

Chapter V

Online Course Design Principles

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Abstract

*The premise of this chapter is that technology for course delivery will change, but effective delivery of content is dependent upon use of appropriate instructional design techniques. The authors take a practical approach by providing guidelines for designing online courses and programs. These guidelines include: (1) designing or selecting a course management tool, (2) course planning and organization, (3) “chunking” content, (4) using interactive teaching and learning strategies, (5) applying adult learning principles, (6) considering self-directed and student-centered learning approaches, (7) using authentic assessment strategies, (8) providing online orientation and technology training, and (9) providing information about appropriate infrastructure for learner support. We use a graduate course, **Advanced Methods in Distance Education**, as “the case” to provide specific examples of the instructional design components. By following these approaches, you can develop a successful online learning environment.*

Introduction

Areas of competence important for teaching at a distance include course planning and organization, verbal and nonverbal presentation skills, collaborative teamwork, questioning strategies, subject matter expertise, involving students and coordinating their activities at field sites, knowledge of basic learning theory, knowledge of the distance learning field, design of study guides, graphic design and visual thinking (Cyrs, 1997). Purdy and Wright (1992) asserted that, “it is not that the technology underpinning distance education drives the system, but rather that fundamental changes in teaching style, technique, and motivation must take place to make the new ‘classrooms’ of the present and future function effectively.” What fundamental changes must instructors make to make distance learning more effective and appropriate for a growing audience?

Often organizations focus on the technological infrastructure to build distance education programs without giving regard to the importance of instructional design. Technology will change — satellite, interactive video, Internet, CD-ROM — but effective delivery of content will remain dependent upon appropriate instructional design techniques.

Newcomers to online instruction find that instructional design principles are very different for this medium. Principles that worked in a face-to-face environment or even over video/videoconferencing must be modified to facilitate online learning. Issues of social presence and immediacy behaviors are extremely important (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997) and the role of the instructor as a facilitator/coach is critical. Now more than in traditional classrooms, distance education relies upon the student’s ability to be self-directed and motivated (Lindner and Murphy, 2001).

This chapter provides practical guidelines to designing online courses. By following these steps, you can develop a successful, active, online learning environment. We will use *Advanced Methods in Distance Education*, a graduate course, to illustrate each of these design principles.

Origins of a Course

In the past, *Advanced Methods* has been taught using a combination of interactive video and Web Course Tools (WebCT®), but we recently redesigned the course completely for asynchronous delivery. We wanted to make the course learner-centered and competency-based (Lindner and Dooley, 2002), rather than relying on more traditional “contact hours.” The course includes five

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