

An Overview of the 2015 Institutional Template for Blackboard Learn

Draft V1

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Summary

Templates enable faculty to construct courses in Blackboard Learn, MSU Denver's Learning Management System (LMS), that are easily customized without requiring advanced web development skills. They provide consistency in both navigation and structure, while offering continuity for learners regardless of the course discipline. Templates empower faculty to focus on the subject matter, intended learning outcomes and instructional strategies, rather than being concerned about graphic design elements and the layout and coding of the HTML pages.

The MSU Denver 2015 Institution Course Template has been considerably updated based on a framework that was adapted by combining several learning theories and instructional design/development models, and accessibility standards. These include Robert Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction, Bloom's Learning Taxonomy, cognitivism, constructivism, and behaviorism. Additionally, the expertise and experience of MSU Denver's Course Design Team and faculty designers, as well as industry standards established by the Quality Matters (QM) program, were leveraged to revise the 2015 Template.

The Template provides an initial structure to streamline the course development process for faculty. It is also designed to give faculty and students just-in-time access to critical institutional support services and information. The Template comes pre-designed to meet most of the industry standards for online and hybrid instruction, and provides easy to follow guidance to further customize each course in accordance with best practices.

The 2015 Institution Course Template will automatically be applied to all new course designs and blank course shell selections. Instructors desiring to apply the 2015 Template to their existing courses will need to make an appointment with the Educational Technology Center for assistance and go through the course development process.

Background

MSU Denver has offered an Institution Course Template since 2001 to help streamline the course development process for faculty. The Template provided the basic course structure and tools, access to technical resources, and course navigation homogeneity. Through the years, the Template was revised as needed to accommodate significant changes in instructional design, teaching and learning best practices, updated LMS tools and technologies, as well as any recommendations made by the Online Policy Committee and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC).

The Institution Course Template has once again been revised. This most recent update was based on the implementation of the Blackboard Learn LMS, as well as a new focus on quality assurance and faculty-centered continuous improvement models.

The primary driving force behind the current Template update was a complete revision of the MSU Denver course development process. This redesign of the development process takes a deliberate approach to course design by working backwards from the course goals and learning outcomes, as well as mapping of the course objectives to specific learning and assessment activities. The changes introduced are designed to facilitate improved student engagement and continuous quality assurance.

Enhancements

In order to achieve maximum levels of quality, the MSU Denver 2015 Institution Course Template has been designed to establish industry-wide standards for course design. This was accomplished by aligning the Template with the standards established by the Quality Matters (QM) program. The QM program describes a set of standards for online and hybrid courses that are designed to enhance:

- overall course design
- learning objectives or competencies
- learner assessment
- alignment of course materials with learning objectives
- course activities that support learner interaction and engagement
- integration of appropriate technologies
- facilitation of access to institutional support services
- accessibility for all learners

The QM program describes 43 specific review standards that are used to assess the overall quality of a course. The MSU Denver 2015 Institution Course Template has been designed to meet 29 of these standards, regardless of the course discipline, with little to no customization on the part of the instructor. The remaining 14 standards have also been addressed by creating placeholders and instructions for how instructors can construct their content in compliance with the standards.

The new content pages have been designed to maximize instructional effectiveness by following Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction, including prompts for instructors to get the learner's attention, inform them of what they will learn, stimulate prior knowledge, present information, and provide guidance. Instructors are encouraged to go further by providing students the ability to practice what they have learned, receive feedback, and ultimately be assessed on their acquired knowledge or skill.

No special knowledge of HTML coding is required for faculty when using the 2015 Template. Each page is customizable using the built in Blackboard Learn Visual Text Box Editor, which operates much like Microsoft Word. Additionally, pre-designated information and resource areas can be managed and modified by MSU Denver's Educational Technology Center from a single location rather than going into each individual course section. This allows our institution to take advantage of economy of scale when updates need to be made to technical support or official policies.

The 2015 Template has a redesigned "Start Here" area that helps students learn how to orient themselves and navigate the course. This area includes a customizable general course overview page,

introductory discussion for community building, and access to technical support. The new “Syllabus and Course Info” area includes the most up-to-date links to policies, academic support services, as well as a completely customizable syllabus, schedule of activities, and an instructor information page.

The completely redesigned “Content” area comes with 16 pre-built Learning Modules that are hidden from students until customized and released by the course instructor. Each Learning Module includes a customizable overview page, content/instruction pages, and a review page. Each of these pages has been developed to guide instructors through the course development process by prompting them to input relevant information.

Additionally, by simply updating the “Schedule of Activities” page and due dates, the 2015 Template makes it easy to expand or condense a course depending on the available time (such as moving from an 8 week to a 16 week course) without requiring a significant redesign. This allows for greater flexibility of course offerings while minimizing the impact on instructors.

Specific Modifications

This section below describes how each of the following QM specific review standards are address by the 2015 Institution Course Template:

QM 1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.

