

Putting a Course Outline into Action: Planning your Course Delivery



Introduction

Planning for the delivery of a course is a dynamic and invigorating process that involves bringing the course outline to life. The goal of this Lifesaver is to discuss some of the issues that are involved in that process and to provide some hints and tips for the development of an effective course plan, based on an existing course outline.

Algonquin's Academic Directive E33, Course Outlines and Course Section Information, points out that

[c]ourse outlines and course section information are essential components of all courses offered at Algonquin College. They document the curriculum at the course and section level. Course outlines support the learning process by identifying course learning requirements, learning activities, and learning resources, as well as evaluation methods, planned to assess student achievement. Course section information details how the course outline will be implemented with a specific group of learners in a particular section. ("Preamble," *Academic Directive E33, Course Outlines and Course Section Information*.)

In broad terms, then, planning course delivery is the preparation of the course section information. The relationship between the course outline and the course section information can be seen in the following diagram.

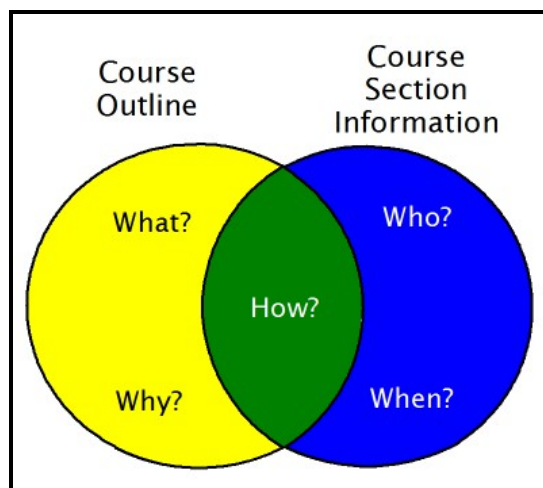


Figure 1: Relationship between course outline and course section information

A course outline provides administrative details about a

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course's content, its purpose, and some information about the ways in which it will meet its purpose. Course section information provides implementation details including the name of the professor teaching the course, and the organization of the course, as well as greater detail about the ways in which the given delivery of the course will meet the purpose laid out in the course outline.

Sharpening the Planning Focus

As the process of planning course delivery begins, it is important to ensure that the purpose of the course is clear. Discovering that purpose involves a process of asking questions about the course, its context, its requirements and the students who will be taking the course. It is also essential that those questions move from the general to the specific.

Figure 2: Questions to Sharpen the Planning Focus on the following page provides some example questions along with a sense of the way in which the questions become more focused, moving from broad program questions, through questions related to the course, down to questions about delivery to the specific students who will be in the class. The questions in the diagram are neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

Additional possible questions that could be asked include:

- (1) Why would employers want this course in the program?
- (2) What do learners need to learn or be able to do (i.e., what material is "need to know" and what is "nice to know")?
- (3) How will the learning be organized?
- (4) What resources will be needed?
- (5) What knowledge and skills do the students bring to the course?

Personal experience, research and professional networking will provide information that will help focus existing questions or generate new, more specific ones.

PROFESSOR OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The content of this Lifesaver is related to the following Professor of the 21st Century Teaching Competencies:

