssqOT0 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjxxFrFDYZ8
Additional coping techniques Diaphragmatic breathing	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDOh1VCXaQk
Meditation Hatha yoga	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0rSmxsVHPE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F51e4WUDT5Q
Mental imagery and visualization Music therapy	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WksDzu8cADE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulUF6z-JGnU
Massage therapy, Tai Chi	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdiMLXrGt3E https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBIZciSHPgA
Progressive muscle relaxation, Autogenic training	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bq0tNdldIM https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t05S6O6YWgw
Clinical Biofeedback Nutrition and stress	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jprYuSkKLS https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWIMfflzHPY
Physical exercise	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae9fF7pnkFU

The course model is written as a combined or hybrid syllabus that permits flexibility for course offering as either an in class or online offering. The author may be contacted directly, if at some point in future the syllabus is removed from the university posting location online. The syllabus is built on several numerous earlier offerings for the course which were not modeled from the perspective of stress reduction upon participating students as seen in the referenced example. Many of the design elements listed below and forwarded from students have been incorporated into the current model.

Elements of Style for Low Stress Course Delivery: External Issues

Among the best practices feedback and suggestions given by students taking the course, across cohorts, was consideration of some of the external factors upon graduate and professional students that effect how stressful a course is perceived (Faculty Focus, 2013). A factor acknowledged by the students themselves is that many may embark on a graduate or professional training program without adequate socio-economic status, or personal support networks, to devote time and energy to the process of learning (Sloan, 2002). Unexpected personal demands or crises may occur during their educational effort that could affect performance and perceived stress.

A related issue is that students want assurance that there are adequate material resources available to take or conduct the class, including: a comfortable and safe environment, adequate (and reliable) equipment, and sufficient student supplies (access to texts, etc.). Further, students have related that an accurate appraisal of costs and risks over the duration of the program is important. That is, consistency of instruction (without substitutions of teaching faculty), no course delivery disruptions (due to budget cuts or tuition increases).

As to the course structure itself, students are seeking to keep the focus on learning and forming relationships without excessive stressful experiences. Students reported seeking a relaxed and stress free instructor who does not transmit personal stress. Further, that the instructor attempt to make a personal connection and be easy to relate to. In addition students seek cultural tolerance and being open to differing perspectives and experiences as valid contributions to the class. Confrontation over difference may increase perceived stress among students whether coming from the instructor or other participating students (Russell, 1999). In addition, the inclusion of accountability measures that reduce or provide a low stress a low stress learning experience is essential.

Elements of Style for Low Stress Course Delivery: Internal Issues

Additional best practices feedback and suggestions given by students taking the course, across cohorts, was consideration of some of the course related internal factors upon graduate and professional students that effect how stressful a course is perceived. Reliable course delivery platforms throughout the course without disruptions due to institutional maintenance or upgrades and changes in the technology are an expectation of most students. Furthermore, ease of learning of the technology, which was not expected to be more difficult than the course material presented in the course.

As an aspect of course design, students supported the notion that there be some performance or grading allowances for differential performance among students, with opt out strategies at different grade levels. Flexible due dates for assignments and opportunities for successive learning attempts were considered important. Variations in learning inputs and mechanisms so as to break up monotony were also considered a key factor for a low stress course. Low volume of paperwork or other stressful course related tasks was also valued (Best Practices in Distance Learning, 2013).

As to relationships as part of the course experience students related that ready access to materials and instructor as needed was helpful. Most students providing feedback also sought opportunities to get to know classmates and form long term relationships. A quality issue for a low stress course experience was the capacity to include opportunities to passively experience, to laugh and where possible to relax (see Figure 3).

