



External Review **Toolkit** for **ODL** and **eLearning** Courses

This document or “toolkit” serves a few key purposes. First, it seeks to help those involved in the Open Educational Resource (OER) course development process do their work according to a few important underlying principles of good instructional design. Second, if you are a subject matter expert, curriculum developer, instructor, or administrator who has taken on the role of external reviewer, this toolkit should provide some clarity about what to expect from a well-designed course.

External Review Toolkit for ODL and eLearning Courses

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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.



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Introduction

Welcome to this Toolkit for External Reviewers of ODL and eLearning courses. We hope that you will find this resource useful for your work with course design and effective as a guide for reviewing and contributing to your own professional development in this constantly evolving area of practice. You should be able to make good use of this toolkit for a range of educational courses and resources, including e-learning products as well as blended and open and distance learning courses.

Purpose of the Toolkit

This document or “toolkit” serves a few key purposes. First, it seeks to help those involved in the Open Educational Resource (OER) course development process do their work according to a few important underlying principles of good instructional design. Second, if you are a subject matter expert; curriculum developer; instructor; or administrator who has taken on the role of external reviewer, this toolkit should provide some clarity about what to expect from a well-designed course.

As a checklist, this toolkit ensures that an individual reviewer can work methodically through a course or resource or set of resources and develop a clear sense that the course under review has successfully met accepted standards of good instructional design. As well, having such a checklist available strengthens the commitment of curriculum developers and education providers towards continuous improvement by integrating evaluation opportunities within the “e-learning Life Cycle” (Philips, McNaught and Kennedy, 2012, p. 113).

Furthermore, reviewers and developers can regard the toolkit as a guide that informs course development practice. As a result, it presupposes a philosophical preoccupation with learner engagement in multiple ways as a pillar of any instructional design strategy. While such a toolkit does not adhere to one particular orthodoxy of teaching and learning in an online or blended context and recognizes variety both in instruction and in approaches to learning, we do agree with the acknowledgement that *“an online course allows the instructor’s role as learning facilitator to enrich the experience for all participants”* (Conrad and Donaldson, 2013, p. 5). It is also important to declare that effective courses in general encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning, and this in turn results in an online environment that supports and guides students in this endeavour.

OER

This toolkit proposes to incorporate the intention of online/blended courses as OER. The term *Open Educational Resource (OER)* was coined at the 2002 UNESCO Forum on Open Courseware. Subsequently, its definition has been updated to the following:

...teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions” (2012 Paris OER declaration).

Even with this definition, what constitutes an OER can still be subject to interpretation and is sometimes confused with other learning resources. However, a more practical description as provided by Hoosen, Moore, and Butcher (2012) gives a clearer indication of the range of possibilities under this definition:

“They are educational materials and resources that are offered freely, are openly available to anyone and, under some licences, allow others to reuse, adapt and redistribute them with few or no restrictions. OER can include lecture notes and slides, lesson plans, textbooks, handouts given to students, videos, online tutorials, podcasts, diagrams, entire courses, and any other material designed to be used in teaching and learning. Thus, the scale of OER can vary significantly. They can be as large as a textbook or as small as a single photograph. They can make up an entire course or curriculum or can be used to enhance existing textbooks” (p. 2).

Using this definition, we can see that OER may be incorporated and integrated into various courses or they may themselves constitute the entire courses. In any case, this toolkit should enable reviewers to evaluate the instructional integrity of courses designed in a variety of contexts from fully online eLearning courses to open and distance learning (ODL) courses to blended courses. Any of these course types may integrate smaller OER in their design, or they themselves may be regarded as OER themselves. However, with this checklist, reviewers should be able to conduct a comprehensive review of a course from its technical specifications all the way to its broader pedagogical design characteristics.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has already published a framework (Kawachi, 2014) for the quality assurance of OER according to the following themes:

- T— Teaching and learning processes,
- I— Information and material content
- P— Presentation product and format
- S— System technical and technology

While this *TIPS Framework* provides guidance to curriculum developers on the process by which they can develop OER to meet established standards of quality, the toolkit provided here reflects many of those same key guiding themes and seeks to provide some consistency from the development to the review stages of the instructional design process for courses. Having this consistency is not only an aspect of quality in the course development process, but it also intends to improve the efficiency of course development (Abeywardena in Dhanarajan and Porter 2013, p. 178).

How to Use the Toolkit

The toolkit is arranged according to specific areas that you can review to establish the overall quality of a course. Specific criteria for review comprise of a mix of instructional design considerations, mechanical or technical aspects of the materials, and adherence to agreed-upon features of style and tone.

