Course Design Practices: Quick Checklist

Within Each Course

Here is a checklist of steps you can take to translate a collection of subject matter into a successful course.

Begin with the End in Mind

Learning goals

What are the high-level, basic concepts you wish students to learn in your course?

What is it you hope students can do, after they successfully complete your course?

From these you will derive course objectives, or subheadings underneath the basics, that describe in greater detail the learning goals of the course. You might do this right away, but often it's practical to do this in an iterative process, as you move through the following steps.

Sketch the Outline

With a semester or session calendar handy, lay out the learning objectives into modules, units, or timeframes. For example, weeks are a common unit of time in courses (Week one we learn this, week two we learn that, and so on) but there are many ways to organize a course. As you describe the objectives, begin roughing in lessons. How will you convey content to students? How will they explore and apply concepts, ideas, controversies, or processes? How can they learn in dialog with you, and with each other? In this phase, consider the following:

Routine and Documentation

As far as possible, craft a repetitive structure. By week 3 or 4, students should be able to roughly but helpfully predict the workload, rigor, deadlines, and course procedure each subsequent week.

Provide plenty of direction through clear, consistent messaging. Have information such as course content and procedures (such as deadlines) in consistent places each week. Provide plenty of advanced warning for special activities and assessments outside course routine.

Choose a few methods for communication and content delivery. For example, use the news tool in D2L, email, or both, to post or send weekly summaries and reminder lists. You may use D2L's quiz tool or perhaps Google Forms for short reading comprehension quizzes. But whichever tools you choose, consistently use them throughout the semester so students know where to look to participate. You may use various toolsets within or outside D2L, but limit these to a sensible variety. Unless your course specifically has students exploring a variety of different web technologies (such as an educational or business technology course), you want to avoid students becoming confused when there are seemingly different tools, each requiring their own login credentials, each week.

Three Forms of Interaction

Great college courses typically have three ways that students encounter, interact, and learn within the class:

- Instructor - Student
- Student - Content
- Student - Student

Lots of Low-Stakes Assessments

Give students plenty of opportunities to influence their future, final grade. Incorporate small, frequent assignments or assessments such as quizzes, short reflection writing exercises, graded problem-solving activities, discussion posts, explainer videos, and so on. These compel students to engage with the course content while reducing stress that might otherwise be caused by big exams or projects that, by themselves, make or break a student's grade. You'll need to balance this practice, though, so you aren't overwhelmed with grading. For example, short, low-stakes, multiple-choice quizzes, are a great choice since D2L can auto-grade these.

A Goal

Ideally, an instructor should feel comfortable - excited? - to explain the rationale for each and every part of a course to students. This means that every week, every lesson or assessment is crafted to help students engage with and apply the concepts, ideas and perspectives that make the course worthwhile for their life and professional activities.
But let's be honest: most faculty are not 100% happy with their courses. We generally feel that some of our lessons, activities, or assessments are more effective than others, and we often struggle to teach toward certain learning objectives or goals. That's okay; so long as we continue to try new things, we are probably improving our courses and our students' experiences.

Thinking on a bigger scale, consider the following:

**General Design Practices**

**Iterative process**

Expect failures large and small. Continual improvements to your courses and your students learning necessarily involves risk. Through reflective assessment (writing or discussion, for example) students can learn even from "failed" course activities or exercises. So can you - see the next point.

**Journal It**

Keep a brief log of your decisions and results as you design and implement new course content. This can seem tedious or time-wasting, but it can make your process more systematic. Plus, as our colleagues teaching in writing disciplines often say, writing can be a critical part of the thinking process.

**Gradual Changes are Enough**

Don't overwhelm yourself with too much change to a course in a single semester. Obviously, transitioning a face-to-face course to online (or vise-versa) involves a lot of work, and you should plan accordingly. But lesser changes can and should be done gradually, over semesters. Even if you succeed in making lots of major changes to a course in a single semester, you may struggle to meaningfully reflect on how well it all worked.

**Continually Explore Possibilities**

Keeping the last point in mind, make it a regular part of your teaching process - budget the time - to experiment with new things. If you are coming from traditional pedagogy (lectures and exams), particularly try to develop lessons that have alternative forms of content delivery, active learning, or students teaching each other. Try to get students creating things, such as small websites or short explainer videos.

When you evaluate new methods, bear in mind the following:

Is it accessible? For example, can it be read by screen readers for the visually impaired, or do videos have transcripts attached for those who cannot listen to a narration?

Simple and reliable is better than lots of features. For example, students can get lost in irrelevant details with complicated website building tools that offer lots of different features.

Can students take away their project in a durable format? An example is a video in .mp4 format. This near-universal file type enables students to host a streaming video in a variety of places, and link it in a portfolio or even a job application. However they made the file, they own it and can keep it after they graduate.

**Faculty teaching faculty**

General faculty development in course design has limits. The above guidelines can certainly help you plan a course, but the best reference for you is probably colleagues or specialized resources within your field. Often, people teaching in the same discipline as you at your institution or another have already come up with innovative ways to do it. In journals, at conferences, and on web resources you can discover a variety of great ideas for your classroom or online course space.

Take advantage of on-campus development opportunities. They are often short, involve learning with and alongside your colleagues, and more convenient than travel to distant conferences or struggling to learn solely through self-paced training via YouTube.