



A Guide to Online Course Design: Strategies for Student Success

Stavredes, Tina; and Herder, Tiffany
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Book Review

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The first online course I ever viewed appeared to be a simple transfer of teaching materials from the in-person format to the online environment. There were scans of handwritten lecture notes, a few documentary links, and a couple of ungraded discussion forums. This haphazard planning was a reminder that the virtual classroom is a distinctly different environment from the traditional classroom and must be planned for and constructed in a very different way. This is where Stavredes and Herder's *An Online Guide to Course Design* would have been useful, to navigate the opportunities an online course affords and to mitigate the problems of student retention and persistence sometimes seen with distance education.

Stavredes and Herder advocate an outcomes-based design in order to plan an online course fully before it even begins. One starts by first asking what students should learn from the course, then asking how to assess what they have learned, and finally asking how they will learn this content. To this end the authors break course creation down into a four-part arc of (1) Analysis, (2) Design, (3) Development, and (4) Implementation and Evaluation.

In the first step, "Analysis," the instructor assesses the characteristics of the expected learners and articulates his or her goals for the course. The authors invoke Bloom's Taxonomy to structure the goals of the course and they use this framework again in choosing course activities.

The second phase, "Design," takes up the bulk of the book. The authors helpfully recommend strategies for choosing and sequencing course activities. Of particular note is the role of the asynchronous classroom discussion, as discussions are one of the ways an instructor creates a social presence in the virtual classroom. Here we see that the online environment is

fundamentally different from the face-to-face classroom. “If learners don’t feel a connection with you and their peers, it is difficult for them to persist online” (80). An instructor must deliberately foster a social presence to engage students in the online classroom. The authors recommend a problem-based approach to content-related discussions: present students with a real-world issue and let them draw inferences from the subject matter to solve the problem.

In the “Development” phase the authors describe further how lecture notes, videos, and introductions can help enhance the sense of the online classroom as a social and collaborative community. The authors also offer advice for developing rubrics and how to write instructions for students accustomed to scanning information on the Internet rather than actively reading it.

Finally, in the “Implementation and Evaluation” phase the authors recommend reflecting on the course to improve it according to specific standards. The authors develop a rubric for evaluating a course and they recommend eliciting feedback from students as well as from colleagues after each term, to discover areas for improvement.

A real strength of this book is that the authors do not just explain what makes for good course design. They give examples of how to design well with a high degree of precision. For example, they offer clear guidelines for articulating course outcomes. In chapter 10 there is a chart quantifying the amount of time different activities in a course take, from assigned reading, to writing, to taking quizzes, in order to meet accreditation expectations. It is this concern with ensuring that all aspects of course design are planned and deliberate that makes this book an asset to anyone serious about developing an effective online course.

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