

ORGANIZING THE ONLINE COURSE

The 5 X 5 Rule

Many are struggling with a process for organizing newly designed courses that are to be delivered to distant learners. Originally, many merely took their existing, traditional courses and converted them. The rationale behind this process was that the course had been taught (often for many years) to students in a classroom and now the same content and assignments were to be offered in an online environment. This strategy was accepted and worked, primarily because it made sense.

As the field of distance education has matured, the old approach of converting existing courses to distance delivery does not always work, especially as totally new courses or significantly revised courses are designed. There are few easily applied benchmarks available to the designer of online courses.

Easy is a key word here. Online design models often are complex, convoluted and not easily applied, especially by a regular instructor. Looking back, one beauty of the Carnegie unit, long the standard for course design, was its simplicity. For every credit there had to be 750 minutes of face-to-face instruction, which easily translated into 15 50-minute class sessions, or one each week for a 15-week semester. Three-credit courses met three times each week for a 15-week semester. The designer just had to fill those 45 class sessions with content.

Well, the old (and certainly outdated) Carnegie model is not easily applied in an online environment. What does the designer do when looking for an easily understood “model” for course organization? First, it may not be a good idea to look for an easy model. Unfortunately, when the dean or department head says, “convert your courses”, the instructor may be in a difficult situation.

Here is one approach, called the **5 x 5 Rule**. It goes like this: for every college credit (sometimes called units for multi-credit courses) there should be five modules of content, and for each module there should be five topics. Thus, a one-credit college course would have 25 significant topics, each with its own behavioral objective. A three-credit course would have 15 modules and 75 topics. The instructor just has to identify the seventy-five topics and prepare learning experiences related to each.

Assessment is critical to the success of any course, especially an online one. A typical course with 3 units (credits) organized into 15 modules and 75 topics might have one or two objective tests to examine students’ understanding of basic concepts and definitions (open-book tests are often used for this kind of assessment). Next, practical projects could be used to determine learning for groups of modules. Four projects for a 3-credit course seems to be the norm. Finally, a portfolio of student



projects for the course might be prepared and submitted as the final assessment activity for the course. If possible, students should present or share their portfolio project to the entire class.

This is a simple, perhaps even simplistic, approach, but also one that has its roots in

instructional design theory and one that can be readily and quickly applied. The editors of the *Quarterly Review* encourage articles critiquing this approach or presenting other techniques for organizing courses for online delivery.

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