

Chapter 12

Curriculum and Online Course Development Framework

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ABSTRACT

The online pivot necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has placed online instruction in the spotlight. While schools and universities around the world quickly moved classes online and kept students learning, it became apparent that most institutions and instructors lacked a solid foundation in creating online curriculum. Recognizing that online instruction is here for the long-term, building skills in creating and managing the online curriculum is essential. This chapter covers the history and foundations of curriculum, explores key issues and opportunities for educators just getting started with online learning, and recommends foundational practices for developing effective online curriculum. The approach takes a practical perspective, stepping through the curriculum development phases and concluding with a look at some of the challenges curriculum developers and instructors face.

INTRODUCTION

Although fully online instruction is not a new delivery mode, it has risen to the forefront in part due to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. Within a matter of weeks, and even days in some cases, classroom instructors at all levels found themselves forced to pivot their delivery mode from on-ground to online. The effort was Herculean. In China, for example, universities moved classes online for approximately 30,000 students at 3000 institutions at the beginning of the pandemic (Peters et al., 2020). Many instructors and their students had no experience with online learning. A crisis model of remote instruction that left much to desire emerged. Operating in crisis mode should not be the norm. Designers and instructors need a foundation in essential curriculum concepts to create thoughtfully designed online courses.

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The What, How, and Why of Curriculum

Curriculum, conceptually, dates to around 1600. In its modern form, curriculum emerged from Renaissance ideas that standardizing concepts of knowledge could improve teaching and learning. Later during the Reformation, mass instruction took root as an educational practice, further developing the modern forms of curricular thought (Hamilton & Gudmundsdottir, 1994).

Definitions of the term curriculum are broad, varied, and sometimes controversial. In a general sense, curriculum defines what instructors plan to teach and what students should learn (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). In more detailed terms, a curriculum is a framework that specifies the structure, purpose, and content presented in the learning environment (Priestley, 2019). Altogether, these decisions form the ‘what’ of the curriculum. Curriculum developers should also know the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the curriculum.

The ‘how’ of the curriculum consists of the provisions for teaching the curriculum. According to Priestley (2019), this includes systems, schedules, sequences of delivery, pedagogy, and planned instructional strategies and activities. The ‘why’ consists of the curriculum’s purpose, goals, outcomes, and objectives. Many developers use the ‘why’ of the curriculum as a starting point, although it is unnecessary.

Developing a curriculum requires a balanced and thoughtful approach to the interaction between what, how, and why. Each can influence the other. For example, imparting subject-matter knowledge (why) might lead to a more teacher-centric delivery (how) (Priestley, 2019). Beyond the what, how, and why is the ‘who’: audience. As developers create a curriculum, the learners are always a primary consideration.

What Should Learners Learn?

Historically, the curriculum has evolved from the questions about what learners should learn to address the order or sequence of learning (Hamilton & Gudmundsdottir, 1994). Thus, the most prescriptive form of this is scripted teaching or curriculum, where the learning experience is scripted down to the word of what instructors should say to learners. Later conceptualizations of curriculum considered not just what learners could or should learn but what those learners could become. In today’s environment, this can lead to considering those soft skills, such as critical and creative thought and interpersonal relations, that serve to shape scholars into leaders in their discipline and worldly citizens.

What, then, should be the curriculum’s focus in any given setting? Is it knowledge transfer, the shaping of learners, or something else? The debate has raged throughout history and continues in different camps. Often, knowledge transfer wins. Consider the trends and practices that dominated the “online pivot” in the wake of the 2020 pandemic. Instructors and schools scrambled to deliver lessons to learners and quickly implemented mandatory synchronous video sessions. In some environments, the video sessions lasted for hours. Why should students spend hours per day online, if not to facilitate knowledge transfer?

As the pandemic stretches on and instructors face the reality of expanded online learning options, the curriculum’s focus continues to present challenges. Now, more than ever, how can curriculum developers address this debate about knowledge, skills, and attitudes when combined with the challenge of a changing and unpredictable future? A background in internal and external influences helps to inform curricular focus.

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