Elements of Style for Low Stress Course Delivery: Technology Usage Issues

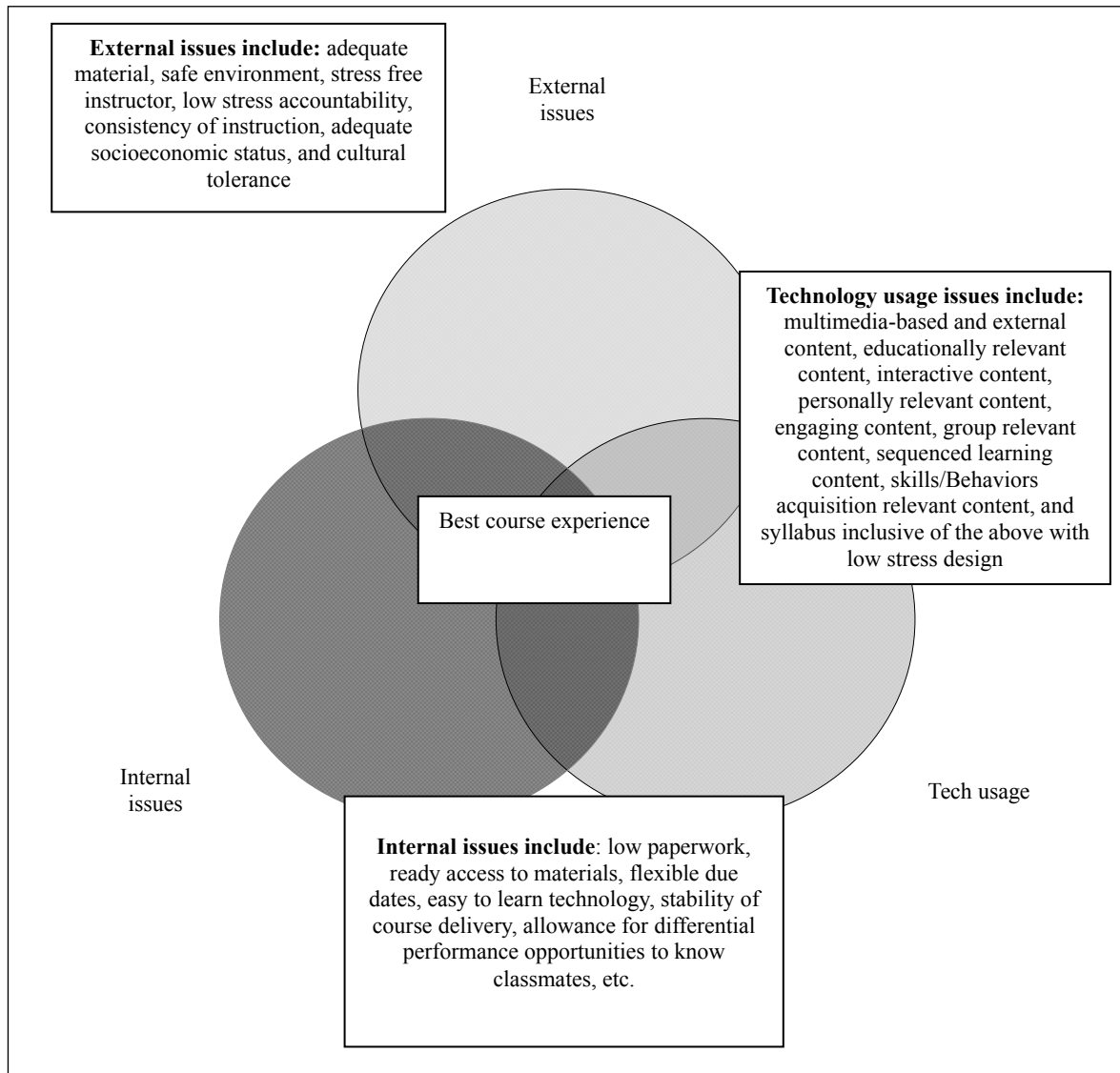


Figure 3. Dimensions of low stress course experience for students.

To the degree that course platform and online technology and content permit, the course should provide an approximate sense of being enrolled and engaged in a course or class with a capacity for relationships with the instructor and other students. Blending technology to compliment variations in learning styles is essential to reduction of perceived stress within online course environments. Remaining responsive, personable, and available throughout the course offering though distant is possible with a range of conferencing, scheduling, and communication options with students. However, curriculum and syllabus design that provide flexible and

contracted grading options and low stress personal learning experiences are important to the overall pedagogy for professional self-determined education through online coursework (Peters, 1998).

Discussion

The principles (Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education, 2000) referred to as *Elements of Style* for low stress course delivery and more specifically for online course offerings will likely serve as an authoritative guide for developing course delivery and content of which the student has a model learning experience and of which the instructor may be highly regarded throughout the course offering and thereafter. Portions of the material presented here are modeled after the classic work in elements of style for written work authored more than a century ago by noted authors Strunk and White (1972). Though the current manuscript could add further refinements to evolving technology and delivery systems (Hirumi, 2000), many of the student centered approaches cataloged here will serve the online course instructor well for some measure of time in developing the least stressful practices in pedagogy and implementation of low stress online course delivery (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Much of the information presented here is iterative and evolving and constitute some of the best practices and lessons learned for engaging students and placing personal responsibility for maintaining a quality learning environment with the students themselves. Students take an active role in course development and improvement. The emphasis remains on quality learning and less on stressful and unproductive course delivery styles.

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