Comprehensible Online Course Design

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Today’s economic climate has encouraged many nontraditional students to begin their paths toward higher education with online courses. Professionals seeking continuing education credits are also increasingly served in this growing field. The flexibility of asynchronous education is seductive to adult learners needing to juggle academics with already-overloaded schedules. The increasing popularity of online programs, courses, and supplementary information for hybrid and synchronous courses has created the need for increased research on and information about teaching in the online world. Specifically, there is a deficit of practical advice for instructors on designing online courses. As part of the Jossey-Bass Guides to Online Teaching and Learning Series, Smith’s (2008) *Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design* takes major strides in making up this deficit. Instructional design specialist Robin M. Smith, Associate Professor of Educational Development and Coordinator of Web-based Learning at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, provides expert advice without condescension or pedantry.

For a slim volume with a conversational tone, *Conquering the Content* packs a scholarly punch. Although easily accessible for online instructional “newbies,” the format of the work may inspire a wry chuckle from aficionados from both sides of the virtual desk, as each chapter opens in a conscious echo of a well-designed online module, complete with learning goals/outcomes, learning resources, additional resources, learning activities, self-assessment, and lesson evaluation. Smith models exactly what she discusses in the work: tight construction, relevant examples, and the creation of elements designed to encourage as well as challenge the student.

The seven concise chapters direct educators through the steps necessary to make the transition from face-to-face, synchronous instruction to online asynchronous instruction. The chapters include strategies for the instructor to use in preparing his or her courses for the transition to the online environment. As *Conquering the Content* delves into the nuts and bolts of implementation, Smith provides time estimates of how long aspects of each step might
take and hints on how to make the instructor’s life easier from the start by anticipating the need to change textbooks or adjust objectives in future offerings of the course. In Chapter 1, “Design with Learning in Mind,” Smith introduces the educator to altering course content for Web-based learning, emphasizing how to “see” the course from the students’ perspectives while aiming instruction toward multiple learning styles. She emphasizes the importance of reframing the focus from what needs to be taught to what needs to be learned, providing research-based strategies for creating a learner-centered environment. One of the strengths of the book, as evidenced by this first chapter, is the inclusion of succinct lists aimed toward continuous instructor success. One example is a list of instructional design applications based on M. David Merrill’s First Principles of Instruction (p. 7). Another strength of the book is that Smith elaborates these lists. For example, she presents and discusses five elements of the learner-centered online environment: self-selected, time, place, pace, and around-the-clock-access (pp. 13-14). Conquering the Content is not recommended as a single read-through before instructors move on to the next model or text; it is a thorough reference work for educators to consult throughout the initial design process as well as during course implementation.

Chapter 2, “Design with the Future in Mind,” keeps an eye on flexibility and ease of alteration to the course in the future. One integral directive is “never to embed textbook page numbers or chapter references within course content, quizzes, assignments, discussions, feedback, or any other portion of the course. Textbook page numbers and chapter references should appear only on the learning guides” (p. 27). By putting textbook-specific information in the learning guides only, the instructor is preparing for an easy transition to different textbooks or later additions of supplementary material. Smith also outlines how to begin developing modules and learning guides early in the book in order to prepare the instructor for the future creation of modules and guides. Like any effective facilitator, she uses both global and sequential methods to provide her reader with an awareness of future goals in order to limit surprises and encourage time management.

Authentic assessment methods are explored in Chapter 3, “Design with Assessment in Mind.” Instructors must remember the importance of allowing students the freedom of assessments that provide the opportunity for students to make, and learn from, their mistakes. Smith compares and contrasts the limitations and advantages of various types of assessment within the online environment. One of the many useful strategies is for the potential online instructor to reflect on how to begin “teaching for the long term” (p. 38). Smith recommends that instructors analyze their course’s goals, the skills necessary to achieve those goals, and whether or not the assessment is appropriate. Instructors must ask if the assessment provided actually measures what the instructor wants his or her students to know or be able to do.

Conquering the Content is a model of good organization whose basic strategies are laid out in Chapter 4, “Design with Organization in Mind.” This chapter elaborates upon learning guides, the course development map, and prioritization in online learning. Smith reminds the educator to continue viewing the course from the student perspective by defining the elements of the learning guides in student-centered language. For example, she notes that Learning Goals or Outcomes are “What You Need to Know” while Learning Resources are “Tools to Help You Learn” and Learning Activities are “What You Need to Do.” She further elaborates on how one should break down each assignment into necessary parts to ease the students into the online experience and create opportunities for success in the course. She warns against “gratuitous use of technology” and suggests strategies for instructors to reflect on how to use the online environment...
to remove personally irritating aspects of face-to-face learning, such as constant requests for grade updates. The hands-on aspect of this chapter is designed to be comforting to the novice online instructor. Chapter 4 continues to stress the importance of taking the time to prepare before the course begins rather than continually scrambling to stay ahead of the students.

Throughout the book, the instructor is encouraged to think of one specific course to transition to the online environment; this approach, described in Chapter 5, emphasizes the need for the instructor to “Design with Content in Mind.” Chunking course content and layering multiple styles of activities are the focal points of this chapter. Smith emphasizes that online course content must have the ability to: present short, directed learning segments, or “chunkability”; repeat and review content, or “repeatability”; stop and resume without having to start all over, or “pauseability”; and offer clear, direct instructions, or “understandability” (pp. 64-65). In order to assist in the creation of the most effective “chunking” methods, she presents brain-based learning research, strategies to maximize learning, and a format to create bridges between informational elements. The reader is encouraged to be realistic when planning an online course. Smith notes that cutting-and-pasting or scanning old lecture notes is not an effective method for approaching online instruction and preparation.

Chapter 6, “Design with Process in Mind,” guides an effective transition from synchronous learning to an asynchronous online format. This chapter offers a variety of best practices to increase effectiveness and student learning opportunities. Smith reminds the educator of the importance of easy navigation from a student’s point of view and provides strategies to assist with the perspective shift. One of the primary characteristics of successful online courses is consistency. Instructors must be consistent about when assignments are to be turned in, where they are to be turned in, what method to use in order to contact the instructor, and even with the physical design connected to the navigational elements of the site. Each of the strategies given throughout the book is concise but relevant, allowing the instructor to recognize and appreciate those with which he or she is familiar and become introduced to those with which he or she is not. Again, the conciseness and relevance of the information within the chapters is demonstrative of the best practices modeled throughout the book.

In the final chapter, “Design with Navigation in Mind,” Smith describes elements essential to maintaining the integrity of the online course and sketches paths for the future. The activities within this chapter encourage successful implementation of elements discussed throughout the book. They also serve as reminders for the instructor to look ahead to “continuous improvement” of the course. Smith provides approaches to use throughout the course in order to document possible future revisions. She does not minimize the role that students can play as stakeholders; she encourages instructors to see student comments as useful information to make the course more effective, and she emphasizes the importance of instructor reflection and journaling throughout the experience to provide a record of personal growth.

Each of the seven chapters contains a goldmine of information; although the book is a “quick read” when read from cover to cover, it offers little nuggets on which the reader can ruminate. Despite the wealth of practical advice in it, what makes Conquering the Content outstanding are the resources provided, both in internet links and in twenty-two pages of applicable forms for design practice and reflection. Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design is a necessity for any instructors who anticipate even the slightest possibility of designing or teaching an online course in the future. Its real-world applications, conversational style, strategies for effective design and instruction, and rich resources are essential for those familiar as well as unfamiliar with the intricacies of online instruction.