

Script for Course Design in Practice

Welcome back to the Centre for Teaching and Learning's Concepts and Course Design Series. We have created a series of sessions that introduced you to principles of course design. But what does it look like in practice? In this video, I will walk you through the design of an actual course that I taught at the University of Alberta.

By the end this session, you will be able to see that course design informs teaching decisions and conversely how classroom practices have an impact on course design. You will also have an opportunity to identify the concepts that you wish to consider in designing or redesigning a course and reflect on the relevance and applicability of the model presented here for your own teaching context.

The model we have chosen to help us conceptualize the course design process is adapted from McGill University. As you can see from the visual, the process of aligning these elements should be iterative. Note that you may start anywhere in the course design process and go back to any or all of these elements at any point in time.

In the case of French 476, I followed the 4-stage process described in Biggs and Tang, with the difference that I started by creating an environment for learning, defined the assessment tasks, and of course marked my student work. It is only upon reflecting on my course after the end of term that I began articulating the learning outcomes. There is no particular reason for this method. I simply needed to teach the course once before being able to write good learning outcomes. I will return to the pros and cons of this approach at the end of the session, but for the purpose of this presentation, I will start with the learning outcomes in order to emphasize the thread between outcomes, classroom activities and assignments.

When defining learning outcomes, it is helpful to use Bloom's taxonomy so that understanding can be defined in terms of observable behaviour organized along a hierarchy of thinking processes. I ask myself: what does a student need to do to demonstrate his or her understanding? Answering this question with concrete verbs such as those suggested in this table helps me define what I mean by understanding a concept or a theory. Bloom's taxonomy allows me to think about the level of abstraction that I wish my students to reach. The complexity of thinking processes increases from low to mid to higher levels of thinking when I ask students to recall information, apply concepts, or design a study.

Let me start applying some of these concepts to my course: French 476, Linguistics Applied to French. The typical students registered in it were French majors and minors in their third or fourth year with no to little prior knowledge of linguistics, so it is in fact comparable to a 200 level course taught in English.

As reflected in the course description, the course provided an overview of the linguistic structures of the French Language and concepts from general linguistics. It examined Hexagonal French, or French French if you will, and the Canadian variety. It also had a practical component requiring students to apply concepts to spoken data.

You will notice that French 476 is comprised of only a few goal statements, as is generally recommended in the literature. In addition to being exposed to foundational concepts in general linguistics, students were also encouraged to develop the view that French is a collection of language varieties that are made of linguistically neutral features that can carry unequal social significance.

The learning outcomes for the course are listed in the next two slides. If you would like more time to read the learning outcomes for the course, simply pause the video and resume when you are done reading.

Even if French 476 is a content-heavy course surveying an entire field, I still expected my student to do more than recall information, so I designed the course with scaffolding activities that helped my students build their understanding throughout the semester to ultimately achieve higher level thinking skills using real-world linguistic data.

The first thing I did when I examined my course was to map out the learning outcomes according Bloom's levels of understanding. The table that you see here is only partial - the full table is available in one the handouts provided under the video screen. Because my goal was to target mid and high-levels of understanding, I changed my first outcome slightly from *describe* to *compare and contrast*. Instead of recalling what they know about two distinct language varieties, students now have to consider what linguistic characteristics the two varieties share and where they differ. It is a more complex level of thinking that justifies describing the outcome as mid- rather than low level.

Once I was satisfied with my learning outcomes, I moved on to designing different blocks of learning. The one that I describe here relates to Sounds. On this slide is the complete course organizer for this learning block, also available as a handout.

Here is a partial view of my course organizer. After I laid out the general learning outcomes, I quickly realized that I needed more specific learning outcomes addressing my learning block. As they learned about the vowel system in Canadian French and hear language samples, they needed to transcribe vowels not only as theoretical constructs, but how they are actually pronounced. Therefore, the outcome they needed to achieve was annotating French Canadian vowels. The teaching and learning activities related to this outcome as well as the portfolio assignment are listed in the last two columns.

Next I decided to map out activities and assessment tasks the same I had done for my learning outcomes to see how I was doing on Bloom's Taxonomy again. You have the details in the handouts, but I provided a partial view here. Notice the question mark next to learning outcome 5, both in my activities and in my assessments. I will return to this point in my conclusion. Please also note that sample assessments, including the portfolio assignment and the associated marking rubric are provided as handouts under the video screen.

So, what have I learned from this process? The first lesson that I learned was that going through the process step by step helped me clarify for myself and then COMMUNICATE more clearly the learning goals and outcomes to my students. I also discovered some inconsistencies between my plan and what I actually did in the classroom. First, the learning block on sounds took too much of class time compared to its relative importance to other topics. I also had somewhat of a focus on lower-level cognitive skills when what I intended was for my students to apply knowledge. Last, it became apparent to me that I was not properly emphasizing outcomes 5 and 6 in my teaching and learning activities. Upon reflection, I realized that these outcomes were important to me, but did not belong to a course surveying the sub-disciplines of linguistics.

Based on this experience, I redeveloped my learning outcomes by drawing more from the top end of Bloom's taxonomy. For example, I showed you earlier how *describe* became *compare and contrast*. Had I started by creating learning outcomes as recommended by Biggs and Tang, I would possibly have provided my students with higher level activities.

After modifying my learning outcomes, I also had to reexamine some of the activities I was doing in the classroom to make sure they aligned with my outcomes. I decided to flip some of my lectures to engage students actively in the classroom. While the term *flipped classroom* usually refers to content delivered with web-based technology, I used a low tech version of the concept. I assigned readings to be completed before the lecture and started with application activities in class. As the quote indicates, the value of the flipped classroom is in repurposing class time to be used for questions, discussion and collaborative hands-on activities that help students apply what they learned from their readings.

Is French 476 a perfect course now? Probably not, but the process of mapping out my course I really helped me achieve good alignment between all of the course components and offer my students as rich a learning opportunity as I possibly could.

So, what have YOU learned from this series? I hope that you can pull together some of the important concepts of course design and apply them to your teaching context. If you'd like, I invite you to brainstorm about key concepts that stuck with you and create your own concept map or course design organizer to start your own process of redesign. Have fun, and if you have question along the way. Feel free to book a consultation with one of our educational developers. We'll be happy to help!