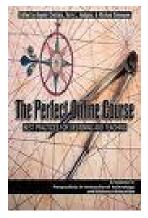# THE PERFECT ONLINE COURSE:
Best Practices for Designing and Teaching

Edited By Anymir Orellana, Terry L. Hudgins, & Michael Simonson (2009). (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 558 pp., $46.50)

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INTRODUCTION

Serim (2007) was entitled his report on establishing online learning policies as 'new gold rush' to emphasize the worst reason for moving towards online learning that has been experienced all over the world especially since late 1990s. According to Serim ¨The temptation to reduce highly skilled professionals with scripted, mass delivered 'content' as a means of reducing costs and/or maximizing profits is a contender for the worst reason¨ (p.13).

Whether for the worst or the best (providing learner-centered education, anytime, anywhere, at any pace) reasons, it is obvious that there has been a rush to go online in all the institutions including those that considered as very traditional, such as Yale, Harvard, MIT, Oxford, Cambridge, and so forth.

The growth of online learning all over the world arise new challenges. One of the major challenges is the issue of quality. What should an online course look like? What kinds of instructional strategies should be provided? To what extent various kinds of interactions must be required? What are the effective learning activities? For what functions should different technologies be used? How can learning be assessed? And similar and more questions have yet no standardized answers although they have been around since early implementations of online learning. Each provider uses different standards developed by either themselves or some institutions or some researchers. Sloan-C: Pillars of Quality, Robley and Wince's Rubric for Quality Interactions, Concord Model, Schrum's Qualities of Successful Students, Quality Matters, and E-excellence: Quality Manual for E-learning in Higher Education are among many of these standards.

The book, entitled as *The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching* is also trying to establish a list of standards about how to design and implement an effective online course.

The main goal of the book is to create a framework of quality educational guidelines that can be used to offer "perfect" online course.

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The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching **has been designed primarily as a reference guide for those practitioners who design and develop online courses and programs. However, because the majority of the chapters included in the book written in the light of scientific research studies, any researcher who would like to study on various aspects of online learning may find it quite beneficial.**

ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT

The editors of the book have organized the thirty chapters into four sections and a conclusion part. As they emphasized in the Preface, it is organized following a top-down approach and starts with review of literature of the general guidelines and the standards, continues proposed methods and models for designing, and best engagement strategies, finally ends with a conclusion.

The two chapters in the first section, entitled as 'Introduction', tries to establish a ground for the following sections and chapters by stressing on the need for solid instructional design for an effective online learning offering. The first chapter in this section, by Simonson and Schlosser, introduces the U-M-T (Unit-Module-Topic) as an easy-to-apply approach for designing an online course. Chernish, DeFranco, Lindner and Dooley in the second chapter summarize a research study in which three different delivery methods (face-to-face, instructional television and online) were used to offer the same course and concluded that online learning can be more effective if the learning processes designed appropriately and special attention given to sense of community.

The second section includes nine chapters concerning best guidelines and standards. It starts with Hirumi's analysis of the literature regarding industry specifications for quality e-learning published by professional organizations. Later two chapters focus on Chickering and Ehrmann's "Seven Principles of Good Practice" as guidelines that can be used for designing online courses. The next chapter (Chapter 7) by Orellana's covers the results of a study in which instructors' perceptions of optimal class size and mainly concludes that the less the better. Following three chapters (8, 9, and 10) deal with interaction in online learning environments. In Chapter 8, Reisetter and Boris present their study on effective design elements in the perspective of learners and reveal that Student-content and student-instructor interactions are the major factors influence the successful course design. In Chapter 9, Sadik and Reisman list the 'understanding the spectrum of interactions as one of the key elements that they derived from their experiences and the literature.

Chapter 10, by Hirumi, includes a three-level interaction framework for online courses. Hirumi states that this can be used to study and design interactions in online learning environments. The final chapter of this section can be considered as a transition chapter in which McLaren suggests instructional design guidelines based-on several instructional methods and models.

The third section is the largest in the book and contains ten chapters that focus on instructional methods and models used in online learning. First two chapters of this section focus on instructors. Chapter 12, by Hawkes and Coldeway, compares two models for course development: instructional (faculty-based) and industrial (team).

This chapter concludes with some design considerations and roles of faculty as instructional designers. In Chapter 13, Kranch proposes a general model (I3D) for faculty to design and development any learning environment including online learning. The next 4 chapters in this section, on the other hand, take online students into consideration. In Chapter 14, Miller and Mazur focus on learners' characteristics and propose a person-centered model. They claim that a successful online learning should result three outcomes: creative, useful and original products, significant learning, and increased self-actualization.

In the next chapter (Chapter 15) Miller summarizes the results of a study on their person-centered model and notes that different experiences exist in different groups. Following two chapters (16 and 17) also uncover results of studies on several aspects of online learning: evaluation of asynchronous discussions and reduction of online academic dishonesty.

