

Planning Your Course: A Decision Guide

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Whenever teachers plan or design their courses, they are in essence making a series of decisions aimed at creating a "design," which in this case consists of a plan of activities for what the teacher and students will do in a course. This guide identifies the several decisions involved in designing a course, places these decisions in an appropriate sequence, and suggests ways to make good decisions.

I have grouped these decisions into three primary sets that represent successive phases of the design process:

- I. Building Strong Primary Components of the Course
- II. Assembling the Components into a Dynamic, Coherent Whole
- III. Taking Care of Important Details

Phase I: Building Strong Primary Components

1. WHERE ARE YOU? Size Up the **situational factors**.

- **Specific Context:** number of students, kind of classroom, etc.
- **General Context:** place in the curriculum, professional preparation, etc.
- **Nature of the Subject:** convergent or divergent, stable or rapidly changing?
- **Student Characteristics:** what prior knowledge, attitudes, maturity, etc.
- **Teacher Characteristics:** knowledge of and feelings toward subject and students; teaching philosophy, experience, etc.
- **Special Pedagogical Challenge:** What is the special challenge to teaching this subject well?

2. WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO? What are your **learning goals** for the course?

Ideally, what would you like students to get out of this course? Some possibilities might include:

- **Foundational Knowledge:** understanding of key content: facts, principles, concepts, etc.
- **Application:** thinking skills, other skills [physical and intellectual], managing complex projects.
- **Integration:** connecting ideas, information, realms of life, etc.
- **Human Meaning:** understanding the personal and social implications of this subject.
- **Valuing:** making changes in one's feelings, interests, and/or values.
- **Learning How to Learn:** learning how to keep on learning after the course is over.

3. HOW WILL THE STUDENTS AND YOU KNOW IF THEY GET THERE? How will you know if the students have achieved these goals? What kinds of **feedback and assessment** would be appropriate?

- FOR EACH GENERAL GOAL specified above, what information can you gather that will tell you and each student how well he or she is achieving that goal? Or how well the whole class is learning?
- For which goals are paper/pencil evaluations sufficient? Which need reflective writing? Performance assessment?
- What kind of feedback and assessment can you provide that will go beyond just providing a basis for the grade and will actually enhance the learning process?
- The chart on p. 6 of this handout provides a way of developing appropriate kinds of feedback and assessment for different kinds of goals.

4. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GET THERE? Select or develop **learning activities** that reflect the principles of active learning.

- How will they acquire the content, i.e., the necessary **information and ideas**?
- What kinds of "doing" and/or "observing" **experiences** do they need? Can you create "rich learning experiences" that allow students to learn multiple things simultaneously?
- What kinds of **reflective dialogue** will help them make sense of the content and connect it to their own lives? Can you develop multiple forms of such dialogue, e.g., 1-minute papers, weekly journals, end-of-term learning portfolios?

5. WHO/WHAT CAN HELP? Find **resources**.

- What resources will the students need (and can you get) to support each of the learning activities listed in No. 4 above? These may be people, places, and/or things, including media.
- Again, the chart on p. 6 of this handout can help identify the resources needed for each learning goal.

Phase II: Assembling the Components into a Dynamic, Coherent Whole

The next three decisions, #6-8, create the basic plan of learning activities. Sometimes #6 (creating a course structure) will be done first, sometimes #7 (building an instructional strategy). I am presenting #6 first because it often—but not always—makes more sense to start with it.

6. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR TOPICS IN THIS COURSE? Create a thematic **structure** for the course.

- Identify the 3-7 major ideas, topics, or themes in the course.
- Place them in an appropriate sequence.
- If possible, these should build on one another and result in a culminating project that integrates the ideas, topics, or themes.

7. WHAT WILL THE STUDENTS NEED TO DO? Identify the specific **learning activities** necessary for the desired kinds of learning, and put them into an effective **instructional strategy**.

- An **instructional strategy** is a combination of specific learning activities in a particular sequence, usually laid out over a 1-3 week span of time.
- Each individual activity should build synergistically on students' previous learning activities and prepare them for future activities.
- Some **examples** of different instructional strategies include the following:

A. Continuous series of **lectures and reading assignments**, periodically interrupted by 1 or 2 mid-terms.

Sequence of student activities: "hear - read - test"

B. Sequence of **reading**, reflective **writing**, and whole class **discussion** (sequence repeated for each topic).

Sequence: "read - write - talk"
(A variation of this: "read - talk - write".)

C. Start with some field or lab work **observations**, followed by readings and whole class discussions.

Sequence: "do/look - read - talk"
(Write-ups of lab/field work is sometimes included.)

D. Present **lectures**, followed by field work or lab **observations**.

Sequence: "hear -see/do"

E. Have students do assigned **readings**, followed by **mini-tests** done individually and in small groups; then move on to group-based application **projects**.

Sequence: "read - individual & group tests - practice 'Doing' with feedback"

F. Work through a series of **developmental stages**: build some knowledge and/or skills (4-6 wks), work on small application projects (4-6 wks), and then on larger, more complex projects (4-6 wks).

