

Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

Fixing Bad Instructional Design

Most instructional designers have been faced with this dilemma: being called on to help an instructor who has started the design of a distance education course but **without** the input of the instructional designer. In other words, the instructor is coming to the instructional designer to help bail him out of *bad* instructional design. What do you, as the instructional designer, do? Here are some tips from leading distance education instructional designers **to help you fix bad instructional design**.

Time/Course Management Ideas

- Reduce the number of graded assignments.
- "Offload" responsibilities to students; that is, determine ways to give more responsibilities to the students in the course.
- Look at what might be handled "outside" of class, which might be done as group assignments, with a partner, or in some manner that might get rid of an "official" grade.
- Maximize grading through technology. Provide online versions of exams that can be graded by software programs.
- Be specific about grading and course requirements.
- Develop materials that are well-organized and concise.
- Students in a distance environment usually need more instructions than those in a traditional classroom. They need to be prompted by e-mail, phone calls, and chat rooms on a regular basis so that they will take part in a Web-based class.
- Consider alternatives to online materials, for example, using CD-ROMs instead of streaming video. Here's what one instructional designer did:
 - This winter I worked hard to stream and FTP 20-minute lectures and PowerPoint slides onto the Web for a class. The only requirement for the student was to have RealPlayer downloaded. When students started calling up and saying that the presentations were taking too long to download because of their dial-up modems, I quickly did some CD burning. Within a few days, students were all sent copies of a CD-ROM that contained the same lectures that were on the Web. This enabled them to use the CD or the Web to listen to their lecture.

Skills-Building and Training

- At the very start, provide them with as much knowledge about the technological and teaching method options available to them.
- Provide them with information about what technologies can and can't do.
- Show instructors the videotape of them teaching over videoconferencing. Most don't realize how poorly they come across if they've never taught with this technology before. They then get a bit more motivated to try to do something about it.
- Provide a list of frequently asked questions to instructors. Chances are that their questions already have been asked by others.
- I always begin by reviewing the features of the new teaching and learning environment. I think it's important to set the context for the redesign or retrofitting process (of a traditionally taught course for the distance education environment), and I've found faculty more amenable to discussing the instructional design process, planning and making decisions as they visualize the new environment.
- Be ready to answer their questions or respond to their statements, such as: "What effective techniques are others in my discipline using?" "I received complaints from my students about ____." "I've created many quizzes in this semester's course. How can I transfer them over to the next semester?"

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Instructional designers also were posed this question: *Is instructional design for a distance education course important? Why should you care?* Here are their answers.

- You have to "structure" learning experiences in a distance education setting. Instructional design is an easy way to do it.
- We are interested in purposeful learning, and that requires design (which does not mean spontaneity should or is lost). **Plan or be in chaos.**
- Instructional design for distance education **courses** is important, but it's also important for **non-course**-type distance learning efforts. Knowing who your audience is, the pros and cons of each technology option, how your content fits best with each technology, are all important in helping to design a successful distance learning experience, whether it's "for credit" or for an informal or certificate-based educational experience.
- Without a live instructor in the same room, **distance education instructional design** is even more important than in regular classrooms because the students must act more independently. Information must be more motivating and must be perfectly clear for them to proceed. Interaction must be planned since it can't just happen as it does in a classroom. The instructor must build interactive communication into the class to let students know you're concerned about their learning.
- A person working in distance education needs to really be involved with the class that they are helping to design. Becoming familiar with the materials has helped me to design better on-line modules. The distance ed designer needs to work closely with the instructor to analyze learners, create classroom objectives and work to find the best instructional strategy. Then, they are able to develop a package of instructional materials that uses Web-based tools that are both accessible and appropriate for the students.

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