Best Practices for Online Course Design

Instructional designers have many tools to make their courses more entertaining and engaging, like video, audio, image editing, interactivity, and more. However, instead of randomly creating courses using any/all of these tools, or packing new tools into a module just because they seem trendy or expected, course developers must follow sound instructional design principles to make their eLearning truly effective.

Here are a few instructional design best practices to keep in mind when building your next course.

1 Begin with a Clear Course Syllabus / Content Outline

Designing course content without a detailed syllabus, regardless of how well-versed you may be with the subject matter, is not a good practice because this approach can lead to the overemphasis of some points and omission of others. The course's syllabus should be referred to as you road-map your design. Understanding your learners and their unique needs is very important here because knowing your target audience will help you select the most important, "must-know" content and design your course around learners' needs and expectations, rather than around your perception of the material.

2 Design Your Course Content for Your Specific Audience

Now it's time to build engaging content around your course wireframe. Before using all of the tools and technology available to you, conduct an audience analysis. Understanding who's learning what will help you select the best presentation mode for each section. For instance: Millennial learners are very comfortable with highly-summarized, succinct content with lots of videos and interactivities. Many Baby Boomers, on the other hand, may prefer straight-to-the-point material in a lecture format.

3 Optimize Your Course's Duration

A best practice for online course design dictates that a course's content must be delivered in manageable "chunks" in order to keep distance learners engaged over time. If your content runs for too long, your students may start to tune it out. By breaking your modules up into segments of

no more than 10 minutes, you help create expectations that will seem manageable within your users' attention spans.

4   Consistent Yet Customizable Content Design

As many eLearning providers have heard directly from their students, consistent design elements make it much easier to navigate online courses. Even so, it is always advisable to include design features that allow online learners to personalize their learning environment, both for the sake of aesthetic preferences and individual learning needs. This includes:

- Font size
- Background colors
- Personalized icons and images

Also, give thought to:

- Layout simplicity
- Use of white space
- When to use bullets versus long sentences

5   Assessments, Feedback, and Interaction

Include features in your course that continually assess students' learning at every stage of the course. Use multiple-choice quizzes instead of essay assessments, which are very hard to evaluate in an asynchronous learning environment.

- Add assessments following short segments of learning material, rather than just at the end of the course.
- Provide immediate feedback on assessments, rather than several weeks later or only at the end of the course.
- Refrain from just offering "Pass / Fail" or "Correct / Incorrect" types of feedback. Your corrective feedback should include details of why the answer was correct or incorrect, with optional additional content / resources that the learner can access if desired.
- Depending on the nature of your course, consider also adding other features to your design, such as Student-Peer interaction (group chats) and Instructor-Student interaction (texting/emailing).

6   Teach a niche, differentiated course topic

One thing I've heard a few times from aspiring instructors is that since there aren't any popular courses (or even any courses at all) on a subject, they're destined for success. One out of 100 times, this might be true. But often it's a sign that the topic isn't marketable or profitable. That's to say that, in general, the clear majority of worthwhile subjects are—by now—going to have some level of competition. It's our job as instructors to teach these subjects in a different way or find new topics within these subjects to take on are differentiated: Maybe you're a social media marketing guru, but (as is the case) you've seen the thousands of successful courses on social media. You might consider uncovering and catering to a niche: "Generating B2B leads on social media" or "Increasing eBook downloads with Facebook Advertising," for example.

The general concept is to think beyond "Everyone has a car, so I'll make a course about driving" ideas. Broader is often not better and with over 9 million learners on Udemy alone (each of whom aren't limited to a single course), it shouldn't be difficult to nab your sliver of the online education pie with a differentiated course topic.

7   Chunk, chunk, chunk

Online courses should consist of a series of short video lessons. Break down your course into easy-to-digest and sequential concepts. This, believe it or not, is called chunking. Chunking your content is ideal for a couple of reasons:

- Focusing inevitably-shorter videos on single concepts makes it easier for learners to process.
- Parsing your content makes it easier for learners to skip material they don't need or re-watch material they haven't yet grasped.
- Chunking allows potential learners to get a more accurate idea of what they're buying when considering your course outline.
- Chunking allows you to easily insert more and more lectures as time goes on.

