Motivating Adult Learners in Accelerated Online Courses:  
An Instructional Design Perspective

Jahna Kahrhoff

The use of accelerated courses in higher education is a growing trend. Due to their condensed format, these courses present some unique challenges for designers, adult learners, and instructors. One challenge is maintaining the expected seat time without sacrificing academic rigor and standards. The condensed timeframe also leaves less time for necessary reflection and analysis. Another challenge is the intense workload that a shorter timeframe represents, and if students fall behind, there is little time for them to regain their footing. Instructional designers must find a way to balance these elements – workload, rigor, content, and student engagement – in a compact educational experience.

Introduction

The use of accelerated courses in higher education – “semester- or quarter-equivalent classes offered in compressed, accelerated, or condensed formats” (Scott, 2003) – is a growing phenomenon. Institutions of higher education and adult learners find accelerated courses attractive for several reasons, both pedagogical and logistical. One obvious advantage, Marques (2012) points out, is “shorter course seating time and a faster pace towards degree completion” (p. 105). Other research has confirmed that this compressed format appeals to adult learners due to their efficiency (Serdyukov, Subbotin, & Serdyukova, 2003; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010). Scott (2003), for example, found that students felt that they were more focused and had a more in-depth and memorable learning experience in accelerated courses. Lee and Horsfall (2010) also found that the financial benefits of accelerated courses were an incentive for some universities.

Due to their condensed format, accelerated courses present some unique advantages, though also challenges for instructional designers, adult learners, and instructors. One challenge, for example, is maintaining the expected seat time without sacrificing academic rigor and standards. The condensed timeframe also leaves less time for necessary reflection and analysis. Another challenge is the intense workload that a shorter timeframe represents, and if students fall behind, there is little time for them to regain their footing (Davies, 2006; Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010). Despite these challenges, research has shown that accelerated courses can – and do – yield positive experiences for students and can be as effective as traditional length courses. Furthermore, this research shows that when accelerated courses are effective, certain attributes related to the course design are found to be present (Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Scott, 2003). These course design attributes include the use of active learning, classroom interaction and discussion, experiential and applied learning, and a course organization that emphasizes depth over breadth. In the process of developing accelerated courses, it is the role of the instructional designer to meet these challenges and balance course design elements – workload, rigor, content, and student engagement – in a compact and effective educational experience.
Design Attribute of Successful Accelerated Courses

Research has shown that when certain design attributes are present, accelerated courses “yield equivalent, and sometimes superior, learning outcomes when matched with traditional-length courses” (Scott, 2003, p. 29). One of the attributes that both faculty and students have identified as essential is the use of active learning. Studies of accelerated courses have shown that students prefer activities and assessments that allow them to build meaningful connections between new and prior knowledge or experiences, and apply what they learn to their personal or professional lives (Lee & Horsfall, 2010; Scott, 2003). Students also prefer the use of applied learning where they have an opportunity to experience the material and apply what they have learned (Scott, 2003). Related to the type of activity is frequent evaluation. Scott (2003) found that students in accelerated courses value having smaller and varied assignments that would be more manageable in the intensive time constraints of accelerated courses.

A high degree of interaction and discussion is another noted attribute of successful accelerated courses. Both Scott (2003) and Lee and Horsfall (2010) found that an important motivating factor for student success is the peer relationships that they developed through class interactions. Another attribute found to contribute to the success of accelerated courses is organization. Scott (2003), for example, found that students regarded organization as one of the most important factors influencing a successful intensive course. This is due to the fact that accelerated courses progress very quickly and if material is not presented in an easy-to-follow manner courses may become “overwhelming and chaotic” (p. 31).

Motivation Theory

These attributes of successful accelerated courses are congruent with the constructs of andragogy and motivation theories, such as the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching offered by Wlodkowski (2008). Wlodkowski defines motivation as “the natural human process for directing energy to accomplish a goal” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010, p. 29). Both motivation and learning are complex – they do not occur the same way all the time and are influenced by a multitude of factors. While the link between motivation and learning in adults is not widely studied, Wlodkowski (2008) asserts that the “bond seems so obvious” (p. 5); when adult learners are motivated to learn, they are more likely to do the kinds of things that they believe will help them learn. For example, they will pay more careful attention, study more, take notes, reflect on their work, ask for help, etc.

Based on theories of adult learning and intrinsic motivation, and the assumption that learning and culture are inseparable, the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching is a “holistic and systemic representation of four intersecting motivational conditions” that educators can create or enhance: establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010, p. 114). While Wlodkowski’s framework is not an instructional design model, it can be used for instructional planning and design, and more specifically as a model for meeting the challenges of teaching intensive and accelerated courses (Wlodkowski, 2008, Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010). To make sure a learning experience addresses these conditions, instructional designers can use the framework and its related strategies “to combine a series of learning activities from the beginning to the end of an instructional sequence so that they create a network of mutually supportive motivational conditions” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010, p. 154). The four
motivational conditions work together, and to make them most effective, designers need to be intentional in how they establish, coordinate, and integrate the conditions throughout an entire lesson or learning event.

