

Flexible LEARNING

Saint Paul University

Course Content Selection and Organization

You are working on a course design, and now it is time to decide on the content and how to organize it. As is often the case, we have far more to say about a topic than we can possibly cover in a term. One rule of thumb is to have students spending from 8-10 hours per week on your course, including in-class time. So how to decide? Following are some tips to help with these time-consuming yet crucial tasks.

Finding Content

- **Check in your department for past syllabi** if you are offering a pre-existing course. Also be sure to check your institution's course calendar and read the course description to ensure that your course meets that stated description.
- **Locate similar courses at other institutions** if your course is new (or you would like some new ideas). Talk to your colleagues in your discipline area or go to the Web to find courses. One of the best interdisciplinary on-line resources is [The World Lecture Hall](#).
- **Review textbooks in your discipline area.** This can be a very easy way to locate not only possible content to cover but also ready-made organizational structures. Publishers will send out texts for you to review. Keep your students in mind when choosing texts – not only their abilities and past experience with the topic areas but also their time limitations.
- **If texts are not available or not appropriate, you may need to create a reading package or course notes.** It will take more time to compile this type of resource, so set aside a few months for this activity. Also, be sure to factor in the time that may be needed to receive copyright clearance for copying and selling published materials. Your institution may have an agreement such as CanCopy which makes this less of an issue, but be sure to investigate what is possible in advance so you avoid basing part of your course on materials that you cannot easily secure for the students.

Selecting Content

Set some type of criteria to help select appropriate content for your course. Course design literature suggests the following criteria. Course content should:

- Fit with your course learning goals
- Have importance in the discipline
- Be based on or related to research
- Appeal to student interests

- Not overlap excessively with student past experience or knowledge
- Be multi-functional (help teach more than one concept, skill, or problem)
- Stimulate search for meaning
- Encourage further investigation
- Show interrelationships amongst concepts

Organizing Content

Many variations on concept mapping techniques exist to help you decide on an organizational structure for your content. The key idea is to name, in a word or two, the major topics or concepts for your course, then try to visually place them on the page. You can use a hierarchical approach or put the concept in the centre of the page and work out from there. Put the words into boxes or bubbles and connect them with lines or arrows to show how the material connects. You may also want to put verbs on the connectors to clarify the relationships between ideas. For an even more flexible approach, try using an index card for each concept, instead of boxes on one sheet of paper, and physically move them around until you see an organization that makes sense. For more linear thinkers, creating lists of headings and subheadings is equally effective.

Some suggestions for ordering the topics or concepts include:

- **Topic by topic** – There are no set relationships amongst the topics, so the ordering is not critical. This works well for courses that revolve around current issues, for example.
- **Chronological** – Moving from past to present is a very common and easy to implement organizational pattern.
- **Causal** – The course presents a number of events or issues that culminate in some final effect or solution.
- **Cumulative** – Each concept builds on the previous one(s).
- **Problem-centred** – Problems, questions, or cases represent the principal organizing features of the course.
- **Spiral** – Key topics or concepts are revisited throughout the course, with new information or insight developing each time.

Within each class, also consider how to organize your material so that students can both learn and retain it. Different philosophies of learning are represented. Some ideas to consider are:

- **Start with what students already know** and then move to the abstract model or theory.
- **Start with concrete examples**, such as cases, news items, or other real-world situations, then generate the abstract concepts.

- **Start with a solution, conclusion, or model** and work backwards to the question.
- **Give students time to reflect**, individually or through discussion, on what and how they are learning.
- **Build in practice time**, with feedback, either in class or on assignments so that students learn to work with the concepts and can receive assistance with problem areas.

Resources

- Geis, G.L. (1996). "Planning and Developing Effective Courses." In R.J. Menges and M. Weimer (eds.), *Teaching on Solid Ground*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass