Chapter 7
Preactive Stage: Needs Assessment

Chapter 2 defined the four course types as: foundational courses, skills based courses, analysis/synthesis courses and hybrid courses and the focus of each. This chapter will look at the phases that the online instructors and designers engage to plan their online courses in the preactive (or the planning) phase. Defined as work conducted prior to the course beginning, the preactive phase includes the needs assessment, establishing objectives within the three learning domains of cognitive, psychomotor and affective, preparation to teach, lesson planning which includes a design for interaction and dialogue, formative and summative evaluation, LMS (Learning Management System) preparation, and technological requirements. Preactive stages of teaching include first understanding the type of online course and the implications and ramifications to all concerned in the development and delivery of the course. The preactive program is crucial and a little challenging, as the online instructional designer in many cases must plan to meet learner needs without knowing who they are and what their individual needs may be.

As stated the course developer first needs to define the type of course: foundational courses, skills based courses, analysis/synthesis courses or hybrid course that he/she is going to teach online. This will help guide the designer to plan the lessons, activities and the interactions for the learners. After defining the category of course, you can now begin to understand the needs of the course and the needs of the students who are going to be taking the online lessons.

Each of the four course categories has specific goals and objectives that need to be attained by instructors and students. By understanding these course goals and needs, we can more appropriately design pedagogies that can assist in meeting student, instructor and institutional needs.

The foundational course targets the base or core knowledge of a professional area that will be built upon and utilized throughout a discipline as well as the fundamental information found in some college and university liberal arts courses. The goals are to provide the students with a solid foundation of knowledge. The skills based course focuses on the development of the necessary mental and/or physical skills needed in the
professional area. The *Analysis/Synthesis* course teaches students to analyze a situation and engage in critical thinking or problem solving that is vital to higher order thinking and the ability to function in a profession. The *hybrid course* incorporates components from each of the other three course types that are necessary in preparing students to engage in all aspects of a profession.

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT PHASES IN THE FOUR COURSES CATEGORIES**

As teachers and instructional designers, one cannot let the media or the platform that you are using to establish what and how we teach. You need to take control of your online teaching to assure that it is needs-driven and not platform-driven. Many people who engage in online teaching believe that it is the online format that drives what and how things are taught and that the perceived limitations guide the pedagogies employed. It is through the use of needs assessment of all stakeholders involved in the educational process that you understand what and how things should be designed.

**PURPOSES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Conducting a need assessment is the initial step in most models of instructional design and a very important step (Rothwell, 2004, p. 57) as it establishes the direction for the preactive and active online teaching phases. A significant competency for the instructional designer is to “conduct a needs assessment” (Richey, Fields, and Foxon, 2001, p. 48-49) although most educational courses do not conduct a needs assessment as they conform to a set of outside standards that may be grounded in a needs assessment. The objectives of a needs assessment are twofold: 1) to identify needs of the learners not being met by the curriculum and 2) to form a basis for revising the curriculum in such a way as to fulfill as many unmet needs as possible (Olivia, 2005). The purpose of a needs assessment is to understand the needs of everyone involved or the stakeholders in the online educational process. A stakeholder is any one or group that has a vested interest in the education or training. These stakeholders may be the learner, the administrators at an educational institution, the instructor and the employers in a profession. Each of these entities have requirements that need to be addressed in the preactive and active teaching phases to assure that the program is viable for all concerned. The instructional designer also needs to consider the situational context of the education and training.

**STRATEGIES FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

The online instructional designer in the preactive phase must ask several questions regarding each of the stakeholders to better understand his audience. Learner needs must be addressed through several lenses. What are the learner needs? What is the background of the learners? Where and how will the learner use the knowledge, skill and the analysis/synthesis problem solving that is to be learned in the course? What is the student’s access to technology (i.e., software, bandwidth Internet access)? What are the technological capabilities of the learners in regard to their ability to use and understanding technology for learning? What is the learner’s access to the necessary learning platforms? Having a deeper understanding of the answers to these questions will better prepare the developer to design online learning lessons that are relevant in content and appropriate methodologies. Knowing your audience and the learners becomes part of the differentiated instruction planning process. By understanding the learners and their needs, you can provide a variety of learning opportunities that are specifically targeted at the learners.
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