- Created a “Start Here” content area in the navigation menu which now contains the Overview, Introductions, Tech Help and Browser Configurations pages.
- An Overview (Read Me First) document has been created which includes information placeholders for a general overview, organization, format (online, hybrid, f2f,) and navigation of the course. The instructor is expected to complete the information for each of these 4 areas. The “Overview” also gives a general description of the “Start Here”, Announcements, and Syllabus, and Course Info links, Syllabus, Your Instructor, Schedule of Activities, Calendar, Content area, Discussion Board, Course Messages, Send email, Groups, My Grades, and Student Help so students know what the items they will be seeing within their course.
- Changed Schedule to “Schedule of Activities” to emphasize that the pace of the course will be guided by the Schedule of Activities.

QM 1.2 Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.

- The Overview document has been designed with the following customizable sections:
 - General Course Overview: instructors are encouraged to get students excited about their course, what they are going to learn, and how to apply what they have learned.
 - About Course Organization: instructors are prompted to describe how the learning process is structured for their course.
 - Next Steps: This section lets students know what their next steps for the course are. This guides students to navigate to the syllabus, schedule of activities, and learn about their instructor.
- An “Introductions” discussion forum has been created to build a sense of community.
- Set Review Status has been added to these documents to reinforce the need for students to review critical information.

QM 1.3 Etiquette expectations (sometimes called "netiquette") for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are clearly stated.

- *A statement regarding Etiquette Considerations was added to the Overview page with a link to the Student Code of Conduct.*

QM 1.4 Course and/or institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated, or a link to current policies is provided

- General University Policy section was added to the Overview page with a link to “General University Policy” website.

QM 1.5 Minimum technology requirements are clearly stated and instructions for use provided.

- Technology Requirements were added to the Overview page. Instructors are prompted to customize this section with detailed, clearly worded information regarding the technologies students will need throughout the course.

QM 1.6 Prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated.

- Instructors are prompted to customize the Course Prerequisites section in the Overview document.

QM 1.7 Minimum technical skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.

- A Technical Skills section was added to the Overview page letting students know which technical skills are required to succeed in this course. These skills include knowing how to: use a learning management system, e-mail with attachments, create and submit files using a word processing program format, copy and paste, download and install software, use spreadsheet, presentation, and graphic programs.

QM 1.8 The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and is available online.

- The Your Instructor page has been created in the Syllabus & Course Info content area. Instructors are prompted to introduce themselves, provide an image and describe their communication policies.

QM 1.9 Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class.

- An “Introductions” discussion forum was added to the Start Here content area so students can introduce themselves to the class.

QM 2.1 The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable

- The Course Goals and Outcomes sections have been included in the Syllabus. Instructors are prompted to copy and paste these from the official course syllabus. Instructors are prompted to create/include measurable learning objectives which are clearly stated and written from the student’s perspective. These are listed under Measurable Learning Objectives in the Syllabus.

QM 2.2 The module learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.

- A description has been added to the Overview document stating “Note: The module/unit learning objectives or competencies describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives or competencies.”
- Each Learning Modules contains an Overview document (formerly “Topic Introduction”) that prompts instructors to provide a general overview or summary of the specific topic they are teaching and are aligned with the course level objectives. A numbered list has been added for the Module Objectives/Milestones to keep them organized.

QM 2.3 All learning objectives are stated clearly and written from the learner's perspective

- In the Syllabus, a Measurable Learning Objectives section was added. Instructors are prompted to customize this section with course learning objectives or competencies that are stated from the learner's perspective.

QM 2.4 The relationship between learning objectives and course activities is clearly stated

- The content area now includes Instruction Pages with the following features: Customizable sections based on Gagne's Nine events of instruction that prompt instructors to complete this page for each learning objective or competency. These sections include Gain Attention: present a stimulus to gain attention; Inform the student: tell the student what they are going to learn; Recall prior learning: Stimulate existing knowledge; Present new information: present information in a meaningful way; Provide guidance: help your student learn; Next steps: practice what they learn and provide feedback on the new skills and knowledge

QM 3.1 The assessments measure the stated learning objectives or competencies.

- Added customizable Learning Objectives and Assessment sections to the Syllabus document. Instructors are prompted to "ensure that your assessments directly assess what has been outlined in your objectives and meet the appropriate level of rigor. An assessment could be a paper, a case-study, discussions, simulations, collaborative presentations, projects, reflective journals, blogs, roleplay, portfolio, interviews, field work, peer reviews, experimentations, etc. Instructors are prompted to provide their students with the exact locations of the evaluation criteria (rubrics, checklists, demonstration of competencies, quality and originality of comments and/or contributions). In the Assignment section, instructors are urged to consider including information such as: format, policies and turnaround time for grading. In the Quizzes/Exams section, they are encouraged to include information such as: method (proctored, open book, etc.), Format (objective, subjective), turnaround time for grading, feedback and make-up exams. In the Discussion participation section, recommendation is made to Include information on how the students will be graded."

QM 3.2 The course grading policy is stated clearly.

