



THE ACCIDENTAL EDUCATOR: EXAMINING YOUR COURSE DESIGN

Let's start with a basic definition of learning: the goal of a learning experience is to CHANGE a learner's knowledge, skills and/or dispositions. This change may expand on a foundation of already acquired understanding and abilities. However, it may also be completely new and, in some cases, require learners to confront misunderstandings in order to grapple with the new information.

Developing a curriculum for adults requires instructional designers to consider a variety of factors.

First, adult learners have their own needs and attitudes related to learning that should be considered.

Adult learners are:

- Self-directed
- Concerned with practicality and connections to work
- Problem solvers
- Highly motivated to learn but...
- Highly resistant to change

By focusing on making connections between the content and their work, you can help support the motivation adults feel to excel while cushioning their concerns about change.

Keeping these characteristics in mind can help make your learning experiences more effective, leading to the change you desire.



CREATING INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

Equity and inclusivity are essential parts of curriculum design and must be baked in from the beginning. This framework offers the scaffolding for building out a culturally relevant educational session, for example, but it is the instructional designer's role to fill in the framework with content that will be relatable.

The course design should apply accessibility principles, such as providing alt text for images and captions for videos. Resources and activities should be created so that all participants have a chance to see themselves in the learning. Also, consider offering learning resources in different formats, including text, audio, and video.

One way to make learning experiences more equitable is to offer them in different formats including face-to-face, hybrid, and online. Designing for different formats will take more time but by allowing learners to choose, you can connect with both their learning preferences and their life circumstances.

Finally, and possibly, most importantly, your learners need to be actively engaged in the learning. They can only absorb so much information at any one time before they need chances to review, reflect and put the new information into practice. Curricula that solely or even mostly depends on the instructor or facilitator "depositing" information into the learner's by way of lecture (yes, that includes panels too) is what Paulo Freire called the banking model of education. This is both a description and a critique of traditional education models where the teacher holds all of the information and the students' role is to memorize and repeat what they are taught. Anti-oppressive curriculum design is rooted in the lived experiences of learners.



ACTIVATE, ABSORB, DO, CONNECT:

William Horton created a framework for e-learning that can easily be applied to face-to-face learning as well. While you don't have to use Horton's framework overtly, his design structure provides a way to make sure you are giving your learners the opportunities they need to change their knowledge, skills and dispositions. Horton describes three parts: Absorb, Do, Connect. We here at FUTURES have added a fourth element that comes before diving into formal learning: Activate.

Activating refers to drawing on those personal and professional experiences that adult learners bring to the curriculum. Start with a simple question: what do you know about this topic? As learners respond, you can begin to gauge their current knowledge and also look for any misunderstandings that need to be addressed explicitly. Remember, learning means change and knowing what needs to be changed can help you as you move into the curriculum. As you design your curriculum, you can be proactive in this area by brainstorming the incorrect information and misperceptions that you know already exist and making sure to address them. Look for others in the activation process. In addition, be sure to highlight those items that are correct and important.

You might also ask the learners what they want to know. Using a pre-workshop survey can help you gauge what they know and want or need to know, as well as gather general information that will be helpful as you plan. Capturing these questions can also help you identify misunderstandings and guide you as you help your learners connect and apply their learning.

From there, you can begin the process of "teaching." The quotes are there because this is how we often think of curriculum: we are teaching others. And, unfortunately, that often leads us to spend a lot of time talking or showing videos of others talking, probably with bullet points and gobs and gobs of information. This is the Absorb phase: usually done in a direct instruction style, and your eyes are glazing over, right? Someone droning on, maybe reading slides to you, asking rhetorical questions. How long can you last before you open another browser window or start jotting down your grocery list? For most people, it isn't very long.



In order to combat learner fatigue, chunk your content into sections of 15 - 20 minutes, being sure to provide formal opportunities for participants to react during that time. (NOTE: formal means that you don't simply invite them to use the chat in Zoom. Instead, you stop and direct them to use the chat to ask and/or answer a question. Same for in-person: don't just ask them to raise their hands if they have questions or comments, take time to invite them to participate and engage with your content. This could be think-pair-share, it could be a poll, it could be a 3x5 card with questions...it doesn't have to be long or involved but it should make sure to underline the main points. While you may use similar activities later, these activities are included here as part of the Absorb section because interacting with the content is part of absorbing.

Horton's next section is "Do" and this is just what it sounds like. Remember, your adult learners want to see practical uses for the learning so making connections to their work and their lives is essential.

Horton's final section is "Connect" and this can be the most challenging as you want to provide authentic experiences where they can use the content.

NOTE: [Here are ideas](#) for different ways to approach Absorb, Do, and Connect and how to support them with technology.

These last two sections should be learner-focused, and they take time that must be built into the learning experience. Do not expect your learners to do this work on their own when they get back to their desks. The chances are good they will not, but they will simply revert to their former practices.