Sequence: "know - 'know-how' - do - DO"

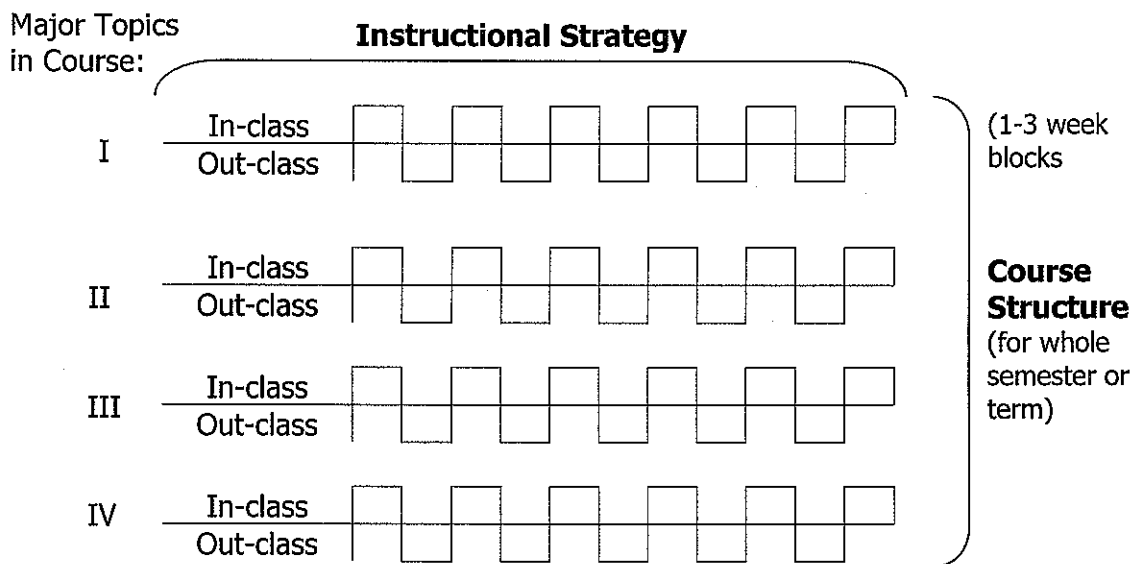
G. **Contract** for a grade: (for example: read text and pass exams = C, + do research paper = B, + do extended project = A)

- It can be useful to create a diagram that illustrates the desired sequence of learning activities. A diagram of one possible sequence might look like the following:

In-class activities	Lecture	Test on readings	In-class problem solving	Exam
Out-of-class activities	Reading homework	Problem solving homework	Review	

8. WHAT IS THE OVERALL SCHEME OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES? At this time you need to dynamically **integrate the course structure** and **the instructional strategy** for the whole course.

- It can be helpful to create a diagram of the course structure and the instructional strategy, and then find ways to enhance the way these two components work together. An example of such a diagram might look like the following:



- The diagram above is just an example of one possibility. This would obviously need to be adjusted to fit the circumstances of any given teaching situation.
- But the plan or design of all good courses provide for both **differentiation** and **integration of learning**.
 - The **differentiation** can be reflected in:
 - **Variety** in the type of learning activities from day-to-day, within each topical block of time.
 - **Development** in the complexity and challenge of the learning, from topical unit I through IV.
 - The **integration** should be reflected both **within** each topical unit of time and in the **progression through** each of the topical units.
- At the conclusion of this process, you should be ready to lay out a week-by-week **schedule of activities** for the whole term. As you do this, there is a helpful sequence of questions to ask:
 - What activities need to come first, i.e., how should the course begin?
 - What activities do you want to conclude with, i.e., how should the course end?
 - What should the sequence of activities be in the middle of the course?
- Developing the design or plan for the course is very important. It is also important, though, to remember that it is only a plan. Like all plans, it needs to be **flexible** and **subject to change** as it is implemented.

Note: The form on p. 7 of this handout can be useful in laying out the entire schedule or sequence of activities for the whole course. The form assumes three classes per week. This would of course need to be adjusted for courses with different time formats.

Phase III: Taking Care of Important Details

9. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GRADE? Develop your grading system.

- It should reflect the full range of learning goals and activities. (Remember: you do NOT have to grade everything.)
- The relative weight of each item on the course grade should reflect the relative importance of that activity.

10. WHAT COULD GO WRONG? "De-bugging" the design by analyzing and assessing this "first draft" of the course.

- **General criteria for a good course design:** Does the design meet the general criteria for good course design:
 - Is it based on an **in-depth analysis** of the situational factors?
 - Does it include **higher-level learning goals**?
 - Do the feedback and assessment activities reflect the principles of **educative assessment**?
 - Do the teaching and learning activities include **active learning**?
 - Are the four components above well **integrated**?
- **Possible "mechanical" problems:** One should also check for such things as...
 - Will the students have time to do their out-of-class assignments?
 - Will they be able to obtain the necessary resources? (e.g., How many students will be trying to obtain reading material in the library reserve at the same time?)

11. LET STUDENTS KNOW WHAT YOU ARE PLANNING. Now write the **syllabus**.

- This should include, among other things:
 - General management information--instructor, office hours, phone, etc.
 - Goals for the course
 - Structure and sequence of class activities, including due dates for major assignments/tests/projects
 - Text and other required reading material
 - Grading procedures
 - Course policies: attendance, work turned in late, make-up exams, etc.

12. HOW WILL YOU KNOW HOW THE COURSE IS GOING? HOW IT WENT?

- Plan an evaluation of the course itself and of your teaching performance.
- What kinds of mid-term and end-of-term feedback will you need?
- What specific questions do you have about:
 - the degree to which your goals for the course were achieved?
 - the effectiveness of particular learning activities?
 - your ability to interact effectively with students?
- What *sources* can give you the information you need to answer these questions?
 - video/audio-tape of the class sessions
 - student interviews and/or questionnaires
 - outside observers
 - test results

Worksheet for Designing a Course

Learning Goals for Course:	Procedures for Evaluating Student Learning:	Learning Activities:	Resources:
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

Sequence of Learning Activities

S e s s i o n s p e r W e e k

Week	Class	Between	Class	Between	Class	Between
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
Finals						