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Book Review: *Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design* by Robin Smith (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

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Abstract

Excerpt: Had Robin Smith's book been available a decade ago, I could have avoided countless hours spent since then in updating, revising, and re-envisioning the web pages supporting my courses. Even with years of experience creating web sites for my courses, I found ideas and insights that will help me continue to improve the ongoing processes of course development and maintenance.

Keywords

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Book Review

Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design
Robin Smith (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

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Had Robin Smith's book been available a decade ago, I could have avoided countless hours spent since then in updating, revising, and re-envisioning the web pages supporting my courses. Even with years of experience creating web sites for my courses, I found ideas and insights that will help me continue to improve the ongoing processes of course development and maintenance.

For those creating their first course web page, whether for a totally online course or for an on-campus course supplemented by a web page, conquering the specific "how-to" protocols of the course management system can seem to be the most challenging and pressing part of the course development process. Smith clearly states in her preface that providing such guidance is not her intent.

Rather, her approach throughout the book underlines the point that the development of an effective online course involves not only knowing course content and being able to use the available technology, but also incorporating an understanding of student styles and needs *and* instructor styles and needs into the development process.   Each chapter title reminds us that creating an online course requires making conscious choices about what, why and how we are constructing the course—in other words, engaging in a process of design.

Design with Learning in Mind and *Design with the Future in Mind,* Chapters 1 and 2, provide the base for course development. Chapter 1 emphasizes the importance of designing the course from the student's point of view and outlines the roles of both student and instructor in the online classroom. Chapter 2 provides a starting point for converting subject matter into the sequence of content and learning activities that will make up the course and for creating the underlying structures—including easily updatable file systems—that will allow the course to be revised in response to changes in teaching schedules, textbooks, and supporting content and assignments.

Design with Assessment in Mind, Design with Organization in Mind, and *Design with Content in Mind,* Chapters 3 through 5, focus on strategies for enhancing student learning in the online course. Chapter 3 deals with strategies and perspectives related to measurement of student learning, including discussion of the author's experiences with assessment and her responses to questions instructors may have about online quizzes and testing. Chapter 4 introduces the learning guide, an organizing tool for each module of the course, which includes learning objectives, resources, activities, and self- and graded assessment of learning for the module. Chapter 5 provides guidance for dividing content into sections that will facilitate learning ("chunking") and for creating bridges and transitions to help students

to see the relationships among various bodies of information in the course and to use information from one content segment to support learning in the next segment.

The final two chapters of the book, *Design with Process in Mind* and *Design with Navigation in Mind,* Chapters 6 and 7, offer practical advice for efficiently communicating with students, keeping web links active, capturing ideas for revision in the next iteration of the course, and updating content and organization from term to term.

Smith did not check her instructional design experience at the door when she took on the role of author for this book. The text is designed like a course and is best used that way. Each chapter begins with a list of learning goals, references, learning activities, points for self-assessment, and evaluation of learning for that chapter. The appendix contains worksheets to help readers apply each chapter's learning to their own particular course and situation, checklists of key points to remember, action steps for proceeding through the development process, and note pages for each chapter to capture ideas for action as they arise.

With respect to her intent in writing the book, Smith notes, "I do not propose to have all the answers. I have a few answers that I hope will stimulate other ideas" (p. xii). I think she has met her goal. For those new to teaching through the web and for those with experience as well, *Conquering the Content: A Step-by-Step Guide to Online Course Design* provides ready-to-use, practical advice and perspectives for thinking about how to make continuous improvements in our online teaching.