

Flexible LEARNING

Saint Paul University

Course Design: Questions to Consider

Here are some questions to consider when designing a course. The questions stem from brainstorming sessions at CTE's Course Design Workshop as well as the literature on this topic. Exploring these questions should help you develop a detailed course plan.

The questions are organized into the five interrelated areas of the model depicted below: Goals, Context, Content, Teaching Methods, and Assessment. Feel free to enter the model wherever it makes sense to you. For each issue area, continually consider how your answers mesh with and/or help you to identify your overarching goals for the course. Also, remember to keep in mind the interrelationships amongst the five components. For example, if you chose to respond to the course evaluation by changing one component, you should double check your overall course design to ensure that your plans are still realistic and achievable.

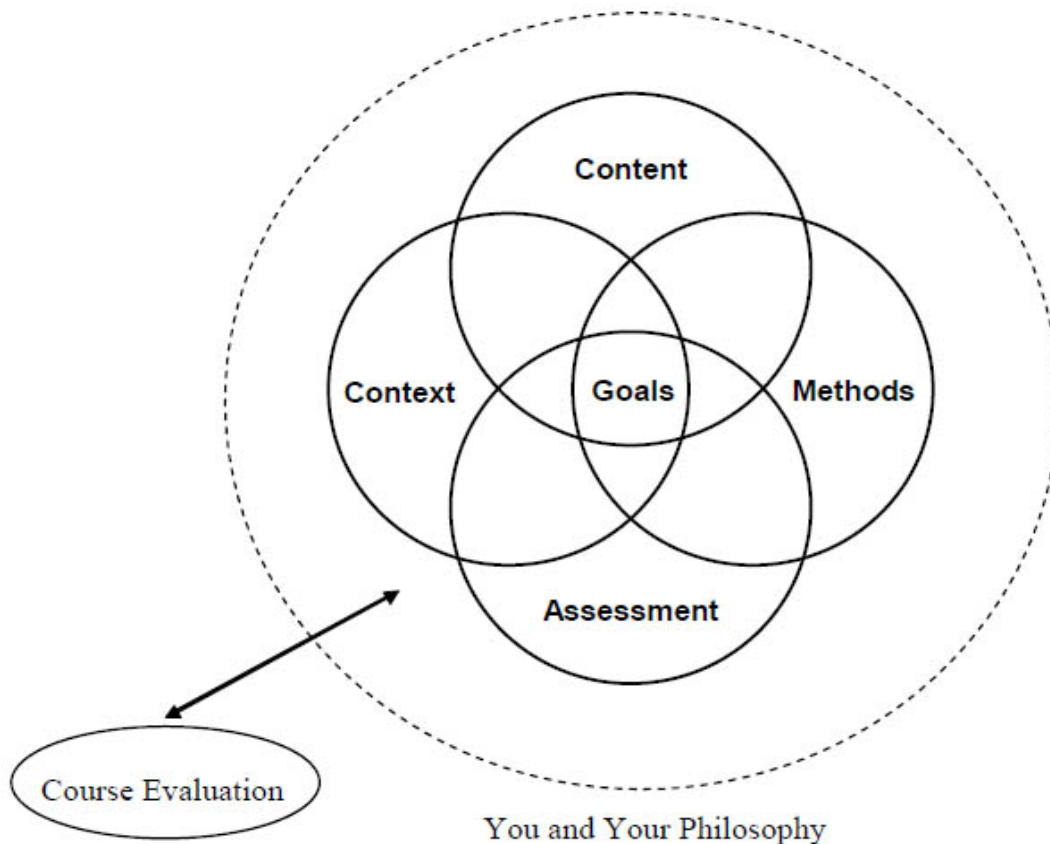


Figure 1: Model of the Components of Course Design

Goals

Identifying and articulating your goals is key to successful course planning. To identify your learning goals for a course, consider what you want your students to leave the course knowing, thinking, feeling, and/or able to do. List up to 5 main goals and be as specific as possible. The time you spend identifying and articulating your goals can pay off in many ways: less time spent selecting and/or designing assessment tools; and a well-designed course with integrated goals, content, teaching activities, and assessment. Best of all, if you are very clear about what you want to achieve, you are much more likely to attain it.

Are my goals reasonable given the contextual issues?

- How well do my content, methods, and assessment work to ensure that I meet my course goals? What could I change to improve the fit?
- How well do my content, methods, and assessment work to ensure that I meet my specific class goals? What could I change to improve the fit?
- What kind of classroom environment do I want to create? How well do my content, methods, and assessment work toward creating this environment? What could I change to improve the fit?
- What goals outside of course content do I have (i.e., writing skills, presentation skills)? Are my goals theory-based or skill-based?
- What are my students' goals? How can I incorporate them into the course content?
- What is the department's goal in offering this course? How can I incorporate their goal into what I am offering?
- What are my goals for my TA's? Do we know each other's goals?

Contextual Issues

There are many contextual issues that will affect how you shape your course. You should take time to think about who you will be teaching, how your course fits within their studies, and about the facilities and resources that you have access to as an instructor.