The toolkit is designed to provide for a more in-depth review than a basic checklist might allow. Part of the intention behind the toolkit is to create a mechanism by which reviewers and curriculum developers can engage in a fruitful exchange around the design of the course under review.

For this reason, the toolkit encourages reviewers to make a detailed and systematic evaluation of a course using the checklist provided as well as inputting comments such as observations and suggestions. Reviewers can make comments on a point by point basis as well as in a more holistic manner in the spaces provided.

Curriculum developers, whether working as a team or individually, may then respond to the reviewer's comments throughout in order to identify revisions that have been undertaken as well as responses to any suggestions.

With this interaction built into the review process, the toolkit is meant to strengthen the quality assurance practices of course development.

Further Reading

Research and resources on e-learning course development and the production of resources for online consumption abound in the scholarly literature. Moreover, centres for teaching, learning and curriculum development among post-secondary institutions reveal that designing effective online courses and resources is an evolving area of interest amongst educators. This toolkit seeks to capitalize on the research into effective course design and reflects the best practices for course review and evaluation.

Furthermore, the references and reading list at the end of this document is not meant to be exhaustive on the topics associated with online course design, but reviewers are encouraged to supplement their learning experience by consulting any of the readings provided. The reading list here does attempt to address the breadth and depth of concern to course developers across the entire design and development process.

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Learning for Sustainable Development

Basic Information

Course Information	
Course title	
Course number/code	
Credit value	
Expected hours of study	
Mode of course delivery	
Institution	
Department/faculty	
Type of Open License	
Course author(s)	
Course development team members	
Reviewer Information	
Name	
Position	
Department/faculty	
Institution/Organization	
Date	

Course Planning

Course materials and/or courses are the eventual products of deliberate planning. While it is not always evident how a course has been developed, reviewers should have some assurance that course developers have participated in a validated process established to ensure optimal quality of a course's final products. The following area of review only concerns those aspects within a course whereby engagement with that validated process is visible.

Principle 1: Course development is the result of deliberate planning and implementation of accepted course design processes and principles.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Course materials and/or the course comply with the course blueprint as agreed to by the course development team and associated reviewers.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Course developers have followed relevant copyright guidelines in the production of materials.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Course development has met the designated sign-off stages.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Courses and materials provide evidence of adhering to your institution's established principles of gender equality.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Course materials and/or the course are designed for delivery in open and distance learning (ODL) and/or eLearning contexts.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Final products are the result of collaboration and consultation and show evidence of incorporating ongoing feedback.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Course materials reflect the social and cultural environmental context of the learners.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Course Information

Information about any course or resource should be comprehensive and provide students with a full orientation to the course. This information can often be captured entirely by a syllabus but should be redundant and consistent throughout a course in order to ensure that students are able to inform themselves sufficiently. Having all the required information of a course enables students to evaluate their own suitability for enrolment as well as their interest in the content and approach of the course.

Principle 2: Students have the information they need in order familiarize themselves with the requirements and expectations of the course.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
The following information is easily retrievable for students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Course title <input type="checkbox"/> Course goals and learning outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> Hours and credit value 		
Instructor information includes the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Instructor identification <input type="checkbox"/> Contact information <input type="checkbox"/> Availability <input type="checkbox"/> Welcome message 		
Course information is provided in multiple channels including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Syllabus <input type="checkbox"/> Assessments <input type="checkbox"/> Class/student/instructor expectations <input type="checkbox"/> Calendar/schedule/deadlines <input type="checkbox"/> Communication channels (messages, discussion area, etc.) 		
<input type="checkbox"/> The course includes a licensing notice identifying its copyright agreement.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Orientation to Learning

Before students begin working on a course, they need to take some time to familiarize themselves both with the online learning environment as well as the intentions of the instructor for their learning. In other words, students need to become oriented to learning online in addition to learning in the context of a particular course with its content, assessments, activities, etc. Therefore, it is important for the course to provide guidance to students about how they can best work in a course environment and with the various learning materials. A course is not simply a collection of content, but it should convey clearly the available pathways to learning.

