

Creating an Engaging Community of Learners

Developing and Delivering a Moodle Course for Master Gardeners

Contents:

Facilitator Guide

We have the tools, now what?

Building an Online Community of Learners

What is Blended Learning?

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

Sequence and Overview of Modules in the Moodle Course

Facilitating a Moodle Course

Student Guides and Communication

Using the Moodle LMS

5 Tips for Success in this Online Course

Communication and Netiquette for Online Learning

Welcome Letter for Students (upon enrollment)

First Day Message

Facilitators Guide to Developing and Delivering a Moodle Course

We have the tools, now what?

Transitioning your program to offer a portion of your training for Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV) through an online Learning Management System (LMS) such as Moodle may seem daunting, however understanding how people learn and engage online will be the key to your success. In addition to the superior horticultural education we offer, the social aspect, personal growth and bonding that evolves within this community of learners each week is what makes this an attractive, sought after volunteer program.

In the same way we develop engaging and relevant face-to-face (f2f) programming each week, we now have the ability to provide a deeper level of learning through a hybrid (flipped classroom) approach. This is virtually the best of both worlds: pairing distance education that can now reach a more diverse population of learners who enjoy the independence of self-paced online learning, as well as those who are unable to attend the daytime/weekly trainings. Pairing f2f meetings that include authentic hands-on activities brings the online learning to life.

Building an online community of learners that results in ongoing engagement and student success occurs from a course design focusing on relevant interaction between teacher-student, student-student, and content-student.

Building an Online Community of Learners

Building community in an online course is key to teaching and learning success. Take a look at https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/news_item/ten-ways-overcome-barriers-student-engagement-online/ by Ali Brigg (2015).

Interaction and relevant activities, discussion and reflection help foster community in an online course. This article discusses 10 tips that help overcome social barriers to student engagement with the following strategies. Here are highlights:

1. **Make first contact before the course begins.** Ex: Welcome letters and First Day message
2. **Create an introductory activity.** Ex: Introductory discussion forum that encourages sharing of photos and personal experiences.
3. **Provide opportunities for teacher/learner interaction.** Ex: Discussion forums in each module, weekly Zoom meetings for live interaction, opportunities for group collaboration.
4. **Encourage sharing.** Ex- Use social media to share resources related to the course informally through a Facebook group, Insatgram or Twitter.
5. **Provide directions often and in various ways:** Very important for the new online learner, as they navigate through this new way of learning. Be clear and concise with your directions and expectations, and provide your directions in multiple ways, such as through email, within the online course, and Moodle messaging.
6. **Establish contact methods and “office” hours of facilitator(s).**
7. **Provide effective and timely feedback.**

What is Blended Learning?

According to [Cornell's Center for Teaching Innovation](#), blended learning or ‘hybrid learning,’ combines the best of online learning and face-to-face instruction for the purpose of enhancing learning, and allowing for f2f class time to be more interactive and less lecture-based and content-heavy. Blended learning provides:

- More flexibility for students and instructors.
- Varied ways for students to engage in and demonstrate their learning.
- Both instructors and students to have the opportunity to develop their technology skills.
- More learning to take place through teaching technologies, or a way to facilitate a specific kind of learning activity that might not be possible without the technology.
- Opportunities for students who prefer courses that have an online component.

Learn more about [Hybrid or Blended Learning](#), the [Flipped Classroom](#), and other resources at Cornell's [Center for Teaching Innovation](#).

Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

Consider the wants and needs, and address learner satisfaction the at ultimately results in an increased motivation to learn:

- Content that they feel is relevant to their needs
- Clear directions for what they should do at every stage of the course
- As much control of the pace of learning as possible
- A means of drawing attention to individual concerns
- A way of testing their progress and getting feedback from their instructor
- Materials that are useful, active, and interesting

Learn more about [Engaging Low-Literacy Audiences](#) resources in the Advanced Training module of the Garden-Based Learning Library in Moodle.

