

Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

Timeline of Course Development

The following is a suggested timeline for the development of a distance education academic course. By beginning the process a year in advance, the increased workload demanded by distance education can be distributed over a period of time to reduce the burden on all concerned. The **operative idea** is to **plan way in advance**. This timeline can be used for videoconference or Web-based courses.

- **Eight months to one year:** Course is selected for delivery via distance education. A meeting of the instructor, instructional designer, and educational technologist is called to discuss promotion and development of course along with the most appropriate medium/media for delivery.
- **Eight months:** Instructor develops written outline of course, including course objectives, lesson objectives and learning activities. The instructor and teaching assistant (TA) begin preparation or adaptation of course materials in conjunction with the instructional designer and educational technologist.
- **Six months:** Site facilitators are contacted, if instructor needs special off-site services, such as teaching a lab or conducting exercises with students off-campus.
- **Five months:** Progress of presentation media and course material preparation is checked in a meeting with instructor, TA, instructional designer, and educational technologist. The instructional designer consults with the instructor on particular marketing considerations for the course.
- **Four months:** The instructor meets with site facilitators, discusses roles and expectations, receives input.
- **Three months:** Web page design and content are discussed by instructor, instructional designer, graphic designer, and computer support person. Responsibilities are assigned and work begun.
- **Two months:** Media promotion (marketing) and pre-registration begin. Site facilitators are involved in these activities at their sites.
- **One month:** Presentation media, Web page, course materials and syllabus are completed. Instructor meets production staff and becomes familiar with facilities, equipment, and techniques to be used.
- **Three weeks:** A run-through is done on the delivery system selected for the course. All equipment to be used are tested.
- **Two weeks:** First wave of course materials is sent to sites. Site facilitators are contacted again to resolve any questions or concerns. Educational technologist meets with production staff involved in actual delivery of course (computer specialists for Internet course, video director for satellite or videoconference course).
- **One week:** Last-minute details are attended to. Problems or delays are addressed. Everyone on the production team is prepared for the beginning of the course.

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Prior to first day of class

The following is a suggested list of what needs to be done before a distance education course begins.

Syllabus is completed. Developing and posting online a course syllabus at least a week before the class helps students understand what the course is about. In addition to the "normal" information (course content, course goals/objectives, contact information, required textbooks and readings), the syllabus for a distance education course should have the following information:

- Technical and software requirements for the course.
- Schedule for interaction sessions (chats, discussions, forums).
- Any class "ground rules," for example, how to interact in a distance environment.

Online welcome page is created. In addition to a syllabus, a welcome page, consisting of a few sentences telling the students that the instructor is glad they're participating, should be developed. The welcome page reinforces the value the students will receive for being in the course. Probably the most important aspect of the welcome page is to reassure them that learners can succeed, especially for those who have never taken a distance education course.

Course materials are requested. Make sure arrangements have been made to have textbooks and other course materials available at college bookstores and remote sites. You may have to do this or designate this to a support staff person.

Office hours are established. Encourage the instructor to establish office hours for off-campus students. These may be in the form of "virtual" office hours (e-mail or chat room) or scheduled times for phone calls.

At least one presentation is rehearsed. It's also suggested that you encourage the instructor to rehearse the presentation (if in a video-delivered course) before the first day of class. If it's a totally online course, you may want the instructor to walk through a trial discussion forum (chat) with some selected students.

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First day of class

The **first day of class** is the **most important** one for the course, regardless of the technology used as the primary delivery medium (videoconference or Web-based). A good first impression goes a long way. If the first day goes well, the class is off to a good start. If it goes poorly, you may have damage control to perform. Of course, you can't control the technical side if difficulties occur, but you can control the way the content is delivered. Here are some suggestions:

- **Recap the course goals and objectives.** Begin by telling learners what will happen in the course.
- **Solve problems, as best as you can.** Direct students to appropriate technical or administrative help. Students may need help registering for the class, setting up e-mail accounts, or securing course materials. Heading off problems on the first day does much to establish a good first impression.
- **Invite interaction immediately.** As soon as possible, invite students to participate and contribute.
- **Give them the "best" stuff.** Don't wait until the second week to show the "real" materials in the course. Start off strong the first week. The first module of the course should be as strong or stronger than the rest of the course.

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