Principle 3: Students are invited to take responsibility for their learning and are given direction for relevant support.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
The course includes expectations for communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Student-instructor <input type="checkbox"/> Student-student <input type="checkbox"/> Student/instructor-external parties (e.g. guests, the university) <input type="checkbox"/> Asynchronous vs synchronous opportunities 		
<input type="checkbox"/> The instructor provides a teaching philosophy to clarify her/his approach to teaching.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning outcomes provide an overview of the course as well as a clear connection to instructional strategies and assessments.		
The course includes information and directions regarding academic misconduct issues, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Plagiarism <input type="checkbox"/> Disciplinary measures <input type="checkbox"/> Policy information on academic misconduct 		
The course explains expectations for managing workloads and offers advice regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Scheduling study activity <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting deadlines <input type="checkbox"/> Completing tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Getting support 		
<input type="checkbox"/> The course navigational structure indicates where students are coming from and where they should proceed on any given page.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Course Content

Content refers to all the information produced and packaged into a course or any of its components, such as units and lessons. It can also refer to individual resources such as a reading, video, or some other form of media. Courses may refer to external content packages such as a published article or book made available online or in hard copy or a film or video available on the Internet, or internal content that is produced by members of the course development team. In either case, it is important that content meets standards of good quality both in ideas expressed and in the production values of the item under review.

Principle 4: Course materials and resources provide clear and accessible pathways to learning.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Content utilizes a variety of media options to convey information.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Content for written, audio, video materials recognizes students as the primary readers/viewers.		
<input type="checkbox"/> The “voice” of the writing is friendly and sympathetic to students.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Written content is formatted according to the course blueprint specifications.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Writing adheres to web-based design principles of brevity, directness, correctness, clarity.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Externally published content is selected on the basis of relevance, usefulness, and accessibility and is integrated into the course to fulfil instructional design aims.		
<input type="checkbox"/> OER have the ability to stand alone as courses and/or resources but offer the potential to re-purpose and contextualize in other courses.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Course resources are compatible with <i>Creative Commons</i> licensing designations.		
Units/Sections/Lessons contain the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Introduction <input type="checkbox"/> Learning outcomes for the unit <input type="checkbox"/> Directions for working with the material <input type="checkbox"/> Linkages to assessment/assignment <input type="checkbox"/> Requirements for completing the unit 		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Multimedia

Production of multimedia, such as images; and audio- and video-based content necessarily reflects the course development processes for content in any medium.

Principle 5: Multimedia-based course material is professionally produced and meets standards of high academic quality.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Multimedia content is integrated with the overall unit/course to align with learning outcomes and respective assessments.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Multimedia depict practical scenarios, hands-on demonstrations, real world applications etc. and are not limited to classroom lectures or “talking heads”		
<input type="checkbox"/> Audio and video content is produced as a collection of small clips, approximately 5-10 minutes each.		
Video material is of acceptable quality for online viewing (See Appendix 1). This includes standards on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Formats <input type="checkbox"/> Codecs <input type="checkbox"/> Frame rate <input type="checkbox"/> Bit rate <input type="checkbox"/> Resolution and aspect ratio 		
<input type="checkbox"/> Video is available in types 480p, 720p or 1080p with stereo audio and popular formats.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Multimedia comply with copyright guidelines and meet your institution’s consent requirements.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Learning Activities

Instructional design is an all-encompassing concept that describes the process of planning and developing the products of courses and their associated materials for the purposes of learning. Instructional design is evident in all aspects of a course, from its basic information to the selection, production and sequencing of content to the development of activities and assessments. For the purposes of this review, instructional design in a course or set of learning materials is most evident in the presence of activities designed to promote students' learning. Learning activities constitute the best opportunity for learners both to become exposed to new information, ideas and to demonstrate their learning.

Principle 6: The course maximizes opportunities for learner engagement as the core instructional design intention.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
The course provides deliberate engagement opportunities for the student, including engagement with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Content <input type="checkbox"/> Students <input type="checkbox"/> Instructor <input type="checkbox"/> The community (if appropriate and relevant) 		
<input type="checkbox"/> Participation criteria and expectations are made explicit to students.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning activities integrate the course content with the learning outcomes.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning activities reflect a variety of learning, both in terms of depth and type (e.g. knowledge recall, problem solving, attitude change, etc.).		
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning activities prepare students for their assessment in the achievement of their learning outcomes.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Assessment

Another key component of a course’s instructional design is the evaluation of learning referred to here as assessment. Assessments can be formal as graded efforts or informal as opportunities for instructors to check in with students on their progress. They can be formative, designed throughout a course to mark stages or levels of learning, or they can be summative as overall reviews of student learning. Assessments may occur as assignments, activities, tests and exams or as collections of work such as portfolios.

