

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Systematically Designing Instruction for Distance Education

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Distance education has become a common offering for many institutions of higher education. The 1990s gave way to particularly rapid growth in the availability of course offerings and enrollments (Sikora, 2002). According to a well-known report by the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the twelve-month 1997-1998 academic year about one-third of the nation's two- and four-year postsecondary education institutions offered distance education courses, while an additional one-fifth planned to offer distance education courses within the next three years. In this same study, it was estimated that there were 54,470 distance education courses being offered (NCES, 1999). Many colleges and universities have continued to find a growing number of students enrolled in online courses. For example:

during the Fall 2002 term, Illinois colleges and universities reported offering 3,233 course sections delivered by Internet that

generated 40,550 student course enrollments. This is an increase of 6,001 course enrollments (17%) from the Spring/Winter 2002 term and an increase of 17,296 course enrollments (74%) from the Fall 2001 term. (Distance Education Enrollments, n.d.).

The growth of distance education course offerings in recent years has also brought the increasing threat of poor-quality courses and materials, devalued degrees, and ineffective educational experiences for students. As many colleges and universities are just now beginning to attain the benefits of distance education programs that were developed a few years ago, many other are just trying to "keep up" with the competition. We have reviewed course plans for distance education offerings that were no more than classroom lecture notes saved on a Web page. In a recent university committee meeting, this very scene was played out yet again. Although there was discussion

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of creating quality distance education courses and cautions about using traditional strategies in this new instructional environment, most went unheard. As one faculty member explained, it was “not the role of faculty members outside of the School of Education to be experts in instruction or distance learning principles.” Understanding that this perception is the “reality” for many faculty in colleges and universities that are quickly urging their instructors to move course materials to an online format, we are addressing this issue through our roles as guest editors for the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*.

Whether an expert in instructional design or not, faculty members inside and outside of colleges of education can create effective distance education experiences for students. With a few guiding examples and some assistance from an instructional designer, almost any course (to be delivered using almost any media) can be effective when it is carefully planned, designed, developed, and formatively evaluated. Instructional design is a data-driven process that provides the blueprints for systemically creating effective instruction, trying it out, getting feedback, and improving it until the required results are obtained (Brethower, 2003; Dick & Carey, 1996). This process commonly blurs the roles of researchers, teachers, curriculum developers, instructional designers, and assessment experts (Kelly & Lesh, 2000; Bannan-Ritland, 2003), but most often results in a high quality and useful learning experience for students. The articles presented in this issue illustrate research in the fields of instructional design and distance education that share the common goal of using the findings to improve practice. Through case studies, the authors contribute ideas, examples, and research data related to the design, development, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of distance education courses.

Kidney and Puckett take an honest look at Web-based Instruction (WBI) at the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL), and discover a primary focus on the method of delivery—in

this case, the “ritzy look and feel” of the Web, rather than on the purposeful and systematic design of quality instruction. Specifically, the authors discuss how self-reflection and role redefinitions were used to redirect their focus to “basic first principles.”

In their article, Lohr and Ku observe how students in an advanced instructional design course apply active learning guidelines to the design and development of Web-based training templates and identify a list of criteria required to create active learning template designs.

Osguthorpe, et al., present a collection of interesting and unique cases in blended learning environments with the purpose of providing greater understanding of how to maximize the benefits of such learning environments while minimizing the potential pitfalls. The collection of cases also aims at illustrating the diversity of blended learning environments through a variety of content topics, the nature of what is blended (i.e. learning activities, students, instructors), and the goals for creating a blended course.

Using a qualitative approach, Pan, et al., provide insight into the instructional design profession by exploring the nature of the roles that instructional designers play. Also investigated is the relationship of this role to interpersonal dynamics with faculty, as well as how the instructional designer’s basic and growth needs interrelated with his or her personal practical theories (PPTs).

In their article, Tu and Corry discuss effective designs, management tactics, and strategies to produce ideal asynchronous network discussions that allow contemplation and encourage development of critical thinking. A model of an online collaborative learning community—consisting of online learning, collaboration learning, and learning community—is then applied to implement the designs.

Chyung and Stepich present a case study that illustrates how the use of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives was instrumental in the development of graduate-level online instruction. The authors describe how Bloom’s

taxonomy was used to ensure congruence among the components of each course module (i.e., instructional objectives, assessments, and activities).

In the final article, Watkins and Schlosser provide a discussion and framework for the role of educational researchers in the continuing growth of distance education. Offering a matrix relating research methods and essential elements of distance education, the authors present a useful resource for conceptualizing future research in distance education that will provide a practical foundation for faculty and students who are no longer confined to the traditional classroom.

As the editors of this special issue of the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, we hope that you find the research articles we have selected for inclusion to be as insightful, fascinating, and valuable as we did.

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