

PLANNING YOUR COURSE: A DECISION GUIDE

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 phases of the design process:

Initial Phase:	Building Strong Primary Components of the Course
Intermediate Phase:	Assembling the Components into a Dynamic, Coherent Whole
Final Phase:	Taking Care of Important Details

Initial Phase: Building Strong Primary Components

1. WHERE ARE YOU?

Size up the situational factors.

- *Specific context*: Number of students, kind of classroom, and so on.
- **General** *context*: Place in the curriculum, professional preparation, and so on.

- *Nature of the subject:* convergent or divergent, stable or rapidly changing?
- *Student characteristics:* Prior knowledge, attitudes, maturity, and so on.
- *Teacher characteristics:* Knowledge of and feelings toward subject and students; teaching philosophy, experience, and so on.
- *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:

- *Foundational knowledge:* Understanding of key content: facts, principles, concepts, and so on.
- *Application:* Thinking skills, other physical and intellectual skills, managing complex projects.
- *Integration:* Connecting ideas, information, realms of life, and so on.
- *Human dimension:* Knowing how to interact with oneself and with others.
- *Caring:* Making changes in one's feelings, interests, and 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?

See Exhibit A.1 at the end of this appendix for one way of developing appropriate kinds of feedback and assessment for different kinds of goals.

- For each general goal specified here, what information can you gather that will tell you and each student about individual progress toward that goal? About how well the whole class is learning?
- For which goals are paper-and-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?

4. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO GET THERE?

Select or develop learning activities that reflect the principles of active learning.

- How will students acquire the content, that is, the necessary information and ideas?
- What kinds of “doing” and “observing” experiences do the students need? Can you create rich learning experiences that allow students to pursue several learning goals 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— one-minute papers, weekly journals, end-of-term learning portfolios?

5. WHO AND WHAT CAN HELP?

Find resources.

See Exhibit A.1 at the end of this appendix, as it can help identify the resources needed for each learning goal.

- What resources will the students need (and can you get) to support each of the learning activities listed in Decision #4? These may be people, places, or things, including media.

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

The next three decisions create the basic plan of learning activities. Sometimes Decision #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 there.

6. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR TOPICS IN THIS COURSE?

Create a thematic structure for the course.

- Identify the four to seven major ideas, topics, or themes in the course.
- Place them in an appropriate sequence.
- If possible, make sure the ideas 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 one- to three-week span of time.
- Each individual activity should build synergistically on students' past learning activities and prepare them for future activities.
- Examples of instructional strategies:
 - Continuous series of lectures and reading assignments, interrupted once or twice by a midterm exam. *Sequence Of student activities:* hear—read—test.
 - Series of reading, reflective writing, and whole-class discussion assignments (sequence repeated for each topic). *Sequence of student activities:* read—write—talk. (A variation of this would be read—talk—write.)
 - Start with some field or lab work observations, followed by readings and whole-class discussions. *Sequence Of student activities:* do (or look)—read—talk. (Write-ups of lab or field work are sometimes included.)
 - Lectures followed by field work or lab observations. *Sequence Of student activities:* hear—see or do
 - Have students do assigned readings followed by mini-tests done individually and in small groups, then move on to group-based application projects. *Sequence Of student activities:* read—individual and group tests—practice “doing” with feedback.
 - Work through a series of developmental stages lasting four to six weeks apiece: build some knowledge and skills, work on small application projects, and then work on larger, more complex projects. *Sequence Of student activities:* know—build know-how—do—DO.
 - Contract for a grade—that is, set up an agreement along the lines of “read text and pass exams” to get a C, add a research paper to get a B, do extended project as well as a research paper to get an 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 one in Figure A.1.

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.

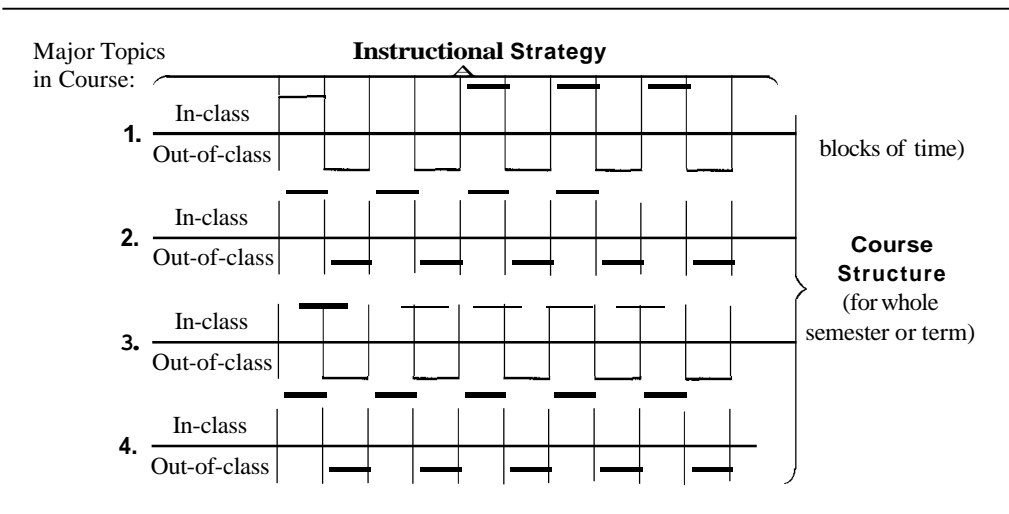
It can be helpful to create a diagram of the course structure and the instructional strategy, and then find ways to enhance the way these two components work together. An example of such a diagram might look like the one in Figure A.2. The diagram in the figure is just an example of one possibility. It would obviously need to be adjusted to fit the circumstances of any given teaching situation.

- Good course designs and plans provide for both *differentiation* and *integration* of learning.

FIGURE A.1. SAMPLE "CASTLE TOP" DIAGRAM.

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

FIGURE A.2. STRATEGY AND STRUCTURE LAYOUT.



The differentiation can be reflected in variety in the type of learning activities from day to day, within each topical block of time, and in development in the complexity and challenge of the learning, from topical unit 1 through 4.

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. Exhibit A.2 at the end of this handout can be useful in laying out the entire schedule or sequence of activities for the whole course. The form assumes three class sessions per week. You can adjust it as needed for courses with different time formats. As you do this, there is a helpful sequence of questions to ask:

What activities need to come first, that is, how should the course begin?

What activities do you want to conclude with, that is, 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.

Final Phase: 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, but make sure you do grade some instances of every kind of learning you want students to retain.)
- The relative weight of each item on the course grade should reflect the relative importance of that activity.

10. WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

Debug the design by analyzing and assessing this “first draft” of the course.

- General criteria for a 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 well integrated?

- Possible mechanical problems:

Will the students have time to do their out-of-class assignments?

Will they be able to obtain the necessary resources? (For instance, how many students will be trying to obtain reading material in the library reserve at the same time? Are there enough copies for all of them?)

11. LET STUDENTS KNOW WHAT YOU ARE PLANNING.

Now write the syllabus. Include at least the following points:

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

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 midterm 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?

Videotape or audiotape of the class sessions

Student interviews or questionnaires

Outside observers

Test results

EXHIBIT A.1. WORKSHEET FOR DESIGNING A COURSE.

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

EXHIBIT A.2. SEQUENCE OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES.

Week	<i>Sessions per Week</i>					
	Class Session	Between Classes	Class Session	Between Classes	Class Session	Between Classes
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
Finals						