Sequence and Overview of Modules in the Moodle Course for Teaching Master Gardener Volunteers

An online Moodle course has been developed, which is direct alignment with sections (modules) found in newly developed Master Gardener Learning Library. Readings, videos and pre-work activities extracted from each Participant Guide prepare students with the knowledge and skills needed for subsequent f2f meetings where hands-on, whole group learning occurs. Post-work activities provide a wrap up beyond the f2f classroom meetings, with additional opportunities for deeper exploration of topics.

Each module contains a unit of linear learning activities which build upon the previous one. Each Module will be available to students for ____weeks / day prior to their monthly F2F meeting.

Overview of the Instructional Activities

The instructional activities in the course include pre-work: mini-lectures (presentations), readings, independent activities, whole group discussion forums (may be small groups as well), self-reflective journals, self-check activities, quizzes and practicum assignments. The final is an “Action” project, which can be a presentation or other project.

Discussion Forums and Types of Interactions

The first discussion forum will be one that introduces the instructor and each participant to each other, creating a social presence among a community of learners. Subsequent discussions

in this course will be both whole class and small group. While some discussions focus on instructor's questions based on the readings and activities, others are experiential connections to the content learned. All discussion forums include interaction between each student, the content, and the instructor.

Learning Activities & Action Project

Learning activities and Action Project are in alignment with the complete MGV Preparation, and are outlined and scheduled with timing as stated in each Facilitator and corresponding Participant Guide. To accommodate participants who are new to online learning and do not possess the technological skills that others may have, a variety of Action Project choices will be available to match diverse student needs and skills.

Assessment

Self-evaluation (Self-checks) and reflective journaling places assessment into the learner's hands and is more beneficial for both the teacher and learner. These activities are self-reflective and provide an opportunity to improve learning as it is based on prior performance. For the instructor, this eliminates the act of grading that rely on the instructor's perspective, and performance indicators are more fully realized in this form of authentic assessment.

Facilitating a Moodle Course for Master Gardeners

Patience and an open mind is the key to a successful online teaching experience. To prevent a 24/7 work schedule for yourself, it is important to establish online 'office hours' and clear expectations of your availability. Daily or every other day check-ins are best, to be sure questions and concerns are answered promptly. We provided a few suggestions for ongoing communication prior to and at the beginning of the course, which helps set the tone and establish a positive experience for all!

Student Guides for Success and Communication for Enhanced Online Learning

Student Guide to Navigating Moodle

Unique to this course, you can navigate through the course in the sequence it was intended, by clicking on the button on the bottom of each page. It is possible to navigate between pages by using the Back and Forward navigation buttons on your web browser. This is not recommended; you will obtain more consistent results by using the navigation options within the website and course pages.

Note that if you navigate to another area of the course while writing a forum entry, your input may not be saved. To avoid this always ensure that you complete what you are doing within the activity first, e.g. post to a forum, save changes. Or, you can open a new window as

described below, so you can look at another part of the course (or an external website) while you continue to work on your posting to the forum, or some other activity.

Tips on opening multiple windows:

You can have two web browser windows open at the same time in the course website, or the course website and any other web site. For example, if you are posting a comment about something you saw in the text, if you leave the page you're writing in to go review another part of the course, when you come back what you had written will be gone. To avoid this, open another window or tab, press ctrl-T in most browsers, and a new tab will open. Then, you can have one window open to write in, and with the other you can go to another part of the course or another web site, to recheck on some detail of what you are writing about, for example.

The main course page is divided into a number of specific areas that you will encounter often. An overview of these is given in the following sections.

Modules

Modules reside in the center of the course home page, as shown at the beginning of this user's guide. It is in each module that your instructor will place the activities etc., which make up the online elements of your course.

Blocks

Blocks are on-screen areas which are placed at the side of the main course page. They fulfill a range of functions as described below.

People Block

The People block provides links to a list of all participants in the course by clicking ☐Participants and to your own user profile by clicking ☐Edit profile. By editing your profile, you can choose many options, including getting forum postings by email, uploading a picture of yourself, changing your contact info, and other functions.