Establishing inclusion is the first motivational condition. It entails creating an atmosphere in which learners feel respected and connected to each other and to the content they about to learn. Inclusion should be established at the beginning of the lesson or learning event. “Our experience suggests,” say Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2010), “that establishing a sense of community within an intensive source should be a primary goal for the first class session” (p. 61). Strategies used to address this condition help establish a climate of respect and community in which learners will feel more included, connected, safe, and comfortable; and in turn, their intrinsic motivation will be more likely to emerge. Some of the strategies that should be used to establish inclusion includes class introductions and multidimensional sharing where student see what they have in common and share their expectations, goals, and past experience. Other strategies include clarifying course goals and learning outcomes and connecting content and assignments to learners’ personal and professional lives.

The second motivational condition is developing attitude. This too should be incorporated at the beginning of the lesson or learning event. Since one cannot force, cajole, or even convince a student to like learning, this condition is concerned with treating adult learners in such a way that will “help them build positive attitudes towards their learning and themselves as learners” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 172). A big part of this is presenting the subject matter so that learners see how it is relevant to their personal lives and work. Strategies that should be used to develop positive attitudes include scaffolding complex learning, use of relevant models, making assessments fair and clear, and helping students plan for their work, both in terms of effort and time.

The third condition, enhancing meaning, refers to creating engaging and challenging learning experiences that include the learner’s perspectives and values. This condition strives to gain and sustain the learner’s attention, and then convert that attention to deeper engagement, interest, and meaning. Strategies to meet these goals should be implemented throughout the learning experience and may overlap with other strategies used for other conditions. Some of the strategies for enhancing meaning include using a variety of modalities to present content, presenting learning activities in a clear and accurate manner, relating course activities to learners’ individual interests and concerns, and using examples and concept maps. Activities such as case studies, role playing, and simulation should be used to make content relevant and evoke critical discussion. Other possible activities include the use site visits and internships.

The final condition, engendering competence, can also be incorporated throughout the learning experience. In general, however, it should primarily come at the end. This condition involves providing opportunities for learners to demonstrate that they have effectively learned something that is of value and relevant to the real world. Assessment does not equal competence; however, it does “exerts a powerful motivational influence on adults because it is the socially sanctioned educational procedure to communicate about their competence” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 312). For assessment to be intrinsically motivating for adults it has to mirror an authentic work or life situation. In addition to making assessments authentic, other strategies that can be built into the course design include making assessment tasks and criteria clearly known to student in advance and fostering the intention to transfer learning.
Applying a Motivational Model to Instructional Design

In November 2011, the School of Graduate Education at Kaplan University launched a project to convert its entire curriculum from a ten-week format to a six-week format. The goals for this initiative were to support student success with a single-course load and optimal class sizes, while at the same time streamline programs and scheduling. There is some evidence in the literature that graduate students benefit from taking one course at a time. Serdyukov, Subbotin, and Serdyukova (2003), for example, found that “a sequential, one-course-at-a-time model of adult higher education meets the needs of adult learners better than the traditional parallel, several-course-at-a-time model” (NP). Students in Scott’s (2003) study also reported that by limiting their course load they were able to direct their efforts and improve their performance.

Kaplan University’s six-week model also offers some logistical and administrative benefits. The ten-week model uses three overlapping tracks that begin approximately three weeks apart. The six-week model, on the other hand, uses a single track with courses offered back to back. Having one track as opposed to three overlapping ones makes it possible to schedule the best faculty every term, for the classes where they are needed most. The single track also allows the School to combine cohorts, offer low-enrollment courses more often, and make sure students are in optimally-sized courses.

To help accomplish these goals, the School’s Assistant Dean of Curriculum (ADoC) and two Curriculum Managers (CMs) developed a conversion model guided by several factors, including instructional design considerations, course metrics, credit hour requirements, and learning theories relevant to adult learners. Each conversion began with a planning phase in which the ADoC and CM prepared a draft six-week outline. This outline did not merely condense ten weeks’ worth of content into six. Each course was evaluated using a backwards design approach, following several general steps. The first step was to review the course outcomes and make any necessary revisions to strengthen them. Next, the course topics and activities were organized so that each unit built upon the previous one, providing students with proper resources, practice, and assessment opportunities. In this phase, the curriculum team began to consider how the course structure would best support the conditions for learner motivation. Once a draft outline was in place, the actual revision process could begin. In this phase, the curriculum team was joined by an Academic Chair and Course Lead, a faculty assigned to provide content expertise to each course, as well as a designer who would build any media components and the course shell. This larger team reviewed and confirmed the six-week outline and analyzed available course metrics to identify areas where student success could be improved. Next, the course level assessments (CLAs) were reviewed to make sure they still offered the most appropriate evidence of student mastery of course outcomes. Once the CLA assessments were confirmed or revised, the team moved on to build the course units and activities, utilizing as much content from the ten-week course as possible.

