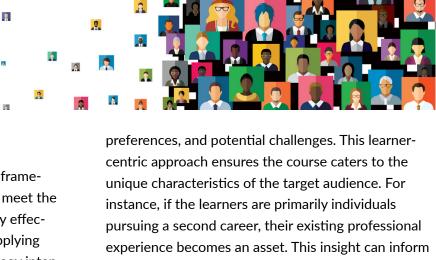# Revising existing online courses with instructional design

By Lindsay Andreolli-Comstock

Tumbuh Global, an educational consulting firm that specializes in immersion learning, online learning, and digital media for education, hosted two webinars presented by the ATS Pathways for Tomorrow Coordination Program for all ATS member schools in March and April—What is Instructional Design Theory? and Why Online Learning Programs Need Instructional Designers.

Instructional design provides a comprehensive framework for revising online courses, ensuring they meet the needs of adult learners and leverage technology effectively. By conducting thorough assessments, applying adult learning principles, implementing technology intentionally, prioritizing technical support, and continuously monitoring and evaluating course effectiveness, educators and institutions can create engaging and impactful learning experiences for the modern online learner.

Instructional design is becoming more and more relevant and necessary for ATS schools, as evidenced by the nearly 200 individuals who attended the two webinars. To follow are some of the ideas that were discussed.

Assessing existing courses

Before embarking on the revision of online courses, it's crucial to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the existing courses. This evaluation should focus on the effectiveness of the course in achieving its learning objectives.

- **Learner-centric approach**: Begin by understanding the learners, their specific needs, learning preferences, and potential challenges. This learner-centric approach ensures the course caters to the unique characteristics of the target audience. For instance, if the learners are primarily individuals pursuing a second career, their existing professional experience becomes an asset. This insight can inform the design of learning activities, such as incorporating group projects or discussions that leverage their practical knowledge.

- **Content, structure, and technology**: The assessment should encompass a thorough examination of the course content, structure, and learning activity delivery methods. This involves analyzing the alignment between course content and learning objectives, evaluating the flow of information from the learner's perspective, and examining how technology is used to deliver the learning modules.

Revising course content and structure through the lens of adult learning theory

After identifying areas for improvement through the assessment, the revision process should be guided by adult learning theory. This theory provides valuable

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1

insights into how adults learn and can inform the selection of appropriate instructional strategies.

- **Key pillars of adult learning theory**: Adult learning theory, also known as andragogy, emphasizes the unique characteristics of adult learners. Five key pillars underpin this theory:

    - *Self-concept.* Adults need a clear understanding of the purpose behind their learning.

    - *Experience.* Learning through experience is highly effective for adult learners. This can involve simulations, case studies, or other hands-on activities that allow them to apply their knowledge.

    - *Readiness to learn.* Adult learners are often motivated by topics that are relevant to their professional and personal lives.

    - *Application and orientation.* Adults value learning that can be immediately applied to real-world situations.

    - *Motivation to learn.* Adult learners are typically self-motivated and desire some control over their learning experience.

- **Leveraging technology to enhance adult learning**: Technology plays a pivotal role in online learning, and its application should be aligned with adult learning principles.

    - *Chunking.* This involves breaking down information into smaller, manageable units to facilitate comprehension and retention.

    - *Scaffolding.* This entails providing learners with initial support and gradually reducing it as their understanding grows. For example, a course might start with detailed instructions and examples, which are gradually phased out as learners become more proficient.

    - *Cognitive load.* Consider the cognitive capacity of learners and design learning experiences that avoid overwhelming them with excessive information or complex tasks.

    - **Evaluation:** Evaluating learner progress is crucial to gauge the effectiveness of the revisions. Various assessment methods—quizzes, projects, or discussions—can be employed to measure learner comprehension and application of knowledge. Revising existing evaluation methods requires careful consideration of the course objectives and the specific information the evaluation is intended to capture.

Implementing technology with intentionality

Technology should be viewed as a tool to enhance the learning experience, not merely as a delivery mechanism.

- **Instructor Engagement**: Fostering a sense of connection between instructors and learners is crucial in online learning environments. Implementing strategies such as virtual office hours, providing prompt and personalized feedback, and integrating live interactive elements can significantly enhance engagement.

- **Peer-to-peer interaction**: Encouraging interaction among learners through online forums, chat rooms, or group projects can foster a sense of community and create opportunities for collaborative learning.

- **LMS training**: Providing comprehensive training on the learning management system (LMS) to both instructors and learners is essential. This includes training instructors on how to effectively adapt their teaching methods for the online environment and providing learners with clear guidance on navigating the LMS.

Supporting the learner's journey through technical support

Robust technical support is paramount in ensuring a smooth and positive online learning experience.

- **Multifaceted support**: Technical support should encompass various aspects, including providing

instructors with necessary training and resources, ensuring timely LMS updates and maintenance, and establishing clear procedures for learners to seek assistance when needed.

- **Accessibility and responsiveness**: Learners should have readily accessible channels to reach technical support, such as online chat, email, or phone. The support team should be responsive and equipped to address a wide range of technical issues promptly.

Monitoring and evaluating course effectiveness

Regular evaluation and monitoring of online courses provide valuable insights for ongoing improvement.

- **Learner feedback**: Gathering feedback from learners through surveys, focus groups, or individual interviews can shed light on their experiences and highlight areas that require further revision.

- **Instructor reflections**: Encouraging instructors to reflect on their teaching practices, challenges, and successes in the online environment can provide valuable data for improving course design and delivery.

- **Benchmarking and metrics**: Establishing clear learning benchmarks and tracking relevant metrics allows for an objective assessment of course effectiveness. This data can be used to identify areas of strength, address areas where learners are struggling, and make informed decisions about future revisions.

Tumbuh Global is currently exploring the idea of an in-person training workshop on instructional design. Feel free to respond to this questionnaire to help Tumbuh better plan for your unique needs.

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