

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD COURSE DESIGN

By L. Dee Fink

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A "good course" is one which meets the following five criteria:

1. Challenges students to HIGHER LEVEL LEARNING.

All courses require some "lower level" learning, i.e., comprehending and remembering basic information and concepts. But many courses never get beyond this. Examples of "higher level learning" include problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, and creative thinking.

2. Uses ACTIVE FORMS OF LEARNING.

Some learning will be "passive", i.e., reading and listening. But "higher level learning," almost by definition, requires active learning. One learns to solve problems by solving problems; one learns to think critically by thinking critically; etc.

3. Gives FREQUENT and IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK to students on the quality of their learning.

Higher level learning and active learning require frequent and immediate feedback for students to know whether they are "doing it" correctly.

"Frequent" means weekly or daily; feedback consisting of "two mid-terms and a final" is not sufficient.

"Immediate" means during the same class if possible, or at the next class session.

4. Uses a STRUCTURED SEQUENCE OF DIFFERENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES.

Any course needs a variety of forms of learning (e.g., lectures, discussions, small groups, writing, etc.), both to support different kinds of learning goals and different learning styles. But these various learning activities also need to be structured in a sequence such that earlier classes lay the foundation for complex and higher level learning tasks in later classes.

5. Has a FAIR SYSTEM FOR ASSESSING AND GRADING STUDENTS.

Even when students feel they are learning something significant, they are unhappy if their grade does not reflect this. The grading system should be objective, reliable, based on learning, flexible, and communicated in writing.

Course Design Methods

A course is much more than a collection of topics slotted into a calendar. If our goal is student learning, the various parts that make up the course must work together to that end. Thus, in designing a course it is useful to “think backwards”: decide first what you would like the outcomes of your course to be, and then consider how you will go about getting there.

The course design process grows out of three basic questions:

- **Learning objectives** – What do I want students to take away from this course?
- **Assessment** – How would I assess them to find out if they know/can do those things?
- **Course activities** – What learning activities should they engage in to help them do well on those assessments?

Other important considerations:

- What prior knowledge will students bring to this course?
- What external factors influence how I can organize or teach the course?
- What feedback can I give students along the way to improve their understanding and performance?

An organizing principle: ***Make sure learning objectives, assessments, and learning activities are aligned.***

Here are a few suggestions to guide your thinking on the three basic elements listed above:

Learning objectives

- Content knowledge (What do I want students to know?)
- Skills (What do I want students to be able to do with what they know?)
- Values (What do I want students to care about?)

Keep in mind...

- It’s easy to get caught in the “coverage trap”: the amount of content knowledge that “must” be packed into a course becomes increasingly overwhelming, resulting in many topics being touched on but none really being learned. Instead, focus on what students truly need to know, and aim for in-depth learning.
- Students do not usually arrive with many of the learning skills we value, such as critical thinking, analysis, or problem-solving. But such skills are probably important in your discipline, and warrant being included as objectives of the course. (With appropriate learning activities geared to developing them.)
- Values are admittedly problematic to assess, but there are nevertheless reasons to articulate values among your course objectives. For instance, communicating the values associated with the discipline—why it is exciting, what role it plays in our culture, how it is useful to humanity—may lead to greater student motivation, retention in the major, or development of intellectual curiosity.

- To help in setting objectives, try thinking both short-term and long-term. What will students need from your course at the next level of their education? What would you like students to carry with them from your course 5 years down the road?

Assessments, for example:

- Exams
- Quizzes
- Writing assignments
- Presentations
- Projects

Keep in mind...

- Using a variety of different assessments gives a more complete picture of students' accomplishments, and accommodates students with different learning styles.
- Frequent feedback during the semester helps students understand what is expected of them.
- Not all assessments need to be graded.
- Rubrics are useful for communicating standards, and can be used by students in self-assessment.

Course activities, for example:

- Lecture
- Discussion
- Reading
- Research
- Problem-solving
- Writing
- Small group work
- Laboratory activities

Keep in mind...

- The teaching strategies and assignments you choose should support your learning objectives, and should also prepare students for assessments. For instance, if your objectives include students being able to apply theories, the learning activities should include opportunities to practice that skill.
- Varying course activities allows students to engage with the material in a variety of ways, deepening their understanding and improving long-term retention.
- Integrate in-class and out-of-class learning activities so that they build on one another.
- Consider the rhythms of the semester: e.g., How can you give opportunities for early success, combat mid-semester blahs, and provide appropriate culminating or synthesizing activities for the end of the term?

Resources

Books

L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003, Jossey-Bass).

Wilbert J. McKeachie, *Teaching Tips* (1999, Houghton Mifflin).

Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (1993, Jossey-Bass).

Angela P. McGlynn, *Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging your Students from the First Day* (2001, Atwood Publishing).

Web resources

University of Washington Center for Instructional Design and Research Course design tips
[http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/2\(1\)CourseDesign.html](http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/2(1)CourseDesign.html)

University of Oklahoma-sponsored Significant Learning web site, growing out of Dee Fink's book (see above), contains guidance on course design, and examples of courses that promote "significant learning." <http://www.ou.edu/idp/significant/index.htm>

Selections from *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis, UC Berkeley: Course design
<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/prepare.html>