



Developing an organisational structure for an online topic/module

General guide for designers

The first step is to organise your unit into a set of discrete topics, modules or time blocks (e.g. based on a week).

Once this is achieved, there are two main things to consider:

- The elements that will make up the topic/module
- The structure of the content (body) of the topic/module.

The elements of a topic/module

For each topic/module /time block, consider specifying the following elements:

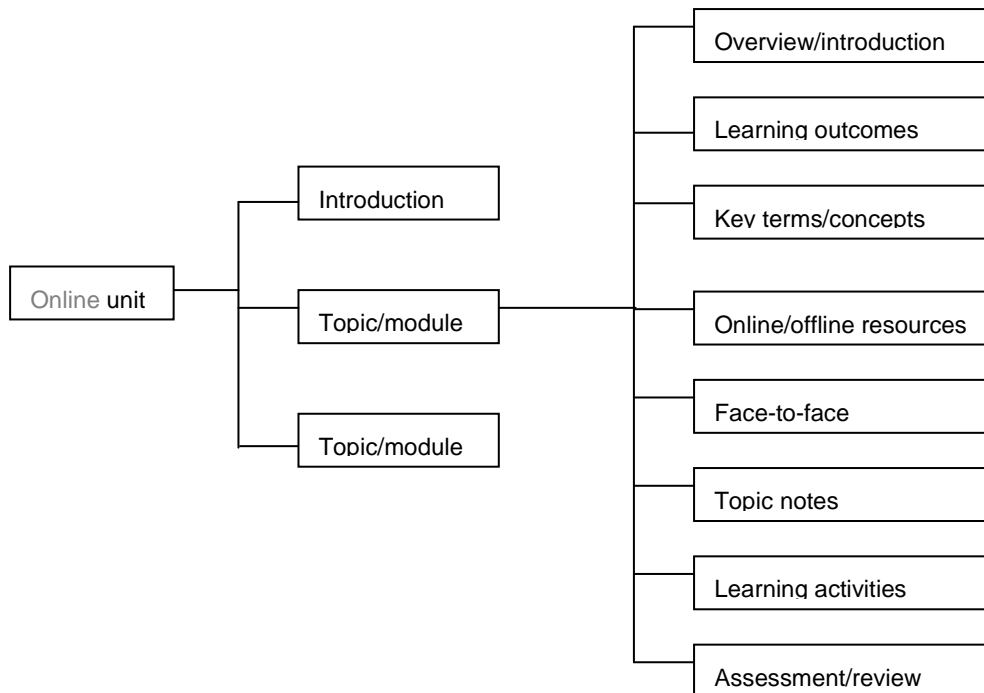
'Organiser' content

- Overview or introduction to the content and/or skills to be learnt
- Specific learning outcomes
- Key terms, concepts
- Online and offline requirements and resources (so students can plan their online and offline time efficiently)
- Links to face-to-face activities.

Body of topic

- Content (topic notes)
- Learning activities
- Supporting discussion, feedback, blogging, journalling (Communication tools)
- Conclusion/summary
- Assessment items (self test, quizzes, other)

As an example:

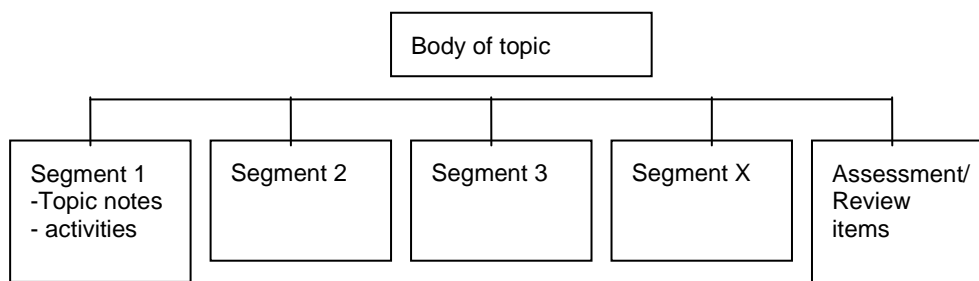


Structuring the body of the topic/module

Chunking

Divide the topic or module up into discrete, manageable segments or ‘chunks’, based on a set of headings and sub-headings. Ideally, aim for each chunk to be able to be completed by students in the one study session (of 1-2 hours). Each chunk should include not only topic notes, but also related student activity or activities, with supporting discussion or feedback. Consider building (or linking to) core content around activities designed to engage students with that content and with others in the course (other students; teaching staff).

Use the headings structure to construct internal links from a table of contents on the first screen.

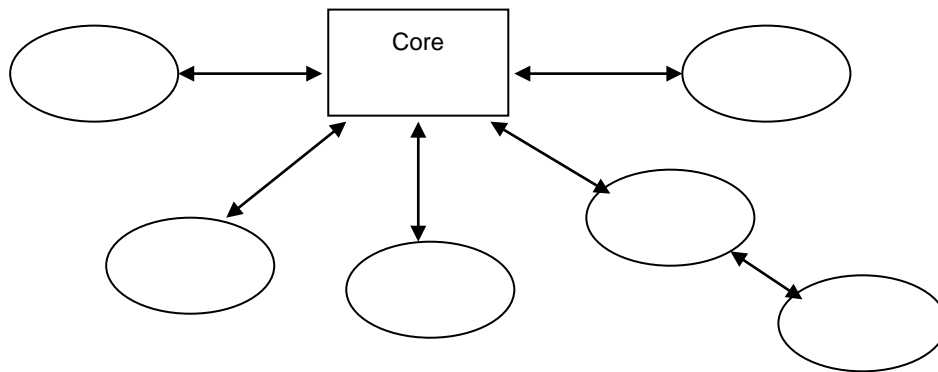


Within each chunk

- Separate the core from enrichment/ancillary material. Identify what you want as core information, and what is amplification, enrichment or other ancillary information (some of which may be optional study for students).

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- Try to keep the core of each segment to one-two screen pages of text (html).
- Break the segment up into a number of subheadings if more than one screen long. Use the subheadings structure to construct internal links from a table of contents on the first screen.
- Build hyperlinks to take students to additional information, commentary etc. Provide a relatively rich supply of links and allow students some choice as to which to follow (but note caveat below).



- Set a clear task and outcome for each segment (e.g. a piece of reflective writing, answers to set questions, summary posting to a discussion board topic, tutorial presentation, etc.).
- Consider how students will obtain feedback on their work (e.g. through a hyperlink to provided answers, through online discussion, peer review or face-to-face tutorial).

Caveat

- Whilst embracing the concept of student choice and the power of the Internet to provide access to a wealth of information, give consideration to the quality of the links you provide. Are they relevant? Well written? Appropriately pitched? Beware of overwhelming students with a myriad of possible links to follow. Annotating links with a brief summary of their content and relevance can be a great help. Another option is to rank them in order of merit, importance, significance according to x, y, z etc.
- Consider the time it takes for students to follow links and the potential for students to get lost in a sea of information. Choose and advise accordingly.
- Within that time, also consider the time that might be involved in downloading files (from slow modems at home, for example) as compared to purposeful reading and analysis.

For the 'Introduction' or first topic

Don't assume that students will know how to use the tools of effectively. Timetable activities or introductory exercises in the first few weeks that will familiarise students with the technology and the particular tools they will be using throughout the semester. In particular, allow for confidence building, development of communication skills, and the settling of group dynamics.

References:

Designer and Instructor Reference: Application Pack 2 for Blackboard Learning System – Vista Enterprise License (Release 4) 2006 Blackboard Inc.

Vista 4.2 Online Help (Blackboard Inc.)

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#368 v 1.0 develop_org_structure_general.doc 30/11/2010