- The Grading and Evaluation section of the Syllabus document encourages instructors to present their students with a clear and easy understand explanation that fully describes how students will be graded or how their grades will be calculated in their course. At a minimum, we recommend including the following: Points, percentage and weight for each course component; policy on late submissions; Any special instructions that students need to know about their grades; a description of the relationship between final grade and accumulated points or percentages; Grading timelines (what will be the turnaround time for feedback and grades).
- Instructors are prompted to complete a grading table.

QM 3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learner' work and are tied to the course grading policy.

- Instructors are prompted in the Syllabus document, under the Assessments section, to provide their students with the exact locations of the evaluation criteria (rubrics, checklists, demonstration of competencies, quality and originality of comments and/or contributions). Assignment section recommends including information such as: format, policies and turnaround time for grading. Quizzes/Exams section, recommends including information such as: method (proctored, open book, etc.), Format (objective, subjective), turnaround time for grading, feedback and make-up exams. Discussion participation suggests including information on how the students will be graded.

QM 3.5 The course provides learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress.

- The Schedule of Activities now has Week/day, Module, Information/Activities, and Assessments with numbering under Week/day 1-16. Instructors are prompted to complete the schedule of activities. Students are pointed to this page to get course information

QM 4.2 Both the purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are clearly explained.

- Located on each Instruction page, the “Inform the Student” section reminds instructors to provide students with the purpose and how the material will be used for learning.

QM 4.6 The distinction between required and optional materials is clearly explained.

- Located on the Schedule of Activities, instructors are prompted to indicate if the instructional materials, assignments and/or activities are optional.

QM 5.3 The instructor's plan for classroom response time and feedback on assignments is clearly stated.

- Under Grading and Evaluation section of the syllabus, instructors are prompted to inform students of their grading timelines including; explaining the turnaround time for feedback and grades.

QM 6.5 Links are provided to privacy policies for all external tools required in the course.

- Located in the Syllabus under the Technical section, instructors are prompted to list all hardware and software that students are required to use, where to obtain them, links to privacy policies and accessibility statements, and where they can expect support for these technologies.

QM 7.1 The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.

- Located in Tech Help document (inside of the Start Here content area), links are provided that to the Embanet Blackboard Support Webpage, Embanet Live Chat, Embanet Support Tickets, and Embanet Self Help. Additionally, IT Help Desk links have been added to Submit an MSU Denver Helpdesk Ticket and a link to visit the Helpdesk Knowledge Base.

QM 7.2 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and services.

- The syllabus now contains sections under Policies for Students that link to the official Accessibility Policies and Procedures as well as the Academic Policies for Students.

QM 7.3 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support services and resources can help learners succeed in the course and how learners can obtain them.

- Added a section to the Academic Support Services section describing links to critical student support services including the Access Center and Testing Services, Office of Testing Services, Writing Center, Student Academic Success Center, Tutoring Center, and Auraria Library.

QM 7.4 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's student services and resources can help learners succeed and how learners can obtain them.

- The Academic Support Services section gives a brief description and links to the Access Center and Testing Services, Office of Testing Services, Writing Center, Student Academic Success Center, Tutoring Center, and Auraria Library.

QM 8.1 Course navigation facilitates ease of use.

- The template embraces standard left hand side navigation with content place holders to make them easy to identify and locate. Tables are used with the appropriate table headers for easy use and accessibility. Headers are used throughout the template documents and a table of content is used for the learning modules.

QM 8.2 Information is provided about the accessibility of all technologies required in the course.

- The Syllabus document now contains the Technical section where instructors are prompted to add an accessibility statement for required technologies and where students can receive help. Additional Blackboard links were added for Blackboard Privacy Statement, Blackboard Accessibility Statement, and Blackboard Support - Embanet.

QM 8.3 The course provides alternative means of access to course materials in formats that meet the needs of diverse learners.

- A statement has been added to each content Instruction page under the Present New Information section prompting instructors to address access to course materials: "Remember that Federal Law and our institution requires your content is ADA Section 504/508 compliant."

QM 8.4 The course design facilitates readability.

- The template has been designed with proper contrast, headings, whitespace, font styles and sizes, follows best practices and groups content into relevant chunks.

Conclusion

The MSU Denver course development process and the 2015 Institutional Course Template have been considerably updated. A framework was developed based on the Quality Matters course quality assurance model, Robert Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction, Bloom's Learning Taxonomy, as well as theories about cognitivism, constructivism, and behaviorism. The new process and Template provide a much more robust and holistic approach to MSU Denver's overall course design and development process. These modifications are designed to encourage greater student engagement, improved learning outcomes, as well as enriched teaching and learning experiences for faculty and students.

The 2015 Template has been designed to accommodate the needs of completely online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses. The flexible template empowers faculty with the ability to use or remove as much as needed to accommodate their specific course needs and pedagogical style.

All new course designs and blank course shell selections will automatically have the 2015 Institutional Course Template applied. If any instructors would like to apply the 2015 Template to an existing course, they should schedule an appointment with the Educational Technology Center for assistance with the course development process.