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# Designing the perfect online course

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# Designing the “Perfect” Online Course

**Michael Simonson**

Dictionary definitions of the word *perfect* are universally similar: without defect, faultless. Certainly it is foolish to try to quickly define the perfect online course; a course without defect and faultless. However, with the current “rush to go online,” many instructional designers, distance educators, and training directors and being asked to design just such a course—an effective, rig-

orous, yet interesting online course—a “perfect” online course.

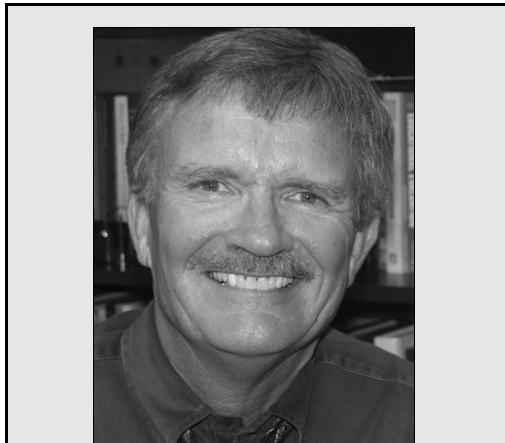
So, for the sake of the naiveté of those asking and the motivation of many distance educators to want to help, let us examine what the best practices literature seems to be indicating about online courses—good, if not perfect ones—and make a recommendation. (Actually, the components of an online course summarized in this column are derived from the recent edition of *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education*)

When designing an online course, there are three organizational categories to consider: course structure, course contents, and artifacts of learning. It might also be informative to look at the organization of the major subdivision of a typical online course: the course unit.

## **COURSE STRUCTURE**

The typical college course is a three-semester, 15-week course with a title something like “Management of Service Centers,” or “Introduction to Educational Statistics.” Certainly most educators know that a three-credit college course will meet about three times a week for the 15 weeks of the semester, or for about 45 class sessions.

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And, for every hour a student is in class he or she should expect to spend about 2 hours outside of class preparing, reading, or studying, for a semester total of somewhere between 100 and 140 hours.

What about a class that does not have class session—an online class? If the course designer applies the same logic to an online class as to a traditional class, then, in an online course an average student should expect:

- Between 100 and 140 hours of “work” during the semester, or about 7-9 hours per week. This time would be spent reading, studying, writing, posting, viewing, listening, and chatting.
- A course that is organized around three major units, each with about five modules. Modules would be studied for about a week.

And, the instructor should also expect to devote between 100 and 140 hours of effort, organizing, posting, reading, grading, and interacting, or between 7-9 hours per week.

### **COURSE CONTENT**

Effective online courses emphasize instructional content that presents in a variety of ways what students should learn. The key organizational document for the online course is the syllabus that gives most, if not all, the important information about the course content and organization. The syllabus contains the sequence of topics, course objectives, assignments, rubrics, reading and viewing lists, and other information needed by the student to “keep up and stay informed.”

Additionally, the perfect online course would use a course management system. It is hard to imagine an online course, especially a “perfect” one, without a course management system. The course manage-

ment system would be a meeting place, a virtual classroom, and the venue where instruction and learning interact.

Next, the online course must have a considerable amount of instructor involvement—even presentations, although lecturing by the instructor of the online course is probably not conducive to perfection. The instructor should introduce himself or herself, distribute periodic and regular organizational e-mails, personally contact individual students, make postings to threaded discussions, participate in chats, both spoken and typed, and make short and on-target presentations—single concept lectures.

Textbooks and other reading materials remain the mainstay for delivering content in most courses, including the online course. The average for a typical online course is two to three textbooks. The modern, well-chosen textbook can provide the content information for most courses.

Finally, the online course should have single-concept videos, audio explanations or descriptions, narrated visuals and other multimedia content. Also of importance are the contents of the virtual portion of the course—chats and threaded discussions, for example—that are built and constructed during the course.

### **ARTIFACTS OF LEARNING**

Some would probably choose a different phrase than “artifacts of learning,” but most who study online education look for observable objects, things, and artifacts that are evidence of student learning. A comprehensive investigation of online courses yields the following general set of expectations for student assignments:

- Three major graded assignments, usually one for each major unit of the course. These major assignments can be exams, problem/scenario solutions,

research papers, group projects, or media productions.

- Approximately 10 minor graded assignments, such as discussion postings, chat participations, e-mails, wiki input, or blog postings.

These artifacts, or learning outcomes, are at the core of the perfect online course (and at the heart of almost any course, as instructional designers often tell us).

If the typical course is examined in more detail, and the major building block of the course—the unit—is examined, its organization might look like this:

- A video introduction to the unit produced by the instructor that in 5 minutes or less explains what this unit is “all about.”
- An audio explanation of the major assignment for this unit, made by the instructor and posted online as an audio file; this explanation would supplement the syllabus explanation and would be what students are referred to when they ask “what am I supposed to do?” Obviously, the assignment rubric would be explained in this “podcast.”
- A reading assignment of several hundred pages from one or more of the course textbooks, or a series of readings from the Web or from a course packet.
- A few short video viewings that highlight key ideas or that demonstrate important processes.
- A series of threaded discussion questions that build on one another to provide a sequenced construction of

information that supports the unit’s final assignment. Instructors are actively involved in discussions early in the unit, but reduce their involvement as students begin to grasp the content more completely.

- Chats, mostly between students working as individuals or in teams, in which between-student interaction is stressed. Instructors monitor chats, but are not overly involved.
- A few instructor presentations, either prerecorded or presented live using voice-over-Internet technologies.

This typical unit would last about 5 weeks, and would build on previous units of study and contribute to subsequent units. The three units in a typical online course would be the “three-legged stool” supporting the overall purpose of the course.

And finally, let us not kid ourselves; the perfect online course is a pipe dream—according to the dictionary again, a pipe dream is the result one gets from smoking one of those funny pipes, so let us be more realistic (and legal). The key to an effective course is the direct, purposeful involvement of a knowledgeable teacher; one with content knowledge, teaching skills, and design experience.

## REFERENCE

- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M. & Zvacek, S. (2009). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.