Welcome to the Teaching Commons online tutorials on course design. We have created a series of short videos that cover the elements of course design to guide you through the process of developing a course.

In this video, I will be demonstrating the process of alignment, which is central to developing a good course. Alignment is a principle in curriculum theory that emphasizes the need fo your content to be weaved into a common thread that unite learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks to create the optimal environment for student learning.

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By the end this tutorial, 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 have an opportunity to identify the elements to consider in designing or redesigning a course and reflect on the relevance and applicability of adopting a reasoned approach to course development for your own teaching context.

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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 teaching and learning activities, feedback and assessment to the learning outcomes is iterative. On may start anywhere in the course design process as long as all elements are ultimately integrated into one seamless thread.

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The course that I will be using as an example for the course design process is entitled Linguistics Applied to French. It is a course that a offered a number of times at the beginning of my university teaching career to 3rd and 4th year

undergraduate students specializing in French literature and linguistics. The language of instruction was French.

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The course provided an overview of the linguistic structures of the French Language and concepts from general linguistics and examined the differences between different French varieties.

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One of my goals was to help students find the linguistic patterns of European and Canadian French. This carried the unspoken expectation that students would develop the view that a language is in fact a collection of varieties that are socially unequal but linguistically neutral. I will return to this unspoken expectation and its implication for course design a bit later.

They were required collect their own sample of spoken and/or written French and apply them to phenomenon described in class.

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In designing this course, I followed the 4 stage design process described in Biggs and Tang. Although they recommend drafting learning outcomes first, I initiated the design of the course as many professors do:

Instead of well-defined learning outcomes, I had a set of ge**ne**ric learning objectives that I used to create - somewhat intuitively - a learning environment based on the content that I wanted to cover. Then defined the assessment tasks and developed marking rubrics to help judging their performance.

It is only upon reflecting on my course after teaching the course once that I began articulating the learning outcomes. There reason for this is simply that…

Until I taught the course once, I was not too clear on how to write effective learning outcomes. It goes to show that the course design process is always in flux.

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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 by presenting the learning outcomes in order to emphasize the common thread between outcomes, classroom activities and assignments.

An effective learning outcome is formulated with an active verb, for example "summarize or analyse" so that it describes in specific terms how students are to demonstrate their learning of the content. An active verb also helps making the outcome measurable.

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When defining learning outcomes, it is useful to use Bloom's taxonomy so that student learning can be defined in terms of observable behaviour organized along a hierarchy of thinking processes.

The key question is: 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 and Bloom's taxonomy allows me to think about the level of abstraction that I wish my students to reach for each learning outcome. The complexity of thinking processes increases from low to higher levels of thinking when I ask students to recall information, apply concepts, or design a study.

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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.

You will notice that I used active verbs in each one so that the kind of understanding that I expect from my students is clearly communicated to them.

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Even if my course was surveying an entire field and was therefore content-heavy, I expected my students to do more than recall information. So my first task was to map out my course by matching the learning outcomes as I had drafted them according to Bloom's taxonomy as you can see in the table. Note that the table is only partial - the full list is available in one the handouts provided under the video screen.

This exercises helped me realize that some learning outcomes were setting low expectations… whereas my goal was to target mid and high-levels of understanding. As a result, I changed my first outcome slightly from describe to compare and contrast. While this change may seem of little significance, it actually made a big difference later on when I designed activities and assessment tasks. Instead of having to recall what they knew about two distinct language varieties, my students now had to consider what linguistic characteristics the two varieties shared and where they were different.

It is a more complex level of thinking that justifies describing the outcome as mid- rather than low level.

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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 organiser for this learning block, also available as a handout below the video screen.

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Here is a partial view of my course organizer. After I laid out the general learning outcomes, I generated more specific learning outcomes addressing my learning block. For example, up until that point students had learned to represent sound in the abstract, in the absence of a real speaker actually pronouncing these sounds. As they learned about the vowel system in European and Canadian French and heard language samples, they started to practice transcribing vowels not only as theoretical constructs, but as they were actually pronounced. The teaching and learning activities related to this outcome as well as the portfolio assignment are listed in the last two columns.

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Next I mapped out activities and assessment tasks against Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure alignment between my learning outcomes and what I was doing in class. With most of my activities at the mid level of Bloom's taxonomy, I felt that I was providing students with an appropriate environment for learning to foster the learning outcomes, but I want to draw your attention to the question mark next to learning outcome 5, both in my activities

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and in my assessments. I will return to this point in my conclusion. Please also note that sample assessments,

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including the portfolio assignment .

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and the associated marking rubric are provided as handouts under the video screen.

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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. As Kennedy, Hynlan and Ryan point out, having clear expectations is an important part of effective teaching and learning"

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 clear 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 survey course in linguistics. Instead, they should be part of a more advanced course on sociolinguistics for example.

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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."

This in turn forced me to revise my teaching and learning activities. Saroyan & Amundsen (2004) point out that we need to ask ourselves: What are the kinds of instructional activities needed to achieve higher-order learning outcomes?

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For me, starting class with a conventional lecture was no longer the answer. I decided to flip my course. The term "flipped classroom" refers to content delivered with web-based technology. In other words, students engage with the learning materials at home and at their own speed, and this frees up time for curated discussion and collaborative learning. So instead of coming to class to listen to a long lecture, students stepped in my class prepared to engage in application activities, followed by clarifications s if and when needed.

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My course is still not perfect, but the process of mapping out my course really helped me achieve good alignment between all of the course components and create as rich a learning environment for my students.

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Now that I have applied the process of course design to a real course, I hope that it can help 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 struck you as essential to create your own course design organizer.

Have fun, and if you have question along the way

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feel free to book a consultation with one of our educational developers at teaching@yorku.ca. We'll be happy to help!