

Chapter VIII

Educational Design at Southern Cross University Australia: A Case Study

Chris Morgan, Southern Cross University, Australia

Jenny Bird, Southern Cross University, Australia

Meg O'Reilly, Southern Cross University, Australia

Abstract

This case study provides an overview of educational design practice in a relatively small regional Australian university with a unique profile of highly distributed, mature-aged learners, and a particular mandate regarding its students and the region in which it is located. In its 15-year history at Southern Cross University, educational design practice has been significantly shaped by its context, and has evolved continuously to meet the changing needs of the university and its student profile. This case study charts educational design evolution over the 15 years, the impact of online learning upon roles and practice, the current institutional "footprint" of the educational designers, the convergence of roles with academic staff development, and its current research agendas. Chapter II should be read as the companion to this chapter for a more extensive exploration of the issues and dilemmas of educational design practice.

Introduction

Southern Cross University is one of Australia's 37 publicly funded universities, located in the growing regional area of northern New South Wales. It is relatively small in size, but has three campuses and covers a large regional catchment extending 500 kilometres along the eastern-Australian seaboard. It has approximately 12,000 students, a little under half of whom are studying in distance mode. It is one of Australia's newer universities and was quick to embrace flexible learning methodologies in order to serve the needs of its widely dispersed community, as well as to attract students from across Australia to its innovative programs. In contrast to many other universities in the sector, Southern Cross has a high level of mature-aged students, often returning to study after long absences, and with a relatively low average socio-economic status. School leavers occupy only approximately one quarter of the total student intake each year. In line with its open learning philosophy, the university has liberal admission procedures, various alternative entry schemes and a strong emphasis on student support and learning assistance to enable students to gain the confidence to succeed in their tertiary studies (Morgan & Hayden, 2002).

In this context, the practice of educational design has always been mindful of the critical importance of a well-planned and developmental first year student experience that accounts for the needs of tentative, inexperienced learners. Units and courses have also required considerable flexibility and a realistic workload to enable the many mature-aged, part-time students to successfully manage competing commitments. With its heavy reliance on distance education, a further key focus of educational design practice is to foster interactive communities of learners, to bridge isolation with the intelligent use of accessible communication technologies. These issues are further explored in this case study and discussed in the context of the rapidly changing Australian higher education scene, along with other technological and pedagogical advances in the sector.

Instructional Design at Southern Cross University: A 15-Year History

Early Days

Instructional designers were first engaged in 1988 as the university moved seriously into distance learning. It was recognised at that time that faculty could no longer deal individually with the increasingly complex task of teaching in dual mode (internal and distance education), and that expertise was required to guide teaching staff through the processes involved in the development and delivery of distance learning materials. Expertise was particularly sought in issues such as how to write and structure distance learning materials, how to assess student learning at a distance, and support was also required in the production processes that enabled quality controlled, user-friendly resources in a variety of media to be provided to students in a timely manner for commencement of their studies each semester.

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