HERE ARE THE TEN THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN A CURRICULUM:

1. Course description and general overview: Appropriate learning environment and overall plan to achieve the course goals, objectives and outcomes. Really focus on what your learners NEED to KNOW and be able TO DO or THINK at the end of the training versus what you think is interesting or is nice to know. The history of a movement may be fascinating but not necessary and can chew up a lot of time. Remember, adult learners want practical information that can be almost immediately connected to their work. The general rule is to be as intentional as possible with every choice you make from content to activities.
2. It was built with inclusivity and equity in mind, from the representation of marginalized groups in your audience during the needs assessment process to accessibility and language access features, choice of resources, and learning preferences rooted in [different ways of “knowing.”](#)
3. Clear, achievable goals and learning objectives: These should develop out of the course descriptions and overall goals and be connected to the learning environment. Your objectives for a one-hour webinar will be very different from those for a three-hour face-to-face workshop. As you write these, consider using [Bloom’s taxonomy](#) as a tool. The essential idea is that we begin with a base of foundational knowledge and move up through increasingly more challenging ways to work with that knowledge from application to synthesis to creation.
4. There should be clear expectations for learners in terms of engaging with the learning environment, the course content, and their fellow students. Are they earning a certification? What are the minimum competencies for that? What kind of feedback and evaluations can they expect? In an online course, you may need to help them learn to navigate the interface. In a face-to-face course, it may be navigating the venue. You may also need to include information about norms and practices.
5. Skip the irrelevant icebreaker; Learners should be engaged immediately through some kind of activation that draws on their own experiences. This should happen as close to the beginning of the curriculum or each section of the curriculum as possible before you begin any kind of teaching. This is also an opportunity to establish trust and comfort among the group, so relational questions are great—the point is to make it clear to learners that they are going to be active



participants in the learning and provide yourself with good information about their current state of knowledge, skills and dispositions. It also makes it clear that you respect their time and attention and want to use the time seriously. Consider having each section begin with an “Activate” activity to help learners transition between chunks.

6. Begin the “Absorb” section with an activity related to the content they will be absorbing. Have you ever taken a class, eager to learn something new, only to have the instructor spend the first few sessions filling in background and history? Slide after slide of details that, while interesting, were standing in the way of diving into the content? What can you do to get your learners immediately engaged so that they might be more attentive during the Absorb section? Narrative is a good way as we love stories. Having a shared story can provide touchstones as you present content as well and give participants something to reflect on.
7. “Do” activities allow participants to actively use the information you have shared. These activities will vary based on the objectives and the type of knowledge, skills or dispositions being practiced. *Remember* and *understand* objectives may be best evaluated via a quiz activity while higher order objectives might require discussion or reflection. You may already have used a few “Do” activities during the Absorb section.
8. “Connect” activities allow users to go more in-depth with the material. You may only have one or two of these in the overall curriculum. They can function as a final project for a module or an entire course. These may also be self-directed as users make those connections to their own work.
9. Collaboration and interaction: if the learning environment allows, give learners a chance to interact with others.
10. Evaluation: You will be evaluating learners (see #3) but they will also be evaluating your course. This often happens at the end— and for a one-hour webinar that is appropriate. For a longer learning experience, ongoing evaluation can help you identify and deal with issues quickly.



SINGLE POINT RUBRIC: EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT CURRICULUM

A single-point rubric is designed to serve as a formative assessment. Rather than assigning numerical values based on the criteria, the rubric focuses on the relative strength or weakness of the stated criteria. The rubric can be used by both the instructional designer and the reviewer as part of the ongoing curriculum development process. They can add comments under both strengths and concerns for each item. These comments can then serve as touchpoints for self-assessment and discussions between reviewer and instructional designer.

The rubric can be used for face-to-face, hybrid and online learning experiences. Special considerations for the platforms are included in the criteria as needed.

Concerns	Criteria	Strengths
	Pre-course survey: used to gather general information about the learners as well as any content-related questions or confusion	
	<p>Description: a course description with pre-requisites (if any), clear learning objectives, and what is expected of learners is provided</p> <p>ONLINE: make the type of course clear: Asynchronous? Synchronous? Self-paced? Facilitated?</p>	



Concerns	Criteria	Strengths
	<p>Learning environment: appropriate to content and goals with clear instructions on how to access all elements of the learning environment</p> <p>ONLINE: User-friendly interface with clear instructions and timely support; careful choice of user-friendly tools;</p>	
	<p>Goals, objectives and outcomes: clearly stated, actionable objectives that include lower and higher-order thinking skills</p>	
	<p>Clear expectations for learners around the learning environment, content, and assessment</p> <p>ONLINE: complete, detailed schedule of assignments and any live meetings; community norms for online interaction if used; tips for succeeding in an online course</p>	
	<p>Plans for ongoing evaluation and feedback</p>	
	<p>Course centers the needs of learners with opportunities for learners to share experiences and make connections to their work</p>	



Concerns	Criteria	Strengths
	The course demonstrates equity, inclusivity, and accessibility in the overall design, resources, and activities	
	Content is intentionally chosen and chunked effectively and efficiently with interactive elements built in to foster engagement	
	Learners have formal opportunities to interact and collaborate with others if appropriate	
	<p>Learners know how to get help and support</p> <p>ONLINE: Support is as timely as possible. For a live session, there is a plan for support. For a course, there is a specific person for support.</p>	
	Post-course follow-up: in addition to the evaluation, a follow-up with learners sometime afterwards to garner the effectiveness and usefulness of the training	

This project was supported by Grant No. 15JOVW-22-GK-03994-MUMU awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

