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And Finally A Baker's Dozen Ideas for Creating an Online Course

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A Baker's Dozen

Ideas for Creating an Online Course

Michael Simonson

Most likely, everyone reading this column in *Distance Learning* journal has been asked how to quickly develop an online course, or tasked to actually redesign a course for online delivery. For those who have taught and learned in the world of distance education this process is easy, straightforward, even if time-consuming. One issue for new online designers or instructors is that much of the process for converting a traditional course to an online one is not

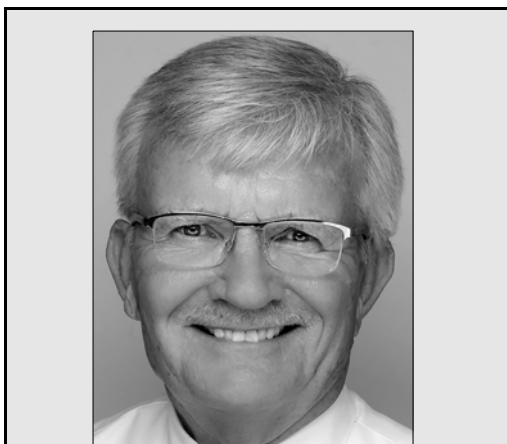
intuitive, and in some respects is counter-intuitive. For example, the idea of chunking instruction into single concept building blocks is an example of an organization strategy for online courses that may not be understood by the traditional teacher most comfortable giving a 50-minute lectures.

Certainly, this column cannot provide the comprehensive and in-depth direction used by practiced instructional designers when online courses are planned and developed. However, there are a dozen "best" ideas, easily understood, that can be considered by new online designers and instructors.

Here they are—the Baker's dozen tips for creating an online course

1. Finalize the syllabus: The syllabus is the key document for any course, but especially for an online course—make sure the syllabus is complete.
2. Organize the course: The unit-module-topic approach is best—do not organize content by time, such as weeks.
3. Organize a course into two or three main units, and each unit into three or four modules. Topics are key ideas in a module. (Most textbooks are very nicely organized and can provide the beginnings of structure to a course that uses the textbook.)

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4. Building Blocks—Modules are building blocks for a course. Typically, a module is a division of content that requires about 8 hours of work by a student (reading, watching, listening, writing, studying, or discussing, for example).
5. Welcomes—the course should have a welcome from the instructor, and each module should have an introductory welcome (written, audio, or video).
6. Schedule—a detailed semester/term schedule should be prepared and sent to students. Content—Add key topics to each module. Content can be textbook readings, single-concept videos, .pdf files, YouTubes, or other information that explains the module's content.
7. Discussions—develop some way for students to interact about key topics presented in a module. Course management systems have easy-to-use discussion areas, but if no system is available email can be used.
8. Monday Morning Memos—Each Monday send an email or other correspondence to students that summarizes the previous week and introduces the upcoming week.
9. Partners—assign students to partners, but not teams. A partner supports, but teams may not.
10. Artifacts—Artifacts of student learning are papers, comments made to discussion questions, quizzes, audio explanations, or video demonstrations, for example. Each module should have some artifact expected from students.
11. Synchronous (or not)—“Live” classes using videoconferencing or conference telephone calls are okay, especially at first, but scheduling is a critical problem. If synchronous sessions are used make recordings of sessions available online (YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook).
12. Location, Location, Location—Online class content and organizational structure is typically placed in a course management system, such as Canvas or Blackboard. If no course management system is available, organize some other way such as by using social media sites such as YouTube.
13. Be available—be regularly available either online, over the telephone, or via Zoom office hours.

As Michiavelli said, there is nothing more uncertain than “to take the lead in the introduction of new order of things.” For now, we can be certain, there is a new order, and it is online learning.

And finally, as William James said: “Great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed.”