Principle 7: Assessments enable both students and instructors to evaluate the progress and effectiveness of learning.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessment information is clearly available and easily accessible in the course.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessments provide opportunities for feedback on student learning.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessments are aligned with learning outcomes and course goals and make appropriate use of the course content.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessments are distributed throughout the course to help gauge the ongoing progress of learning.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Assessments provide clues as to the depth and frequency of student engagement.		
<input type="checkbox"/> The course employs a variety of assessment strategies and tools to meet the diverse needs and preferences of students including formative and summative assessments.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Grading information, such as marking guides and rubrics, are available to students.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Models of good practice for assessments are available to students for review purposes.		
<input type="checkbox"/> The instructor’s grading practices are made clear to students (e.g. turnaround time of assignments and tests, consequences for missed deadlines).		
<input type="checkbox"/> The course provides opportunities for self- and peer-assessment where relevant and appropriate.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

User-Friendly Design

Course materials in general should be visually appealing and user-friendly, not only for aesthetic purposes, but also to provide the foundation for effective learning and communication of ideas. Moreover, good design demands that course materials are available in usable formats. For this purpose, text must be readable and multimedia must be accessible for a variety of computers and devices. Simplicity and clarity should be the guiding concepts for the presentation of content.

Principle 8: Learning materials are accessible and available to all students and easy to work with.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
<input type="checkbox"/> Materials are available in conventional formats for working online and off-line (i.e. not requiring specialized software).		
<input type="checkbox"/> Formats for different media are specified.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Any links to internal or external resources for the course are working and up-to-date.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Documents and media are downloadable and meet file-size requirements.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning materials and activities avoid the requirement for proprietary software wherever possible and instead encourage the use of open software where possible.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Contact information for technical help is available in the course.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

This aspect of a course reflects the initial focus on following a recognized course development process in order to produce courses and materials that meet high standards of academic quality and integrity. The final products of a course development process necessarily demand review, evaluation and constructive criticism by the course's primary stakeholders, i.e. the students. As such, courses should provide channels for feedback for the wellbeing of the course, the instructor, the course developers, and ultimately the students themselves.

Principle 9: Courses and course materials invite opportunities for continuous improvement based on stakeholder feedback.

Area of Review	Review Comments	Response/Follow Up
The course includes a variety of mechanisms for student and tutors/instructors to provide feedback, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> surveys <input type="checkbox"/> questionnaires <input type="checkbox"/> comments <input type="checkbox"/> suggestions 		
<input type="checkbox"/> Students are assured of anonymity when providing feedback.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Instructors are given an opportunity to respond to feedback provided throughout the course period.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Feedback is available to instructors/course developers for reflective practice and ongoing improvement of the course.		
Overall comments/impressions/suggestions		

Follow up

Recommendations for course improvement
Additional comments
Certification
I certify that the course review has been completed according to the principles and criteria established in this toolkit. Reviewed by: <hr/>
Date:

Appendix 1: Recommended Upload Encoded Settings for Online Videos

Source: *YouTube Help*, available at <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1722171>.

Container: MP4

- No Edit Lists (or the video might not get processed correctly)
- moov atom at the front of the file (FastStart)

Audio codec: AAC-LC

- Channels: Stereo or Stereo + 5.1
- Sample rate 96khz or 48khz

Video codec: H.264

- Progressive scan (no interlacing)
- High Profile
- 2 consecutive B frames
- Closed GOP. GOP of half the frame rate.
- CABAC
- Variable bitrate. No bitrate limit required, though we offer recommended bit rates below for reference
- Chroma subsampling: 4:2:0

Frame rate

- Content should be encoded and uploaded in the same frame rate it was recorded.
- Common frame rates include: 24, 25, 30, 48, 50, 60 frames per second (other frame rates are also acceptable).
- Interlaced content should be deinterlaced before uploading. For example, 1080i60 content should be deinterlaced to 1080p30, going from 60 interlaced fields per second to 30 progressive frames per second.

Bitrate

- The bitrates below are recommendations for uploads. Audio playback bitrate is not related to video resolution.

Recommended video bitrates for uploads

Type	Video Bitrate, Standard Frame Rate (24, 25, 30)	Video Bitrate, High Frame Rate (48, 50, 60)
2160p (4k)	35-45 Mbps	53-68 Mbps
1440p (2k)	16 Mbps	24 Mbps
1080p	8 Mbps	12 Mbps
720p	5 Mbps	7.5 Mbps
480p	2.5 Mbps	4 Mbps
360p	1 Mbps	1.5 Mbps

Recommended audio bitrates for uploads

Type	Audio Bitrate
Mono	128 kbps
Stereo	384 kbps
5.1	512 kbps

Resolution and aspect ratio

YouTube uses 16:9 aspect ratio players. If you're uploading a non-16:9 file, it will be processed and displayed correctly as well, with pillar boxes (black bars on the left and right) or letter boxes (black bars at the top and bottom) provided by the player.