General Guidance for Course Design

Amount of reading per week?
It is impossible to give a specific guideline here; rather, weigh these factors as you decide:

- Assign enough to help your learners successfully complete their assignments, but not more. (Don’t provide a “literature review” that comprehensively covers a broad swath of knowledge.)
- Is each of these readings of value? (Eliminate any that aren’t.)
- Does each reading contribute something unique? (Don’t have students read multiple articles that say the same thing; pick the best one.)
- Given two readings that essentially address the same thing, select the one that best combines readability, scholarship, and brevity.
- If the section you want learners to focus on is contained within a lengthy reading, consider assigning only the relevant section or advise them to skim the pages around that section but to concentrate on the vital bit.

Number of Discussion questions per week?
A very rough guideline would be between two and four questions per week. A clear caveat is that all Discussions must align with one or more of the weekly Learner Outcomes. In addition, consider these factors:

- One or two really challenging, “meaty” questions are far better than three or four obvious, shallow questions.
- Never (to the extent that “never” is appropriate in an academic environment) ask close-ended questions; that is, questions with a single right-or-wrong answer. Once the first right answer is posted, what can any other learner add?
- Building on the last point, ask questions that allow or require learners to bring their own personal experiences to bear. One of the basic precepts of adult learning is respect for learners’ knowledge and background. Leaning on this is also a good way to engage learners and to diminish the chances of plagiarizing.
- Questions that require some research and then analysis or summarization can be of high value.
- Questions that require critical thinking (see six definitions of critical thinking, below), taking a stand, and then a defense of one’s position can be of high value.

Critical Thinking
Based on a Teaching Tip from Dr. Ken Sagendorf in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) on October 1, 2012, which is in turn based on work by Dr. Valerie Lopes, a professor in the CETL of Seneca College in Canada, consider these six definitions of critical thinking:
1. Raising vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
2. Gathering, assessing, and effectively interpreting relevant information
3. Developing well-reasoned solutions, tested against relevant criteria and standards
4. Open-mindedly evaluating the assumptions, implications, and practical consequences of alternative systems of thought
5. Communicating effectively with others in solving complex problems

Number of required postings per Discussion?
For each Discussion question, the learner should make an initial posting and respond to at least two other learners’ postings in a “substantive” manner. (This requirement is based on long experience in CPS and is built into CPS online courses. See standard language in the Course Overview.)

The next section provides background and research supporting the guidance above.

Considering the Learner Viewpoint
A close reading of student evaluation comments from two full terms (Fall 2012, Spring 2013) produced a conviction that three themes are uppermost in our learners’ minds with respect to our online courses and their facilitation; in order of importance (most important first), they are:
1. I want a more personal relationship with my teacher; that is, I want to feel that that individual is personally directing the course, adding his or her own perspectives as appropriate, and providing me with customized feedback and encouragement.
2. I want a consistent experience, course to course; that is, I want to know that such elements as the syllabus, special resources, rubrics, and so on are located in consistent places where I can find them without hunting. And I don’t want to look in multiple places for the information I need to complete my work.
3. I don't want to do “busy work.”

2013 Revision of Regis University’s Definition of “Credit Hour”
The language below is taken from the 2013 approved policy on the definition of a credit hour at Regis University and informs many of the recommendations above under “General Guidance for Course Design.” Note highlights in particular.

All Regis University courses have designated student learning outcomes. To merit three credits, a course must have enough mentored learning activities that are directed toward achieving the learning outcomes. Three-credit courses require a minimum of 30 hours of mentored learning activities. All Regis courses require learners to complete individual studying, reading and writing in addition to mentored learning activities, but these activities are not counted toward credit hours.

“Mentored learning activities” is an explicitly broad concept, designed to encompass the variety of learning work faculty and students do inside and outside the classroom. The principle is simply that both faculty and students are actively engaged (not necessarily simultaneously) in the activity, and both parties are necessary to the activity’s completion. This concept extends beyond seat time in a classroom to encompass moderated blog discussions, ‘flipped classroom’ activities, faculty-student conferences on work, faculty feedback regarding ongoing work, etc. Mentored learning activities do not, however, include a student’s study or review time, or time students spend actually writing up papers and assignments as faculty members are not actively involved in this work. In addition, summative examination and measurement of course outcomes are not included.

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Research on Accelerated Learning for Adults

The material below is drawn from “The Dynamics of Accelerated Learning,” by Dr. Joan Marques, published in the journal Business Education & Accreditation in 2012 (full citation below). Each excerpt is an individual bullet, taken verbatim from the article. Note highlights in particular. The full list of references from the article is also provided, although not in APA style. Some of these resources may deserve more investigation when time permits.


- Dr. Joan Marques is director of the BBA Program and faculty of management at Woodbury University’s School of Business in Burbank, CA. She teaches courses in Ethical Leadership and Organizational Behavior. She holds a B.Sc. in Business Economics from MOC (Suriname), an MBA from Woodbury University; and a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University. She has been widely published in scholarly and popular journals and has authored/co-authored nine books. Her current study interests pertain to Buddhist psychology in the workplace, and awakened leadership.