Activities Block

This block displays all of the available activity types in the course. Clicking on the text to the right of the activity icon will display a list of all of the available activities of that type.

Recent activity block

As you can see, there are many different activities going on in this course. Each day (or several times a week), when you log on, you may not wish to go through each different part of the course to see what is new. The Recent Activity block is the easiest way to check what new forum postings have been made, without checking each forum individually. The Recent Activity block displays a synopsis of recent activity within the course together with links to the activities themselves, as well as a more detailed full report of recent happenings.

Administration block

This block contains a link to the Grade book where you can monitor your achievement against each graded activity.

Course resources

As the title of this section suggests, a course can contain various resources that you will need to assist you in your study. These can take various forms e.g. text, images, video, web pages, MS Office documents, or Acrobat pdf files, to name a few. Resources are accessed by clicking the text link to the right of the resource icon (an example is shown below).

Forums and the text editor

The Forums are the interactive part of the course; it's what makes this a real course, not just an online book. Participation is key. Here's how: Enter a forum by clicking on one in the index page. On the white background is the forum introduction, to focus the discussion.

In text below that, it says ☐ Add a new discussion topic. Click there to add your own posting, to respond to the introductory question. You can also reply to others' postings, by reading their posting, and clicking *Reply* in the right hand side of their message.

There is a text editor for you to customize your posting; you can add color, change fonts and styles, attach images, etc. Play around to get a feel for it. Below, you can see a wide range of small icons; these are tools to edit your text with (font, bold, italics, indent, etc.).

Now that you've made your way through this guide, you should have good sense of how to get around our courses. If there are useful tips you discover that you think belong in this guide, please let us know. We are always improving it. This guide can be found as an online resource in the Introductory section of the course main page. Good luck, and enjoy the course!

Adapted March 2012 from a document compiled by Marguerite Wells and modified by Paul Treadwell, 2008

Guides for Success

5 Tips for success in this online course (for students)

1. Be an active participant. Sense of community in an online course is just as important as in a face-to-face classroom. I believe it is more important, because we depend on our written words to reflect, collaborate and communicate. The discussion forums and group activities serve to enhance and advance the content we are learning. Sounds heavy, but studies support this. Follow the rules of "Netiquette" (referenced in Module 1) for a positive and open environment. Be respectful of each other's thoughts and opinions and if you are compelled to disagree, that is OK; we need to hear all perspectives. Keep the discussion forums focused on the topic, and feel free to share in the News forum found at the top of the homepage of the course.
2. Keep up with readings, discussions and assignments, and adhere to the deadlines. Falling behind in an asynchronous online learning environment will cause you unnecessary frustration and stress. At first, it may seem like there is a lot of work to do, but manage your time wisely. By signing on every other day and devoting 4-5 hours a week, you should be able to keep up with ease. In the rare event of a personal issue or emergency, contact me so we can agree on a reasonable time extension if needed.

3. Look ahead at each module as soon as it opens on _____. We have 6 Modules (units) of study, all which build upon each other and are now viewable at once. A new Module will become available _____.
4. Keep in touch- if you need support or guidance, do not fade into the background. You invested in this course, and it will pay off for you in the long run.
5. Enjoy the flexibility of this course and all that we have to offer each other....and have fun! We all share a common interest, a desire to maintain the connection we have to our environment, and to share our enthusiasm with others through garden-based learning. I am confident you will leave this course with a few new friends and a bundle of wonderful resources to use as a Master Gardener Volunteer.

Communication and Netiquette

We should approach our online learning environment in the same way we would a face to face classroom, being considerate of others and especially mindful of how the typewritten word can sometimes be misunderstood or interpreted as something other than what we intended. As with every other form of communication, there is a code of proper behavior for talking on the Internet, called "netiquette".

