

# Designing Forward

## Instructional Design Considerations for Online Learning in the COVID-19 Context

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Pivot—it's a word that many educators, as well as those of us in the field of instructional design and technology, have come to view in less-than-positive terms over the course of the past several months. The term has been used repeatedly in reference to the transition of instruction to virtual delivery in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Daniel, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gardner, 2020; Ferdig et al., 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Lasse, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2020; Teräs et al., 2020). Given that *pivot* typically refers to a quick turn or rotation (MacMillan Dictionary, n.d.), anyone who has planned online instruction realizes this word does not accurately reflect the extensive amount of time and effort required for creating effective online learning experiences (Hodges et al., 2020).

The ubiquitous, global need to cease in-person educational experiences and shift to virtual delivery presented a unique opportunity to reflect on what are the important guiding principles for designing learning solutions during these challenging times. Before describing these four principles, it is important to be clear about the fact that the ideas shared as follows are nothing new. As a matter of fact, some of these ideas have been around for a very long time. Since the beginning of the pandemic, a deluge of information has emerged related to online course transition strategies, in an effort to support the immediate professional development needs of educators at every level and in every corner of the earth. In considering what guidance to share with regard to instructional design for online learning during these challenging times, some foundational ideas come to mind, ones that are underscored by research and best practices in the field.

### Simplicity

The instructional design process provides a reliable foundation on which to build effective online learning experiences. At its core, the systematic nature of ID can guide our thinking about what learners need to learn, and how to successfully elicit these targeted outcomes within the affordances and constraints of the given learning environment. At a time of great uncertainty and constantly changing conditions, relying on straightforward, proven design approaches such as the ADDIE framework to guide the creation of learning solutions seems like an effective option (Hodges et al., in press). This is not to suggest that such a process is simple, but rather to propose relying on what is a known and trustworthy framework.

The creative aspect of instructional design may seem the most daunting at a time of so much change. Again, earlier work related to distance and online learning offers an abundance of ideas for how to plan engaging and effective learning experiences through a variety of delivery modes. For example, one of the most challenging aspects of ID during these ever-changing times is likely the selection of instructional strategies, given varying delivery modes. The IDT knowledge base provides excellent guidance for creative teaching method choices, aligned with the features of various learning environments. While technologies have evolved to bring interactive video conferencing to individual students, the affordances of desktop conferencing tools such as Zoom have much in common in terms of design possibilities. For example, Cyr and Conway (1997) offer over 100 activities that can be employed to actively engage learners in synchronous learning sessions. While these activities were designed for use in classroom-based conferencing in an earlier generation of distance education, they still present viable and motivating ways to facilitate learning. Shank (2011) presents a wide array of creative and practical instructional strategies for online learning in both synchronous and asynchronous contexts. For assessment ideas, Palloff and Pratt's (2008) exploration of ways to measure learning in online settings remains a standard guide for planning assessments for any type of outcome. These are but a few of the trusted resources that can provide helpful insights and ideas to incorporate into online course design efforts.

## Flexibility

Has there ever been a greater need for flexible learning options? The notion of flexible approaches to teaching and learning is not new (Hill, 2006). Formal models of flexible delivery have been with us since the beginning of correspondence study, representing the first instance of distance education, or home study (Holden & Westfall, 2010), providing learning opportunities for those who could not access traditional, location-based education. The idea of mixing modes of instructional delivery also has a long-standing history in our field. Keller's Personalized System of Instruction (Keller, 1968) was one of the earliest forms of blended learning, including a mixture of independent learning with guided in-person instruction. This multi-modal design strategy was founded on consideration for which learning events could effectively be undertaken independently and which would benefit from social interaction, excellent guidance for those who need to plan for online and classroom-based experiences.

More recent forms of mixed-mode instruction have also originated from systematic design practices and been informed by research over the years. Best practices in hybrid and blended learning (Holden & Westfall, 2010; Stein & Graham, 2020), flipped learning (Altmeueller & Lindquist, 2017) and hybrid-flexible, or the HyFlex model (Beatty, 2019) provide relevant and timely insights for the creation of learning experiences that are distributed across time and place. Going back to the notion of a standard ID approach, the analysis phase of design can be used to consider the many ways in which flexible learning approaches can help meet the needs of learners based on their current context (Hill, 2006; Willems, 2011).

## Accessibility

The imperative to make learning solutions accessible to all is a long-standing requirement in the design and development of educational programs in general, with specific considerations needed in the realm of online learning. Perhaps a distinction between access and accessibility is important here—access related to the ability to obtain necessary resources or entry into the learning program and accessibility regarding the design of the instructional resources or activities so that all learners may benefit from them. Earlier this summer, Johnson et al. (2020) investigated U.S. faculty and administrator experiences and approaches in response to the pandemic and found that both access and accessibility posed challenges in the transition to emergency remote teaching. Returning to the notion of systematic design, consideration of the learning contexts, as well as the teaching context, can help guide decision-making related to the planning of materials and instructional strategies that are accessible in both aspects. Recent guidance on universal design for learning in online learning contexts can serve to address these related needs (Barrett et al., 2020; CAST, 2018).

# Empathy

During this incredibly difficult time for those in education and learning professions, the need for empathy is essential, for our learners as well for ourselves. For those with little or no experience in the realm of online teaching and learning, the rapid shift to a completely different approach has left many with a multitude of negative emotions—anxiety, frustration, helplessness, and anger, to name a few. And then there are those who support these educators, perhaps feeling the same emotions as well. How can we be intentional about our efforts to support learners, our teaching colleagues, and ourselves?

While empathy is not typically featured in a specific sense in the systematic design of instruction, consideration for the learners and the learning context can form the basis for empathetic design. Lessons learned from the research conducted by Matthews et al. (2017) describe concrete ideas, as well as identify realistic tensions, involved in the deliberate inclusion of empathy in the design of distance and online learning. Possible strategies to support the well-being of learners during these challenging times include setting flexible expectations, creating a sense of belonging, incorporating routines, prioritizing design decisions with an eye toward streamlining requirements, and humanizing the learning experience (Hodges et al., in press).

In addition to attending to the care of our students through strategic planning and thoughtful design decisions, it is also important to care for ourselves. Instructional design efforts in the COVID-19 era are undoubtedly fraught with challenges—logistical, pedagogical, emotional, and more. When considering how to go about the planning, design, development, and implementation of educational experiences, we must think also of what is feasible for us as practitioners and learning professionals. Factors that should come into play involve identifying what is realistic for us in the design process in terms of time, access to necessary resources, and comfort level with potential technological systems or tools, or pedagogical approaches. Whatever can be done to ease the burden of creating learning solutions during this problematic time should be given serious consideration.

# Final Thoughts

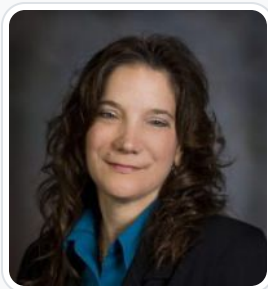
Though the aforementioned design “beacons” are likely not new ideas for most in the instructional design profession, it is hoped that they can be a helpful reminder of key factors to contemplate in future ID efforts during the COVID-19 era. May it also serve to applaud the efforts of those on the front lines of education everywhere, striving to effectively meet the needs of learners while meeting the demands of changing professional practice. This difficult work will inform the creation of learning experiences in ways that we cannot possibly imagine.

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