3. Using a Variety of Teaching and Learning Strategies.
7. Designing Courses and Programs.

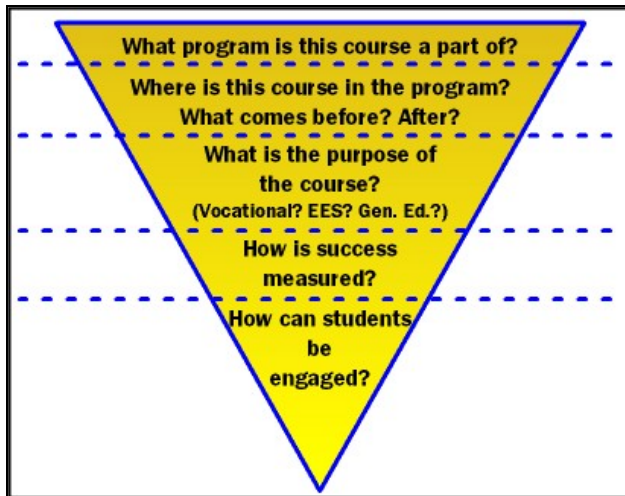


Figure 2: Questions to Sharpen the Planning Focus

Taking the time to brainstorm and collect ideas around these types of questions will help to set the priorities for course delivery planning. The sense of planning focus that will emerge will help with making decisions related to changes in the course delivery.

The Course Schedule as a Template for Course Planning

Once some of the initial brainstorming around prioritizing the factors affecting the planning of course delivery has been completed, it may be helpful to create a table for the course schedule. A complete course schedule is an excellent tool because it provides a picture of many of the inter-connected factors that need to be balanced during course planning. The template on the following page provides a possible structure for a complete course schedule.

Once the table has been created and the first two columns have been completed, the next step should be blocking out known constraints, such as any time required for major in-class assessments, such as tests and mid-terms or oral presentations. The dominant focus of the course planning will help identify which column becomes the starting point. A thematic or content approach will focus on the Topic column. The text-based approach will focus on the Readings column. A more hands-on course, such as a laboratory course, will most likely focus on the assignments column. Sketching in the

appropriate content into the focal column will then reduce the options for subsequent elements in the same row. For instance, once a topic is chosen, it is expected that there will only be a few choices for readings that will relate to that topic. In this fashion, content can be roughed in for the course. Having completed a rough course plan by progressing through the weeks in this fashion, it is time for a holistic review of the plan.

This review of the plan should be done using the course outline as a checklist. This may also be a good time to create a second copy of the course schedule that will be the instructor's annotated schedule. Going through the course plan, it should be possible to check off the relevant elements in the course outline, including the course learning requirements and the evidence of learning achievement. If problems arise, or the connections are not clear between the course outline and the course plan, then notes could be added to the instructor's version of the schedule. If any elements are not covered, the plan will need to be modified to ensure complete coverage. As modifications are made to finalize the plan, remember to verify that changes have not had a negative impact elsewhere.

Inevitably, the need to change the course plan will arise from time-to-time. These changes will be much smoother if a strong course plan is already in place.

Dealing with Changes in Delivery

Once a course plan has been created, one of two substantial changes may take place that will require a more detailed review of the plan.

First, the delivery mode may change. A course that was originally planned for face-to-face delivery may become hybrid, or a course planned for online delivery might move into the classroom. These changes in delivery mode often have the greatest impact on assessment and evaluation. As the delivery modes changes, new opportunities for assignments emerge. The content itself will remain fundamentally the same, although the presentation will need to change. The new delivery mode will provide opportunities for changing learning activities. Time, ostensibly, stays the same. It is very true that the nature of the contact time changes, but the normative hours remain the same.

The second change affecting a course plan could be a change related specifically to the time factor. There are three broad areas into which time changes may fall: modifications to the weekly contact time (course scheduling), modifications to the period of time over which the course is offered (course duration), and modifications to the normative hours (course hours).

(continued on last page)

A Course Schedule Template

The following template can provide a useful framework for beginning rough work on the planning of course delivery. (NOTE: Remember to block out the known constraints.)

Week	Dates	Topic	Readings	Assignments	Notes
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					

In the process of compiling a course schedule, try to ensure that the following practical questions are addressed:

- Have all holidays been taken into consideration?
- Have key concepts been organized in a way that will appeal to students with different learning styles?
- Are students able to practise knowledge and skills before they apply them in assignments?
- Have you allowed time for out-of-class experiences?
- Has the time required for major assessments been blocked off (i.e., tests, mid-terms, or presentations)?
- Is there enough time to provide feedback before the next assignment is due?
- Is there room to adapt to the needs of the students?
- Are the readings and assignments (the course workload) reasonable for a student with a full course load?
- Is there time for both student exploration and teacher discussion?
- Is the integration and role of learning materials clear and appropriate for the students?