Understanding and following proper "netiquette" is very important in the distance learning environment, due to the absence of the expression in non-verbal cues, body language and face-to-face communication. Misunderstandings happen and need to be clarified and sarcasm is easily misunderstood. When replying to discussion posts, always quote or paraphrase the part you are responding to so your classmates will know what you are talking about. Answer individual responses to your postings individually and submit only relevant responses of global interest to a discussion.

Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation: [Communicating with Students Online](#)

Ways for ensuring effective communication with students include:

- Schedule announcements with the learning management system at the beginning of each module to announce the opening / availability of new content.
- Create a summary discussion post.
- Promptly acknowledge any technical glitches that occur (such as Moodle outages or incorrect or broken links).
- Plan for the unexpected.
- Stick to your guidelines for providing prompt responses to student questions.
- Address areas where students are struggling and adapt content if need be.
- Provide [rules for online etiquette](#).

Provide your students with an outline of your expectations regarding online behavior. Use this Netiquette Guides here as a starting point to explain your own course policies.

- EducatorsTechnology.com
- University of Florida Center for Teaching Excellence: [Netiquette Word Document](#)

Communicating with Students

Welcome Letter to Students Upon Enrollment – via email

(modify *the underlined italics* to include your information)

Dear :

Many thanks for enrolling in Master Gardener Volunteer Preparation Course. My name is *Donna Alese Cooke, a Cornell University Cooperative Extension Horticulture Specialist*, and I will be the Facilitator of this course.

Here is what to expect prior to the course opening. A few days before the course begins you will be added to the online course in an online Moodle interface. The course formally begins on *Saturday, September 14*, but you will have access to the site in advance. The introductory week is designed to give you the chance to get to know the interface and your fellow “classmates”. We encourage you to read, review, and become familiar with the site prior to *September 14*.

You will find this course to be highly supportive and self-directed. In each unit or “module” you will find readings and assignments that you will complete; a student discussion forum where you will interact; and an opportunity to reflect through a journals and self-reflective assignments that you will submit to the Moodle interface. We find that students who really take the time to go through each and every reading during the first several days are the most prepared, will get the most out of the course.

If you haven’t taken an online course before, no worries! I was new at it once, myself, and I hope you will find my guidance to be supportive and warm. To help make your experience and transition to working with the Moodle course an easy one, I advise:

- A recent version of an Internet browser, such as Firefox or Internet Explorer.
- A current version of Acrobat reader, so that you can read pdfs.
- You may need to turn off your pop-up blocker while in the course.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to check in. We look forward to “meeting” you!

Sincerely yours,

First Day Message: Sent to the Whole Class through Moodle Messaging

(modify the underlined italics to include your contact preferences)

Hi everyone-

How wonderful to see the introductions off to such a great start! Each of you has so much to offer the group, and you bring a wealth of experiences that will make this course so worthwhile for all. You have already shared some excellent garden tips, and the course has only just begun!

If you have not done so already, please take a look at two new items I posted in the "What's New" section at the top of the course homepage:

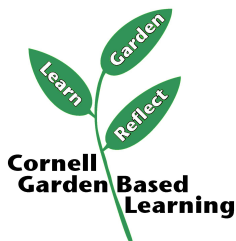
**"5 Tips for Success in this Online Course" and
"Guidelines for Discussions and Posting to the Forums"**

Also, I would like to let you know what you can expect from me. I try to check Moodle other day or so, and will provide feedback as quickly as possible.

On _____, I update and open the next Module. I may pop in here and there on Saturday / Sunday to answer questions only. In addition to teaching this course, I work F/T for Cornell Cooperative Extension, where I am rarely in my office and travel often. When that happens, there may be a few more days in between "checks." I will always let you know if I am away for a long period of time, and as soon as I return I will check in and get back to you!

As always, if you need to contact me, please send me a message through Moodle like I just sent this to you. I check messages in Moodle more often the email when the course is in session.

All the best...enjoy the course!



References: Cornell University's [Center for Teaching Innovation; EducatorsTechnology.com](#); University of Florida **Center for Teaching Excellence**:

Learn More: [Cornell Garden-Based Learning](#)

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