



Chapter X

Standards for Online Courses: Can We Do It? Yes We Can!

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a real-world example of how instructional design theory can be used in academe, industry, and business to aid in the design and evaluation of online courses. It also describes how theoretical, philosophical and pragmatic aspects of instructional design were combined to develop standards and a model for an online instructional design system. We begin by establishing a need for standards in the field, followed by an outline and description of our standards. The chapter then describes how we used these standards to build an actual course. Examples are also provided of how the standards can be used to effectively evaluate online courses.

A NEW BEGINNING — IT'S ALL ABOUT LEARNING RIGHT? Instructional Design vis á vis Rubber Tree Plants

For the past several years, my colleague and I have worked at the Michigan Virtual University, a very unique organization that deals with a variety of different organizations, from K-12 to higher education; from manufacturing to government. In addition to serving different populations, we also fulfill various roles for those institutions. We build learning centers, design custom courses and curriculum, and help make decisions in buying off-the-shelf learning, as well as provide a host of consulting services. This experience has given us a very broad and, we think, distinctive view of the e-learning world.

Since we aren't just a single company cranking out courses and modules "our way," we are able to see how different entities are thinking about and producing e-learning materials. Sometimes, the results are quite impressive; more often, they are not. So, we set about doing our utmost to try to get the best courses into the hands of our constituent learners.

But then a funny thing happened at the office one day. There we were, minding our own business, doing our own thing, when we started hearing the same question over and over again — how do we *know* that the courses we're building, buying and recommending are any good? After the requisite initial blank stare, we started to think, "Yeah, how *do* we know?"

As instructional designers, we like to think that we know what good instruction looks like. But how could we communicate that knowledge to internal and external clients who don't possess this expertise? Furthermore, how could we talk about the quality of online instruction with various groups, with any kind of consistency, when everybody has their own ideas about quality? And what an online course should look and be like? There are educators who use pedagogical strategies of instruction. Then there are those in the corporate world who are more interested in "training" than "education" who have been conducting standup training for years. Then there are those in the LCMS and Web development fields who have their own ideas about what's important in an online course with all of their talk about user interfaces and learning objects.

What's an instructional designer to do? What should be like music to our ears, with all voices coming together to create beautiful instruction, in reality is more like the noise on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, with everyone shouting to be heard. And it's not that these voices aren't important

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