COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING

Issues in E-Learning & Distance Education Video Series
www.col.org/videos

What is Instructional Design?

Summary

Dr. Mark Bullen demystifies instructional design by providing a simple and easy to understand explanation of the concept. His key point is that instructional design is all about crafting learning objectives at a level appropriate for the knowledge and skills that are being developed, then designing learning activities and assembling resources that help learners achieve those objectives.

Instructional design is essential to the development of quality open and distance learning materials. But what exactly is instructional design?

Well, it has a long history dating back to the second world war and the development of training materials for American military personnel.

Academics have spent careers theorizing about instructional design and developing a variety of different instructional design models. All of this has given instructional design a certain mystique that obscures the fact that at its core, it really is largely common sense. Or at least common sense for educators.

Instructional design is all about alignment: aligning learning objectives to learning activities and assessment.

It means carefully crafting learning objectives at a level appropriate for the knowledge and skills that are being developed,

then designing learning activities that help learners to develop their understanding of the content and

to develop the skills that are being taught.

Teaching is more than just transmitting content and learning is more than just memorizing facts. Learning is about developing one's own understanding of content and integrating it into ones own mental framework. Teaching, then, is about designing activities that will enable this. All of this activity is what I call instructional design.

All too often when teachers or instructors sit down to plan a course they think solely in terms of content or what they want to teach students. Instructional design forces us to move away from this content-centred perspective to a learning-centred perspective. So instead of starting with the

question, "what am I going to teach?" we start with, "what do I want my students to learn? Or what do I want my students to be able to do at the end of this course".

Approaching teaching from this perspective helps ensure that everything we do as a teacher is in support of some learning outcome or objective. If we have a clear idea of what we want students to be able to do at the end of a course, it guides our selection of content and the kinds of learning activities that we develop. This is what instructional design is all about.

The key to good instructional design is formulating good learning outcomes. Again, there has been a lot written on this topic and often people are overwhelmed with learning objectives to point of paralysis. It really shouldn't be that way. Writing a good learning objective should be fairly straightforward. It's all about being clear, concise and specific and making sure you have stated the outcome in terms of what the learner will be able to do. It's also important to cover an appropriate range of levels of learning so that you aren't only dealing with basic knowledge acquisition but are covering higher levels of learning, when appropriate.

If the learning objectives are well developed then you will have a much clearer idea of what content needs to be covered and you should be able to think of the kinds of activities that you want the learners to engage in to help them achieve the learning outcomes.

And of course, doing all of this will help you ensure that your assessment activity is truly measuring the student's achievement of the learning outcomes.

Using instructional design also helps us make appropriate media and technology choices. It's tempting to use a variety of different technologies just to spice things up but if the technology isn't chosen carefully it can distract, confuse and frustrate learners. By aligning your technology selection to your learning activities and learning objectives you help avoid that, as the rationale for using a particular technology will be clear to the learner.

This is obviously a simplified explanation of instructional design. The mechanics can get quite complex and there are a variety of different methods and tools but underlying all of them is the fundamental process:

- first specifying clear learning objectives
- then selecting content,
- developing learning activities
- and finally, designing assessment activities that are all aligned and all contribute to the achievement of those learning objectives.

It's important to remember too that this isn't a lock-step linear process. Often we will have to cycle back from developing content or activities to revise the objectives. Or we may find that once we start developing the assessment we realize we have left something out and need to go back and revise some of the content, which in turn lead us back to revising the objectives. Instructional design is an iterative process

At it's core, though, is about moving from a teaching and a content perspective to a learning and a learner perspective.