

# Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

## Support Structures for Students

In addition to providing sound teaching methods to students, research consistently tells us that we must provide additional measures of support for students. But why? Support structures help students to **become comfortable** with a distance course and the individual lessons. As a course is designed, you want the participants to have as much “up front” knowledge about the course as possible. Many first-time distance learners are very nervous and apprehensive about the venture. Therefore, as you help instructors develop courses, you want to do as much as possible to ease that anxiety. You might even want to provide your students with online surveys to determine whether they would be a good online learner.

Following are examples of support structures: welcoming letter, course handbook, orientation meeting, study guides, and interactive kits. Remember **support structures**:

- Help reduce student anxiety.
- Provide students with accurate information about the lesson content.
- Assist students in the learning process.
- Provide students with a way to get help.

## Support Structures Before a Course Begins

### Welcoming Letter

A **welcoming letter** typically contains:

- Why the course is important
- What benefits the student might realize in the course
- How the student can apply the skill and data to his/her professional life
- Any innovation introduced or featured in the course
- Information about the orientation meeting and whether it is required or not
- How the course handbook can be of value to the learner

### Course Handbook

When creating a **course handbook**, you want student concerns and learning to be the primary focus. A course handbook provides students with a starting point for the course, a source of information with contact information, and a sense of security. Hence, a course handbook might contain:

- Course policies and information
- Class schedule and timeline if appropriate
- Readings
- Course syllabus (often a separate document)

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## Orientation Meeting

The **orientation meeting** is another important support structure that relieves many student anxieties. This meeting could take place face-to-face or virtually. Orientation meetings usually have the following goals:

- Address any misconceptions about distance education
- Provide course procedures
- Deal with needed specifics about telecommunication packages or equipment that will be used in the course
- Special instructions on accessing class resources (user accounts and passwords, etc.)
- Distribute any materials that haven't been mailed to students
- Address the topic of "What to do when things go wrong." This includes advice about technical issues and academic issues. Letting students know the importance of having open communication lines is critical.

## **Support Structures Once a Course Begins**

### Study Guides

**Study guides** can range from very detailed to simple outlines of the lesson. Moore and Kearsley (1996) in *Distance education: A systems view* remark, "The study guide is quite different from a textbook or book of readings. These are intended primarily to communicate information; the study guide is intended to communicate teaching. It has sometimes been referred to as 'a tutorial in text'" (p. 108). You can find examples of study guides at the following Web sites:

Andrew Jackson University MG641 ([http://www.aju.edu/mg641\\_mpa.htm](http://www.aju.edu/mg641_mpa.htm))

PE Technikon George Campus Agricultural Management III  
(<http://saaslin.petech.ac.za/AgMan/studyg/agman3/GUIDEAM3.htm>)

Mississippi State University AISE 8103  
(<http://www.msstate.edu/dept/ais/8103/units/week14.html>)

### Interactive Learning Kits

**Interactive learning kits** provide students with materials needed to perform experiments or other activities that don't lend themselves to a computerized environment. Remember that being in a distance environment does not limit you to just "computer and print" options. You can send materials for experiments, VHS tapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and more.

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