8   Include your value proposition in the course title

For example, a Twitter course targeted at busy start-up marketers who need results fast might take the shape of "How to Attract Your First 1,000 Followers in 10 Days." This is called a value proposition. Value propositions answer the question "What will learners gain from your course?"

It's clear from this value proposition that learners will get 1,000 Twitter followers and it will only take 10 days.

This type of course title is very different from the courses you took in grade school or college. A local community college might offer "Anatomy 101" although the same course published online would ideally be titled something along of the lines of "Learn to Name All Parts of the Human Body."

9   Don't break the bank buying equipment

Most learners don't expect a high production value of your videos. I'm not saying that professional-level courses shot with $3,000 cameras aren't awesome. They're just not necessary. Learners are much more concerned with the knowledge they'll gain from your course than they are about whether you're exceptional with PowerPoint or can afford fancy gear.

You can use your smartphone for recording videos, pick up an affordable microphone and you're well on your way.

10   Develop a Clear, Consistent Structure

The course's look can be intentionally inviting, intentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting or unintentionally. Often times instructors have a lot of information that needs to be crammed into the online learning environment, which can create a disinviting learning environment. In order to create an intentionally inviting online environment, courses need to have a clear and consistent structure that offers intuitive navigation. Each module should have the same structure. The location of reading materials, assignments, tasks, collaborative opportunities, etc. always should be in the same location and format.

In addition, each module should look like the previous modules, with updated content and learning outcomes. When thinking about course design and usability for learners, an effective approach is to ensure all resources utilized throughout the course are contained within the LMS.

The course design can play a huge role in usability and student success. One strategy for engaging learners is through the integration of microlearning, which is a trend in online

learning. Microlearning involves presenting content through mediated micro levels so students are exposed to small learning units on short-term assignments. Microlearning is based on H.A. Simon's 1974 research that outlines the effectiveness of creating chunks of learning experiences that the short-term memory can retain. This approach translates into online course development through the use of learning modules.

An effective way to develop learning modules is by planning backwards. Instructors can look at all the content they want to cover, and then identify thematic chunks of information. The thematic chunks become units or learning modules that are a short-term approach to long-term planning. Within the learning modules, instructors provide tasks, assignments and supplemental resources, and tools to enhance content mastery.

An effective strategy for module development is to begin with an overview page that outlines all readings, tasks and assignments required for the module, along with corresponding due dates for each item. Depending on the LMS, instructors can hyperlink items in the overview page directly to the assignments, which provides a clean and organized feel to the course. The overview page adds to the course's structure, and can help keep students engaged in the learning process and increase academic integrity.

It is imperative to have precise instructions for expectations of all aspects of learning outcomes within the learning modules. Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS) can increase students' performance. An example of EPSS within the online learning environment is the use of job aids, which offer a summary of steps or a checklist of how to complete a task. Job aids reduce mistakes and potential follow-up questions because they provide clear performance expectations and correct common misconceptions. Assignments that require students to complete a specific task can include a job aid to increase student success.

Along with job aids, rubrics posted with each assignment also foster open communication and clear expectations. Students easily can read the assignment narrative and still not comprehend what

is expected; rubrics provide additional clarity. Students are more successful on assignments when they know exactly what will be expected for assignment grading.

11 Reflect and Revise

According to academic research and excellence in teaching narratives, a reflective practitioner is a successful practitioner. There are several strategies that instructors can use to practice reflective strategies in order to improve the learning environment for students.

Successful instructional course design needs a performance evaluation process that has flexible guidelines. One evaluation framework is ADDIE, which has five phases that are the basis of content design: analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate.

Reflective practitioners use the evaluation phase to review their courses through the lens of best practices. A few ways to reflect upon course designs is through student feedback and by keeping a design journal of things that come up during a semester. Finally, there are course design rubrics, such as from Quality Matters, which can assess course design according to research-based rubrics.

Sources: eidesign.net, insidehighered.com, coursearc.com