Furthermore, Chapters 18 to 20 presents best practices on course materials, course content, and design management. Chapter 18, by Moore, Downing and York, provides the results of a study on comparison of students and instructors perceptions concerning the placement of certain course materials under static headings. It shows that there is a difference between students and instructors and suggests alleviating student confusion. In Chapter 19, Morrison and Anglin offers an interesting term shovelware as content taken from any source and placed on the Web as fast as possible with little regard for appearance and usability.

The authors later provide a tool for assessing instructional soundness of traditional courses presented in online format. Chapter 20 focuses on text and graphic advance organizers. Chen, Hiram and Zhang in this chapter elaborates how these organizers can be used to link new information with the ones already known and then to apply this information in new contexts. Chapter 21 presents a project management tool, Enterprise Project Management that can be used to design and develop online courses. In the final chapter of this section Boyer focuses on scaffolding techniques such as learning contacts, diagnostic instruments and reflective components.

The fourth section of the book discusses different instructional strategies used in online learning. First three chapters (23-25) emphasize one of the main components of online learning: interaction.

In Chapter 23, Wanstreet provides a literature review about interaction. Meanwhile Battalion in Chapter 24 discusses the necessity of all kinds of interactions and states the significance of instructor-student interaction.

Chapter 25, by Northrup, investigates students' perspective about interaction and reveal that students value timely feedback from the instructor and interpersonal/metacognitive interaction the most.

On the other hand, Chapter 26 focuses on one of the most accepted instructional strategies, problem-based learning (PBL). The author, Wheeler, suggest that PBL can be used to provide learners real-life experiences with simulations. In Chapter 27, Havard, Du and Olinzock also focus on instructor-learner interactions and propose that if instructor-led interactions are well organized and implemented deep-learning may occur. Chapter 28 includes the results of a study about effects of moderators on learners' participation in online course discussions. The study, by Durrington and Yu, shows that learners more frequently participate the peer-led discussions compare to instructor-led discussions.

The next chapter, Chapter 29, is also based on a research study on participants' perceptions of building learning communities in online courses. It provides evidence that there is a positive relationship between sense of learning community and perceived learning, course satisfaction and learning outcomes. The final section, Conclusion, covers Simonson's evaluations regarding the best practices in designing online learning. He suggests three categories to consider while designing an online course (course structure, course content and artifacts of learning) and provides brief design guidelines in each category. He concludes with emphasizing on importance of the 2knowledgeable teacher' as the key factor for designing an effective online course.

STRENGTHS

As the reviewer I found *The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching* as an interesting and beneficial resource for especially those who are new to designing online courses. Chapters, such as Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, provide prescriptive guidelines for designing online courses. Even one with little design skills can use these guidelines to design an effective online course.

Similarly chapters in the best engagement strategies section offers clear suggestions about how to establish interactions in online courses. Providing research-based guidelines and standards is another main contribution of this book. Quite a number of chapters provide results of the studies on various aspects of online learning. This increases the credibility of the information provided in the book. It's easy-to-read and –follow structure furthermore is also strengths of the book. After drawing a big picture the book provides general guidelines and standards and then best instructional methods and models, later best engagement strategies. This structure helps readers a lot.

Above all, the most significant contribution of this book is its emphasis on instructional design. Almost all sections clearly notes how important to have an instructional design perspective to design an effective online course.

WEAKNESSES

One of the main concerns about this book is related to the context. All the chapters were written from a single perspective that considers online learning as a convenience rather than necessity. It is a general context in the Western World (USA, Europe) and assumes that online learning should include a certain number of students, materials should be developed by the instructors, various assessment strategies should be employed, and so forth. It, sort of, represents an educational culture as Powar (2003) indicated. However, in many other countries, online learning is considered as one of the main solutions for providing equal education right to extensive demand. Thus, the majority of the guidelines, standards, methods, models and strategies presented in this book may not work in designing online courses in these countries. In these countries, online learning carries more industrial culture (Powar, 2003).

Furthermore, *The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching* focuses mainly on interaction in online learning. However, there are many other issues and aspects that have directly affects on designing online courses, such as technology (LMS, media, etc) required to use, the general characteristics and requirements of the program in which the course will be presented, bandwidth capacity of the learners' learners characteristics (e.g. readiness). Moreover, the book does not clearly present relationship between learning outcomes, learning activities, delivery channels and assessment strategies.

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CONCLUSIONS

Overall, for those who want a thorough and knowledgeable introduction to designing online courses and those who look for indicating importance of instructional design in online learning, this book, *The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching,* can be a good starting resource. It especially is a good source for those who would like to get an insight about how online courses should be designed in US-based education institutions.

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