

Book Review

Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning

Ralf St. Clair

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015

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In the book *Creating Courses for Adults: Design for Learning*, Ralf St. Clair outlines critical elements for effective course design within adult learning contexts using a socio-cultural learning theory lens that is concerned with interactions between learning stakeholders during a teaching and learning process. The author's theoretical perspectives about learning, grounded in the above learning theory, influence his overall approach for the book. He believes that socio-cultural values—which recognize shared experiences and the value of situational interactions between teaching and learning stakeholders—should inform all educators' approach to design and learning, just as they do his.

At its core, the book speaks to the importance of investing deliberate and sufficient thought and effort into the process of designing and learning for adults. The author believes and stresses that failing to follow this intentional and rigorous approach would significantly undermine and compromise the value, impact and outcome of learning for all stakeholders involved—especially the learner.

The nine-chapter text is divided into two parts. The first part consists of three chapters which address what St. Clair considers to be the three key factors that must be taken into account for effective adult course creation: Educator factors (including their experience and learning/teaching philosophy and preferences); learner factors (including learner expectations, personalities and influences during learning); and contextual factors (such as learning location, spaces and environments). According to him, the ability of educators to meaningfully reflect on their teaching philosophy and approach as well as the underlying origins and assumptions is foundational to successful course creation. Combining this first step with a comprehensive understanding and accommodation of relevant learner and contextual factors, as part of the overall learning architecture by the educator, is the main thrust of part one.

In the second part, the author dedicates six chapters to unpacking the key categories of decisions that educators should make in relation to the three key factors (i.e. educator, learner and context) of course design expounded on in the first part. The foundational decision for course designers is presented as the ability to determine the objective or purpose of the course from a perspective that both integrates the formal course aims as well as the interests and needs of the learners who will be attending the course. The author stresses that educators should decide on an approach that also reflects the learners' particular interests (at least to a significant degree) as this would better support effective learning and realization of meaningful outcomes.

A dogmatic and inflexible approach that is more strictly oriented to formal course aims and educator preferences would ultimately do more harm than good for learner and learning due to its counterproductive outcomes.

The next decision the author outlines is about getting priorities right especially in regards to content selection, time allocation and content delivery within the allocated time. Educators must strive to strike a balance that ensures the right mix of the most important content within allocated course time and class sessions. Although experience helps, many experienced educators and designers still struggle with this real challenge and putting more careful thought and research into the design process might help alleviate this problem. Familiarity with and focus on the non-negotiables as part of the overall course architecture would help educators addressing too little or too much in the course.

Consistent with his philosophical orientation and overwhelming research evidence, the author highlights another important decision around how to engage and maintain a relationship with learners that supports the learning process throughout the course. He emphasizes the incorporation and promotion of collective and participatory teaching methods rather than course or class engagements based on top down or expert to students' teaching relationship models. Linked to this, St. Clair also thinks it is the role of educator course designers to decide on and build in an evaluation mechanism that allows for ongoing learner input (including anonymously, if necessary) throughout the course. This enhances the participatory approach to learning and enhances continuous improvement as the course progresses. This is a departure from the traditional practice where evaluations are only done at the end of the course or just twice during the course, with more emphasis generally given to the final evaluation when it is too late to change anything for the benefit of current learners.

The fifth decision area relates to how educators can make learning more visible or demonstrable. Here, the author suggests the consideration and inclusion of any relevant range of activities or tasks appropriate to course content that also reflect the connection the learners have made with the content and their understanding and mastery of key concepts. Finally, the author thinks that critical decisions need to be made around the transfer of learning from theory to practice, which he presents as a very critical aspect of course design. In doing this, he encourages educators to not only consider the possibilities, expectations and boundaries around transfer but also explore and exploit viable opportunities and strategies for it during the course design process. Finding the most effective ways to model how knowledge can be applied at each juncture in the course is pivotal to achieving the ultimate outcome of learning-which in my opinion is being able to optimize and/or apply the knowledge in an informed and productive or meaningful manner.

Throughout the book, St. Clair maintains that understanding the reasons for and process of designing assists educators with a grounded structural framework for engaging with their work in a thoughtful, planned, responsible and justifiable manner whilst allowing an adequate degree of flexibility for necessary adjustments. The author does a commendable job of unpacking the key interrelated factors and decisions that are involved in the process of educational course design for adults. Moreover, his work stimulates further and more critical thought around learning design considerations for important existing or emerging categories of adult learners with unique needs such as older adults and seniors whose learning needs, and therefore course design needs, may differ in certain aspects to those of younger adults.

Importantly, this text may serve as a catalyst for further research into how learning can be best designed and adapted for a range of unique adult learning contexts. Such areas of further

interrogation may include, but are not limited to, situations in which there is a significant mix of adults in a course (including very young, middle age and much older or senior adults) and how the interplay of key factors and key decisions affect the design and learning required. It might also serve as a foundation for targeted empirical studies focussing on how adult educators can effectively navigate situations in which they are faced with serious or significant resource challenges, amongst others, in course design projects.

Overall, I applaud the author for this integrated and holistic approach to adult course design in an excellent piece that is not only relevant for both new and older educators and course designers but also insightful and useful for decision-making amongst important adult learning stakeholders and practitioners across disciplines. St. Clair's book comes highly recommended as a vital go-to manual that should be used as a necessary component of adult learning design resources for everyone with an interest in optimizing the way in which learning is designed and operationalized for adults.

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