Students:

Who are my students (i.e., age range, program of study, year of study, experience)?

- What are their interests? What are their needs? What are their goals?
- What are their expectations of this course? Of me?
- How can I respect the diverse abilities and needs of my students (ie. language or cultural differences, or students who learn in different ways)?
- What teaching methods are most likely to engage my students?
- Do I need to assess their skills (i.e., a writing or technical diagnostic)? If so, how?
- What is my maximum class size?

Course within Program:

- Where does my course fit within the degree program (i.e., what pre-requisites or antirequisites exist, what year is the course taught, is it required or elective)?
- What course should my course prepare them for (if any)?
- Is the course practical or theoretical? Is my course skills-based, theory-based, or both?
- What extra resources are available for students (i.e., tutors, TA's, etc.)?

Course Description:

- What does the calendar description tell me about what I need to do in the course?
- If a description does not exist, how do I accurately describe my course?

Course Location:

- Where will the course take place and at what time? What facilities are available?
- Will the students have access to computers?
- Will I have access to A/V equipment?

Content Issues

Choosing what to cover in a course can be very intimidating – there are often so many different issues to choose from within each topic! Here are a few questions to think about when you are narrowing down your choices.

Textbook/Readings/Other Resources:

- What resources will I use and where do I find them (i.e., journals, libraries, student bibliographies, online searches, etc.)?
- What has been used in the past (i.e., textbooks, reading packages, notes packages, computer packages, etc.)?
- Are my students the same as those for whom the resources were prepared?
- Should I vary the types of resources for different learning styles (i.e., concrete vs. abstract learners, students learning in different languages, etc.)?
- Are there new resources I want to add? Would a course notes package be useful? Do I want to put any resources on reserve in the library? What is my deadline for selecting a text/compiling a book of readings?

Class by Class Plan:

- What will I teach? Are there department regulations regarding curriculum?
- Do the students have pre-requisite knowledge or do I need to refresh them?
- What will I teach each class? How much can I cover? How long are my classes?
- How much time should I spend on each topic area?
- What concepts are particularly important, particularly difficult or complex?

- Given that the average attention span is 15-20 minutes, how can I divide the lecture content for each class into manageable chunks (i.e., 15-20 minutes each)?
- How much reading will I assign outside of class?
- Given the guideline that students should spend approximately 10 hours/week on a half credit course, how well do my content coverage plans match this?

Teaching Methods Issues

Teaching methods include lecturing, facilitating discussions, inviting in guest lecturers, guiding group activities, and organizing many different types of active learning exercises both in and out of the classroom. Each method has its own advantages and disadvantages. You need to select methods that support your goals for the course.

- What teaching methods am I familiar with? Comfortable with?
- What methods fit with my own teaching philosophy?
- What methods are my students likely to be familiar with? Comfortable with?
- What other methods might I consider for this course? Would a blended learning approach be appropriate for this course? What methods would I like to learn more about?
- How do I believe that learning happens and what methods can I use that will support my beliefs?
- What methods will help me emphasize particularly important content and/or help students understand particularly difficult content?
- Would a learning technology help me to better convey certain concepts?
- Are the necessary resources (funding, technology, guest lecturers) available?
- What methods seem appropriate given the assessment methods?
- Given that the average attention span is 15-20 minutes, what methods can I use to help me maximize my effectiveness?
- Given my students, my context, my content, my time constraints, my goals, and myself, what methods are reasonable to use on a class-by-class basis? Remember, instructors do not have to use the same method(s) all of the time.
- What materials can I use to supplement my classes (i.e., videos, graphs, slides, etc.)?
- How can I evaluate my methods (i.e., student feedback, peer feedback)?

Assessment Issues

There are many different types of assessment designed for use in a university course (see the CTE Teaching Tip “[Types of Assignments and Tests](#)”) and the key is to choose an assessment that allows you to evaluate whether students have attained the goals you have set out.

- What assessment tools will I use (i.e., assignments, exams, projects, collaborative work, peer assessment)? Why?
- What am I trying to accomplish by using these tools? What do I want the students to get out of them? Are they consistent with my beliefs about student learning?
- How do my assessment plans fit with the difficult concepts in my course?
- How can I limit the possibility of plagiarism and cheating?
- What weights will I assign to my assessment tools? Why?

- If I want flexible grading criteria, how can I build this into the course?
- Are there expected grade distributions in my department? If so, how do I build that into my assessment tools?
- When does assessment fit into my course?
- How well do my assessment plans match the guideline that students should spend approximately 10 hours/week on a half credit course?
- Is the workload reasonable, well timed, and sustainable for my students and me?

Resources:

- CTE Teaching Tip: “[Course Design Heuristic](#)”
- CTE Teaching Tip: “[Course Content Selection and Organization](#)”
- CTE Teaching Tip: “[Creating Course Outlines](#)”
- CTE Teaching Tip: “[Course Design: Planning a Class](#)”