

2018

And Finally ... Seven Critical Elements

Michael Simonson

Nova Southeastern University, simsmich@nova.edu

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NSUWorks Citation

Simonson, Michael, "And Finally ... Seven Critical Elements" (2018). *Faculty Articles*. 497.
https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fse_facarticles/497

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Seven Critical Elements

Michael Simonson

Robust research and decades of experience have yielded a wide variety of useful (if sometimes conflicting) guidelines for planning and implementing online instruction. However, seven elements are critical for an effective online course.

1. In any course, there must be something to learn, to accomplish, and to understand. So *content*—textbooks, documents, audios, videos, and instructor presentations, and so on—must be the primary element.



Michael Simonson, Editor, *Distance Learning*, and Program Professor, Programs in Instructional Technology and Distance Education, Fischler School of Education, Nova Southeastern University, 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314. Telephone: (954) 262-8563. E-mail: simsmich@nsu.nova.edu

2. The best instructional design divides content not by increments of time, but by ideas: single concepts that are the building blocks for instruction. These single concepts are then collected into units, modules, and topics/concepts. A typical three-semester credit college course may have 3 units, 10 modules, and 40 topics/concepts.
3. Regular and substantive *interaction* elevates distance education from programmed instruction or self-study. To Michael G. Moore's triumvirate—*instructor-student interaction, student-content interaction, and student-student interaction*—a fourth, *instructor-content interaction*, may be usefully added.
4. *Student time* requirements should be obvious. Students in a three-semester credit course should allocate between 120 and 140 hours reading, listening, viewing, interacting, writing, presenting and studying.
5. *Class size* of courses taught by one instructor should be approximately 20 students. Having significantly more or fewer threatens student-instructor and student-student interaction, compromising both teaching and learning.
6. Instruction should guide the student toward production of *artifacts of learning*, such as papers, presentations, and projects. Typically, there should be

... continues on page 67

three major projects and 6–10 minor assignments in a three-credit course. Tests and exams are best used as study projects rather than as artifacts of learning.

7. *Prepared instructors* are critical. Teachers and trainers must, of course, be content specialists. However, preparation in the process of teaching the online learner is necessary.

The list of research-based guidelines for effective instruction could and probably should be longer, but these seven are critical. Content, well organized by a design plan, and delivered by qualified instructors should be hallmarks of any distance education course.

And finally, as Alexander the Great is said to have claimed, “the person is the most important element.”