Sample Schedule

The following provides an example of the types of information that might appear in a completed course schedule.

Week	Dates	Topic	Readings	Assignments	Notes
1	Sep 3 - Sep 7	Welcome, Orientation What is Urban Forestry?	Chapter 1		
2	Sep 10 - Sep 14	Seeing the Forest and Not the Buildings	Chapter 3	Interview Questions	Guest Speaker

Course Scheduling

Modifications to the weekly contact time are essentially scheduling changes that affect the duration and frequency of contact during the week. For example, having a class twice a week for 1.5 hours rather than meeting once a week for 3 hours. For these types of changes, the main consideration will involve ensuring that the timing of assessments remains fair and equitable. The secondary consideration is the combination or separation of content and the associated learning activities to meet the new duration and frequency of contact.

Course Duration

Modifications to the period of time over which the course is offered most often involves compressing or expanding a course without reducing or increasing the normative or delivered hours. The reasons for this change can vary; however, the important point to remember is that the existing course plan can provide a useful guideline for preparing a new course plan. As with modifications to the weekly contact time, the main consideration will be the timing of assessments. There is, however, a crucial difference. In this case, new assessments may have to be developed, especially if the period of time has been reduced significantly (i.e., a full-semester course is scheduled over half the semester). The consideration of content will be important, but in these circumstances a greater emphasis will need to be placed on dynamic presentation of the content in order to create an environment conducive to learning.

Course Hours

Modifications to the normative hours of the course will have an impact on the course plan. Before undertaking any course planning to address these changes, it is essential to determine the extent of revisions to the course outline. When reviewing the course outline, it is important to determine (1) if the main purpose of the course has changed, and (2) if there have been changes to the course learning requirements. With clear answers to those questions, it is possible to move on with the changes. In this particular case, the creation of a new course schedule is needed (See Course Schedule Template above). The previous course schedule should be close at hand while the new schedule is being created.

A reduction in course hours that does not involve changes in course learning requirements can usually be achieved by asking difficult questions about the "nice-to-have" components of the course. There is, unfortunately, no one-size-fits-all solution, but the following considerations may make the task easier.

LOOK FOR BALANCE: Try to address reductions in a balanced fashion—less time devoted to a number of

different activities may be easier and have a smoother implementation than less time on one or two different activities.

SHARE THE LEARNING AND TEACHING: Explore possibilities for students to take more responsibility for their learning. Student poster board assignments, for example, may be able to replace the teaching of certain content without losing any of the learning.

REDUCE BUFFER TIME: Think about the possibility of reducing the amount of time that has been allotted to deal with the "unexpected" occurrences that can arise over the course of a semester.

ENHANCE THE INTRODUCTION MODULE: Build additional material into that part of the course that lays the foundation for the rest of the semester. A strong sense of momentum created from the outset can help keep the course at a lively pace throughout the rest of the semester.

The challenges of dealing with changes to course delivery and their impact on the course plan can be overcome with thoughtful consideration of the factors that affect the entire course planning process. Moreover, the results can be extremely fruitful when combined with a willingness to review and adapt the plan on an on-going basis.

Course Planning Documents and the Course Outline Mapping and Management System (COMMS)

A further benefit of strong, clear, and organized planning documents is the ability to discuss the purpose of a course and its role in a program succinctly and quickly, and speed up the use of tools available to document course and program curriculum.

One such tool is Algonquin's Course Outline Mapping and Management System (COMMS). COMMS will make use of the information contained in course planning documents to ensure that curriculum delivery at the course, semester, and program level is consistent with the outcomes that are in place.

The requirement to enter information on COMMS will be a much less onerous task when the course planning documents are in place.

QUESTIONS??

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