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And Finally . . .

Toilet Paper to Toothbrushes Planning the Online Course

Michael Simonson

Last year, *Distance Learning* published a column that discussed a fascinating program on the History Channel. The topic of the 30-minute program was coal slurry ponds (Simonson, 2004). The theme of the column was that if it was possible to make an interesting program about a topic as seemingly boring as coal slurry ponds, then distance educators should be able to make their courses interesting, too.

A few days ago, the History Channel had another of its many provocative programs. This one discussed the history of toilet

paper! Without going into the details, it was an intriguing and interesting show—and the Sears Roebuck Catalog was the star.

The original coal slurry ponds column concentrated on the characteristics of high quality distance instruction—the instructional experiences, materials, and events that the distance teacher prepares and that students use, access, study, and learn from during a course.

Planning the online course is a challenge to many, especially those who do not have an instructional design background. Here is an easy and effective approach for course design.

First, a typical college level course should have 45-60 topics. These topics, sometimes called learning experiences, are the building blocks for the course. Topics can then be organized into modules, and modules are finally organized into units. This is called the U-M-T approach to course design (Simonson, 2006).

In other words, a unit of instruction has 3-4 modules, and each module of instruction has 3-4 topics. Topics are important ideas that students examine, or activities that students complete.

Organizing topics within a module can be simplified by following the ARCS Model (Keller, 1987). The ARCS model has been used for

decades and is an effective strategy for organizing portions of a course.

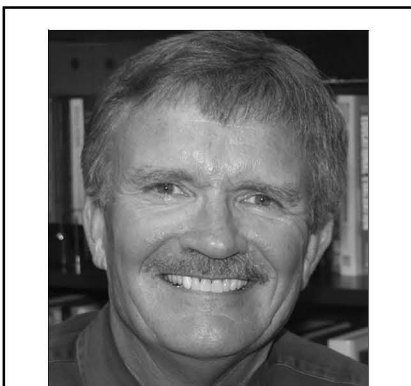
The first topic in the ARCS model is used to gain the *attention* of the learner and focus it on the critical issues to be studied. The second topic stresses *relevance*. Next, there is an activity to help build *confidence* in the student. Finally, there is *satisfaction* building. This is repeated for each module.

Keller's ARCS model, combined with the U-M-T approach to online course design, may not yield as intriguing a story as the history of toilet paper, but applying these approaches gives the distance teacher a head start at designing an effective online course.

And finally, the History Channel is advertising another "don't miss" program: the history of the toothbrush. Coal slurry ponds, toilet paper, and now toothbrushes. Wow!

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