Chapter 2
Differentiating Instruction: Four Types of Courses

Technology and the distance education models have no doubt changed the way that many educators view teaching and learning over the past several years. The use of online platforms or Learning Management Systems (LMS) (i.e., Blackboard, Moodle, Angel, E-College or any number of organizationally designed platforms) has brought an evolving dimension to the educational process. With the growth of online education, it is becoming clearer that modifications can enhance traditional design approaches in meeting the demands and opportunities of online learning environments (Irlbecka, Kaysa, Jones, & Sims, 2006).

As the technology grows, so do the opportunities that allow instructors to see new pedagogies and new ways to teach knowledge and skills in an online course. It is the successful educator who sees the growth potential as a great opportunity to expand teaching and learning capabilities and integrate new hi-tech pedagogies. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on four distinct categories of online courses, and the design and teaching considerations for each category.

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The concept of distance education courses has come a long way from the initial correspondence courses consisting of readings and assignments sent through the postal system. Now we have anytime anywhere, 24/7 learning with Internet connection. This immediate interactive digital arena affords a unique learning environment that many believe is a rich resource for deep learning. With these new technology changes comes the responsibility of the educator to explore new teaching opportunities and understand the possibilities that can exist, being open to the changing and growing dynamics. What was once unthinkable in the online environment, such as teaching skills, instructor lectures and real time interaction is now part of everyday online teaching. Where we could only post text, we can now function with virtual chat rooms (synchronous communications) and interactive discussion boards (asynchronous), lessons through narrated PPT lectures, videos and audio demonstrations.

The term differentiated instruction takes on many meanings and can be viewed through a variety of lenses. The concept of differentiating our instruction in the online teaching and learn-
Differentiating Instruction

ing environment means maximizing the learning opportunity for all students across a spectrum of curriculum and courses. This differentiated lens helps online educators to reinvent their online instructional strategies and pedagogies to provide the best possible teaching and learning opportunities. “Differentiation is not a recipe for teaching nor is it an instructional strategy” (Tomlinson, 2000b, p. 6). It is a common sense approach to address the needs of a wide variety of learners and learning situations promoting equity and excellence, focusing on best practices (Tomlinson, 2000a). The concept of differentiation is not a new concept. “The one-room schoolhouse is a prime example of teachers differentiating to meet the needs of students” (Anderson, 2007).

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy based on the premise that instructors should adapt their instruction to student’s differences and different instructional situations. Educators and trainers must view differentiation as a philosophy of teaching and learning that becomes tantamount as Tomlinson states to the uniqueness and possibilities of learners (2004).

Differentiating instruction is multidimensional and does not follow a step by step progression (Smith, 2005), especially in the online environment nor is it something that an instructional designer, teacher or trainer does when he or she has the time. It has to become the way we think about teaching and learning (Tomlinson, 2004). Differentiated Instruction represents a proactive approach to improving learning and learning opportunities for students (Pettig, 2000).

To attain better results and reduce variation in student achievement, Bloom (1956) reasoned that there is a need to increase variation in teaching. He proposed that instruction must be diversified and differentiated in order to address individual learning needs so all students learn well. All online courses should not be designed or taught with the same model. We need to look at each online course as a unique opportunity. Seeing that there are different types of courses offered in the online arena, can assist instructors and designers to differentiate their planning and execution of distance education pedagogies to maximize student achievement of course outcomes.

In their research, Fuller and Kuhne, (2008) identified four different types of courses that are taught in an online Learning platform. They are: foundational courses, skills based courses, analysis/synthesis courses and hybrid courses. Each of these four has unique properties that are approached differently in the preactive (or planning) phases of teaching and the active (or teaching) phases of the course. Each of these types of courses are approached uniquely and possess goals and objectives that require different facilitation techniques.

One of the greatest challenges in the online arena for many instructors is how best to design and facilitate interaction. This interaction focuses on the areas of student interaction with the content, the instructor, other students (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Moore, 1989) and the technology (Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994). Dewey’s (1938) transactional conception of activity-based teaching and learning established an educational encounter as a “transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (p. 43). The role of the online teacher is to decide how best to design and facilitate this learning environment with the most appropriate and interactive student activities to maximize the learning opportunity. Each of the four courses is unique and the types of facilitated interactions are designed to achieve different learning outcomes. Using the four course lens provides an opportunity to understand our courses in a unique way allowing us to assist students to master the objectives and maximize online instructional strategies.
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