- There is a general misnomer that accelerated courses are normal courses, squeezed in a compact format, which basically entails that there is no change in approach, just an increase of speed with the same structure. Authors such as Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003; Swenson, 2003; Daniel, 2000; Scott, 1993, and many others, explain that the most essential strategy in these courses is to shift from lecturing to facilitating.

- In these courses, there should be great interaction, significant self-learning, and increased responsibility. Swenson (2003) explains that learning is, in fact, individual and situational, meaning that each person learns in his or her own way, and in context with his or her environment and experiences.

- Wlodkowski and Kasworm (2003) concur that the lecture method of teaching does not work too well in intensive formats. Rather, they recommend that, given the general features and structure of these courses, instructors should adhere to an “active learning method of teaching” (p. 94). Collins (2005) maintains that assignments in accelerated courses need to require students to reflect, and that small group assignments should be included to prepare students to the work-based reality of dealing with different opinions and ideas.

- Knowles, Holton and Swanson’s (1998) stress the importance for educators of younger and older adults to seriously consider and apply the andragogical principles instead of the pedagogical ones. The difference between these two styles is simply facilitating versus lecturing.

- Knowles et. al. (1998) explain that andragogy considers six focus points: 1) The need to know, which should be clearly explained to adult learners; 2) The learner’s self-concept, this is often shaped by the way he or she is treated; 3) Encouraging students to integrate their work and life experiences in their learning; 4) Readiness to learn. Adult learners have made a conscious choice to be in school: they have a readiness to learn, which should be stimulated through interesting course strategies; 5) Orientation to learning. Most adults learn best when new information is presented in real-life context; and 6) Motivation is greater when students are given responsibility and ownership.

- Swenson (2003) recommends three checkpoints for educators when engaging in accelerated courses: 1) Create room for students to actively engage in their own learning; 2) Enable ways for the student to include reflections of life and work in the process, and 3) Ensure sufficient time for reflection.

The figure on the next page, “The Dynamics of Accelerated Learning,” is also taken from Marques, but the callout is ours. Note that the callout specifically addresses strategies for effective facilitation in an accelerated learning model.

Created September 18, 2013, by Ling Thompson and Chris Fleming
References


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The material below is drawn from “Higher Education: The Online Teaching and Learning Experience,” by Drs. Betty A. Barr and Sonya F. Miller (full citation below). Each excerpt is an individual bullet, taken verbatim from the article. Note highlights in particular. The full list of references from the article is also provided. Some of these resources may deserve more investigation when time permits.


- According to Rovai (2002), a strong feeling of community and camaraderie among students is crucial, not only to increase diligence in coursework, but also to encourage cooperation and commitment among students and student goals.

- The four interacting components of a sense of community within the online learning environment are connectedness, interdependency, socialization, and common goals (Rovai, 2002). When students can experience and embrace these components, their online experience may be more positive and lead to their success in the program. Experts suggest that instructors of online learning programs can mitigate the isolation felt by students and increase a sense of community by increasing dialogue, encouraging mutual awareness and interaction, establishing proper netiquette, providing small group collaborative experiences.
ensuring that group tasks are effective for all, embracing differentiated instruction practices, and managing community size as appropriate for student success (Rovai, 2002).

- **Best practices for Online Teaching**

Effective instruction in any learning environment includes the creation of a positive learning environment by cultivating self-efficacy, providing meaningful and active engagement, and inclusivity. Instructors of online learning programs must:

1. Establish a nurturing and supportive environment that reduces stress associated with academic difficulties and peer conflicts. Brain research has confirmed a link between cognitive and affective learning domains. When students feel threatened, stress hormones are released that interfere with the processing of information. Memory and learning are impaired (Jensen, 1998).

2. Ensure that communication between faculty and student must be constant and effective to include e-mail, web-based conferencing (webinar), courseroom postings, online discussions and phone contacts. FaceTime and Skype should be included for those students who need the personal approach.

3. Provide cooperative learning opportunities to facilitate critical thinking, brainstorming/problem solving, study groups and the use of dyads and peer assessment activities.

4. Provide experiential and active learning activities, utilizing Bloom’s Taxonomy to activate areas of the brain responsible for higher order thinking that address the construction of knowledge through analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These activities require students to make decisions, conduct experiments, and explore ways to solve real-world problems, case studies, role-playing, and scenarios to promote a higher level of achievement.

5. Give punctual feedback regarding students’ posts, within courseroom, through e-mail, courseroom assignment postings, or whatever is agreed upon by teacher and students. Structure opportunities for practice and establish peer tutoring when necessary.

6. Express high expectations of students by continually motivating, commending successes, and providing stimulating activities to support active learning.

7. Embrace cultural diversity and different learning styles by incorporating Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (1983) to address varied learning styles and engaging students’ academic strengths.

8. Provide differentiated instruction, by channeling in, personally, to all students’ needs, so that all learners can be reached and developed to their fullest potential.

9. Discuss and define course policies, teacher expectations and plagiarism early in course. Differentiate intentional and non-intentional plagiarism. Implement contractual documentations, if necessary.

10. Ensure accommodation of learners needing special assistance and assistive technologies.
References