The most critical part of the conversion model was making sure course activities were balanced and supportive of adult students. Prior to this conversion project, the ten-week online courses in the School of Graduate Education already included many of the instructional strategies commended by Wlodkowski (2008), such as course introductions, case studies, role playing, authentic assessments, and discussions. However, with the conversion to an accelerated six-week format, the importance of using motivational strategies became an even higher priority. Some of the motivational strategies that were employed with greater emphasis include:
• Establishing inclusion and developing attitude: introduction discussions, providing a purpose for each discussion and assignment, and outlining projects to scaffold learning and help students plan for the amount of time needed to be successful.

• Enhancing meaning: cumulative projects that are completed in smaller parts over 4-5 weeks and allow for formative assessment and feedback, role playing and case studies modeled on work place problems.

• Engendering competence: authentic assessments that mimic what students will do on the job in different academic settings and roles, and reflective journals.

The following is one example of how the six-week courses incorporate these motivational principles. Most of the six-week courses are structured around project-based learning. Project-based learning helps enhance meaning because it “builds on learners’ curiosity and interest, requiring students to develop knowledge and skills though an extended inquiry process involving authentic research that is central to the course, requiring learning products evaluated through performance-based assessment” (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 2010, p. 118). Course projects such as thematic unit plans, program assessments plans, school web sites, and research proposals, incorporate several strategies to address different conditions of motivation. They are designed to offer students realistic practice for the kind of work they will do in the workplace.

Scaffolding is a key aspect of these projects. Scaffolding involves “giving clues, information, prompts, reminders, and encouragement at the appropriate time and in the appropriate amounts, and then gradually allowing learners to do more and more independently” (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 2010, p. 83). To accomplish this, projects are broken into smaller components that students complete across several units, often starting as early as the first unit. These smaller components might be completed in discussions, in a collaborative wiki, or a dropbox assignment. They may be done individually or as a group. Students always get feedback from the instructor on these project components, and often from fellow classmates as well, through peer review or comments. Students have a chance to test their knowledge, discuss, get feedback, and revise their work before the final project submission.

This approach also provided for authentic assessment. Using authentic tasks to assess mastery has been used in adult education and training for many years. Wiggins (as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008) outlines several characteristics of authentic tasks. Authentic tasks are realistic, complex, and interactive. They require the learner to use real world knowledge, skill, and judgment in a manner that replicates or simulates the context they would find in real life. In addition, authentic assessments are revealed to the learner in advance and offer opportunities for formative, as well as summaries feedback to the learner (Wlodkowski, 2008). The projects that are used in the Graduate Education courses possess these authentic task characteristics.

For example, in a course on technology enhanced learning environments students assume the role of an Instructional Technologist and create a school or district technology web site. In the first unit they create a web site template in Google Sites and begin filling in information such as contact and district information, and setting up the links where various components will go as they create them throughout the course. In following units, they create additional components to add to the site. The project is outlined in the first unit and clearly shows students all the components that are needed in the final web site, as well as in which units they will work on them. The order of the components matches the order of the course topics. The components are developed in partner and individual assignments, some of which require student to post to a class wiki. Weekly discussions are used to share ideas and work-in-progress, and also explore course
topics in short case studies, where students apply their knowledge and skills. For example, the topic of Unit 2 is “Copyright, Fair Use, and Web 2.0 Technologies.” In this unit students develop a technology awareness training presentation and work with a partner to develop a school copyright policy. Both of these items will later become part of their web site. The topic of Unit 3 is “Open Source and Learning Repositories; Recycling and Redesigning Content.” In this unit students share information about open source repositories in the class wiki and participate in a case study discussion on creating a learning object repository for teachers and staff at an imaginary school district. Later they will add information and resources from open source repositories to their web site. This model continues through all six units. The end result is a robust web site that not only showcases what students learned, but is also a usable model for the kind of resources these future educational technologies will have to create on the job.

Conclusion

Using these and other motivational strategies, which are supported by the research on the attributes of successful accelerated courses, the curriculum team in the School of Graduate Education converted over 70 online courses form ten to six weeks during 2012 and 2013. As courses are being offered, course metrics (such as course level assessments and student grades) and feedback from students and faculty is being used assess the value and success of the six-week courses; and identify which practices work best, what areas need further attention and revision, and what future research is needed in this field.

References


Jahna B. Kahrhoff, Ph.D., Assistant Dean of Curriculum, School of Graduate Education, Curriculum & Innovation, Kaplan University: jkahrhoff@kaplan.edu

Presented at the Research-to Practice Conference in Adult and Higher Education, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO, September 20-21, 2013.