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Getting Started With Your First Online Course

Excerpted from **Alexandra M. Pickett**, Assistant Director, SUNY Learning Network in *A Series of Unfortunate Online Events and How to Avoid Them*

What if you knew that 20% your online students have slow modem access to your online course from home? What if you knew that 60% of your online students were taking an online course for the first time? What if you knew that students would NOT read every, or all of each of your course web pages? What if every online test/quiz was take home, open book, and potentially collaborative? What if you knew that there was a significant relationship between the length of a web page with the degree of comprehension? What if you knew that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the amount of contact and interaction your students have with you and the other students in the online course, and their perceived learning and satisfaction?

Getting off to a good start in any online course happens by design, not by accident.

Online students won't know what you want or how to behave, unless you clearly tell them. The more students know about what to expect, the easier it will be for you and students. Your work designing the course ahead of time pays off in the long run.

Consider a welcome note that introduces you and the course to the students. Your welcome sets the tone, gives you a "voice" and is the students' first "glimpse" of you. Let students know what you expect in terms of participation in the class, cheating, and netiquette. Providing instructional documents on what they are to do first and next is especially important in the beginning of an online course to get things off to a good start.

On the whole you want to go for consistency across modules in structure and length.

- Create consistent and complete course "chunks" or module structures.
- Design a detailed orientation to each course module/section/area.
- Use meaningful and consistent course section and document titles to organize and convey information about the activities, content, and structure of your course. Use the outline structure of the course as an advanced organizer for the course for your students.
- Create complete well-explained online and off line learning activities.
- Provide detailed instructions for each learning activity including expectations, timeframes, navigation, method of evaluation, etc. Provide explicit instructions, directions, and signposts for students.
- Model your expectations with your own presence in the course.
- Provide models as illustrations for your students and rubrics for references on how you will evaluate their work.
- Get students actively engaged, thinking, applying, defending, refuting, reporting, and self-assessing.

Current research shows that online collaborations between the instructor and students, and between students themselves, positively and significantly influence student satisfaction and perceived learning. Building opportunities for such interactions into the design of your course will be your challenge- the fun part, and the key to success.

Alexandra M. Pickett will be hosting Sloan-C's Online Course Development for Beginners from March 6-24. She is the Assistant Director of the SUNY Learning Network (SLN), the asynchronous learning network for the State University of New York.