

Sketching Out Your Course: Strategies & Considerations

So, you are about to teach a new course. Where do you start first? Whether you are teaching on our UCI campus or developing an online course for our UCI Learn platform, the first step in the development process is to map out your course and develop a syllabus. The following information will help you think about the design and structure of your course before you put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and craft your syllabus.

Course Level Learning Objectives

If this is your first time teaching a new course, your program representative should have already provided you with a copy of the preliminary syllabus for your course or, at the very least, a detailed course description and course level learning objectives that have been approved by the appropriate departments on our main campus. Together, the course description and course level learning objectives describe the desired outcomes of the course, or essentially what we want students to be able to do and understand once they've completed the course. If you do not have the most updated version of the approved course description and/or approved course level learning objectives, please contact your program representative.

As an Extension instructor you have a great deal of flexibility in terms of how you want to set up your course and how you want to assess students' learning. That being said, it is extremely important that every aspect of your course aligns with the course description and course level learning objectives so that you can objectively measure whether or not students have achieved the desired outcomes of the course.

Lesson Level Learning Objectives

The first step in developing an effective course plan is to break up the course level learning objectives into lesson level learning objectives. Whereas course objectives describe what students can do after completing the course, lesson objectives describe what students can do after moving through the content, activities, and assessments associated with a single lesson. Like the course level learning objectives, lesson objectives should be action-oriented and measurable.

Let's consider an example of a course level learning objective and its subsequent weekly lesson objectives. In a "Managing Organizational Change" course, the following is listed as one of six course level objectives:

Course Level Learning Objectives:

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- **Identify** the types of change that can occur in an organization and the root causes of these organizational changes

The second lesson in this course deals specifically with this course level objective and is structured around the following lesson objectives:

Week #2 Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- **Define** adaptive and transformational change concepts
- **Describe** the most common pressures that propel organizations toward change
- **Contrast** force interactions that stabilize and change
- **Relate** different images of managing change to pressures for change

What do all of these lesson objectives have in common? Well, for a start, they all begin with a verb. But more importantly, they all consist of something someone can do. After finish the lesson, students will be able to define adaptive and transformational change concepts. They will be able to describe the most common pressures that propel organizations toward change. And so on. Not only are these great learning objectives but they are also directly measurable within the context of the course. You, the instructor, can create discussion prompts, homework assignments, exam questions, or group projects that require students to do any one of these things! By developing activities and assessments that measure lesson objectives and developing lesson objectives that speak directly to course objectives, you are able to objectively determine whether or not students actually achieve the desired outcomes of the course.

Using Bloom's Taxonomy

Many of you may be familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy, which is a classification of actionable objectives for educators to build learning opportunities, which encourage students to apply higher order thinking skills. Bloom's original taxonomy proposed six categories of thinking with related action verbs. The six categories from lower to higher order thinking were: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Forty years later Lorin Anderson, one of Bloom's former students, revised his learning taxonomy. She made two major changes. First she renamed the six categories from nouns to verbs and then made creating the highest order of learning mastery. Each level on the taxonomy comes with a set of verbs that describe the kinds of activities associated with that level of learning. These verbs are an excellent place to start as you begin brainstorming the types of activities students will need in order to achieve the desired outcomes of the course. For a full list of those action verbs, please refer to the Bloom's Taxonomy handout posted on the Instructor Resources site.

Lesson Components

After you have determined your lesson level learning objectives, you will need to build out a lesson that meets those objectives. In order to create meaningful and relevant lessons, it is incredibly important that each activity aligns with at least one of the lesson objectives. A fully built out lesson will often include the following five components:

- An **introduction** of the topic, in which you are setting expectations for the lesson, creating interest in the topic, and connecting the dots between this lesson and the previous lesson
- The presentation of **new information**, which can be done via an expository approach, an inquiry approach, or a combination of these approaches. An expository approach is one in which the instructor explicitly presents the concepts that a students should learn whereas an inquiry approach requires students to draw their own conclusions about the concepts based on readings, stories, etc.
- **Guided practice** offers students an opportunity to test their understanding of the concepts presented and allow you to determine where knowledge gaps may exist. This can be in the form of a quick quiz that tests students' ability to define important terms or a quick assignment that asks students to come up with their own example of a concept
- **Application** refers to opportunities for students to use the new information they have acquired in a meaningful real-life context, either as a group or individually. Students may be asked to create, problem solve, debate, reflect, etc. It is often useful to incorporate at least two types of activities that appeal to different learning styles.
- **Evaluation** should occur at all stages of the lesson and can be both informal and formal. Students' performance on assessments as well as their questions and feedback can help you determine whether or not the learning objectives for that lesson are being met and what can be improved upon as the course continues.

Pedagogical Considerations

Finally, a conversation about course planning is not complete without a conversation about how students learn. Although there are a number of learning theories out there, we will touch on three: behaviorism, cognitivism, and social construction of knowledge. Most online instructors will use teaching approaches that incorporate elements of each of these learning theories.

Behaviorism

The behaviorism model looks at students' responses to a stimulus, such as a multiple choice question. Rather than focusing on the mental processes that lead to answer, this approach measures learning by

student output. In other words, the student is taught that $2+2=4$. Learning has occurred when the student sees the stimulus of $2+2$ and is conditioned to respond with the number 4. In this way, a student's performance on assessments can demonstrate whether or not learning has occurred, as long as those assessments test measurable learning objectives.

Cognitivism

The cognitive approach moves beyond the idea of learning as a conditioned response and focuses instead on developing the mental thought processes needed to answer a question correctly. In our math example, it's not the student's response of 4 that equates to learning but rather his or her understanding of math concepts such as addition. The instructor's role is to meet students at their current level of understanding and scaffold new concepts in a way that allows students to build increasingly complex mental structures.

Social Constructivism

The final learning theory that we will review here is the social construction of knowledge, in which the individual creates meaning for himself or herself based on interactions with others. Unlike the behavioral and cognitive approaches, in which the learner plays a passive, receptive role, the social constructivist approach moves the responsibility of learning onto the learners. For this reason, students must be actively engaged in the learning process and have ample opportunities for inquiry, exploration, and interaction with the content and with fellow learners. The instructor is no longer looked at as the "sage on the stage" but rather as the "guide on the side", who curates content, provide examples to contextualize and illustrate important concepts, and generates opportunities for interaction and collaboration among students.

Next Steps

Now that you have had a chance to think about the design and structure of your course, from the desired outcomes of each week to the learning activities and discussions that will objectively measure those outcomes, it's time to build your official course syllabus. Be sure to utilize the additional resources on the Instructor Resources site to guide the creation of your syllabus and to ensure that you are meeting our official quality standards.