Chapter II

Design Levels for Distance and Online Learning

Judith V. Boettcher
Designing for Learning, USA

Abstract

This chapter describes a multi-level design process for online and distance learning programs that builds on a philosophical base grounded in learning theory, instructional design, and the principles of the process of change. This chapter does the following: (1) describes a six-level design process promoting congruency and consistency at the institution, infrastructure, program, course, activity and assessment level; (2) describes a conceptual framework for designing online and distance learning programs; and (3) suggests a set of principles and questions derived from that framework. The principles are derived from the Vygotskian theory of cognition that focuses on four core elements of any teaching and learning experience — the learner, the faculty/teacher/mentor, the content /knowledge /skill to be acquired/or problem to be solved, and the environment or context within which the experience will occur. This chapter includes a set of principle-based questions for designing effective and efficient online and distance learning programs.

Introduction

What differentiates effective distance learning and online learning programs from those that are less effective, less efficient or less attractive to students? Do successful online and traditional programs share a common set of instructional design principles that might be more consistently applied?

This chapter describes a six-level design process that promotes congruency and consistency at the institution, infrastructure, program, course, learning, activity and assessment levels. This multi-level design process builds on a philosophical base grounded in learning theory and instructional design, as well as in the principles of change processes. The design process includes perspectives from a Life Style and Learning Style Design Framework (LS-TWO) that recognizes the influences of the life styles and learning styles of learners and faculty, and the challenges and power of the new technologies and their impact on communications and resources. It is hoped that the questions and principles derived from this framework will support instructional planners in the near term and also into the future. In summary, the goals and objectives of this chapter are to:

•   Describe a six-level design process incorporating design at the institution, infrastructure, program, course, activity and assessment level.

•   Describe a conceptual framework for designing online and distance learning programs.

•   Suggest a set of principles and questions derived from that framework.

When a reader completes the chapter, they should have at their disposal a set of principles and questions for designing effective and efficient online and distance learning programs. These principles are derived from the Vygotskian theory of cognition that focuses on four core elements of any teaching and learning experience. Those four elements are: the learner, the faculty/teacher/mentor, the content /knowledge/skill to be acquired/or problem to be solved, and the environment or context within which the experience will occur.

Design Principle for Planning Distance and Online Learning

A fundamental principle for designing online and distance learning is that design happens not just at the course or program level by a faculty member. Achieving

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