



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

"MASTERING" ONLINE COURSES

What process do we implement that continually updates online instruction? How do we produce and update online courses in a cost-efficient manner yet still maintain quality? How can we make sure that this delivery mode is not just making mediocre or poorly designed courses available to greater numbers of students?

Houston Community College is developing a new approach with selected courses. The "master course" is a "best practices" course, each developed by a team of faculty for online delivery in distance-learning and hybrid environments, and available to all. Master courses provide the core curriculum requirements as set forth by disciplines and meet a standardized rubric for course design and quality.

Faculty still have the flexibility and are encouraged to personalize the master course core curriculum by including their own discussion groups, exercises, chat sessions, special assignments, streamed media files, additional selected readings, and other features.

Master courses have a number of potential advantages. They can improve instruction by making a high-quality course available for all faculty to access, lower development costs by creating one core course and then updating it periodically, and include a greater number of faculty in both the teaching and group planning process. Courses selected for development are usually those that experience high student demand and already have multiple sections offered through distance education and hybrid modes each semester. Core curriculum courses are good examples, but master courses can be at any level in any subject area.

Master courses must include a discipline-approved instructor's guide, including a syllabus, a detailed set of instructional resources, and other materials. This helps ensure that courses are of good quality and that future instructors can teach that course. Course assessment instruments measure instructional effectiveness.

Prior to the introduction of master course development, individual faculty members created all HCC distance-learning courses separately. In most cases, each

received a course development stipend. As a result, in some of the required and most popular core curriculum areas (history, government, mathematics, etc.), 10 or more faculty offered separate sections of the same course that they had developed individually.

HCC has seen distance-education enrollment increase at an annual rate of nearly 20% over the past six years. Large numbers of hybrid and distance-learning courses, as well as other online-assisted instructional modules, were being created each academic year, and development costs were becoming increasingly expensive.

Using the master course approach, a faculty development team is assembled within a specific discipline, and team members create a high-quality course; a \$1,650 stipend is awarded to each member. Revisions are made whenever necessary or appropriate.

Perhaps even more beneficial, once this master module has been created and peer approved, all faculty assigned to teach the course can use it. This allows qualified faculty (all instructors new to distance learning are required to go through a technology certification process) to begin with a well-designed, technology-assisted course without having to create "from scratch."

Versatility is improved. Faculty can use the online master course as a complete, web-based, distance-learning course—or as a complement or corresponding resource to on-campus instruction. Previously, courses were created and used only for their original, singular, and specific purpose—distance learning or hybrid.

Faculty and administrative collaboration is one of the most vital components of master course development. Therefore, the selection of the master course faculty team is critical. To ensure fairness, HCC uses a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, with rating criteria, to select team members. The opportunity is publicized widely to both full-time and adjunct faculty. Experience in teaching either an online or hybrid course is required.

Faculty development teams are selected after RFP's are evaluated. An instructional design specialist is assigned to each team to help ensure instructional quality. The team must represent a minimum of at least two dif-



ferent colleges from the six-college HCC system, which means that faculty who have not collaborated previously will now do so productively.

Team design also brings a variety of teaching perspectives into the development process. All team members must attend a full-day orientation workshop, conducted by instructional development and media specialists. They are required to research similar courses taught at the college, state, and national levels to create a truly exemplary course.

Progress is peer-reviewed throughout the course development process by appropriate representatives of the disciplines and instructional specialists. Final course approval is required by each of these groups prior to offering the course to students. Development stipends are then awarded to each member of the faculty team. The new master course must be taught by each member of that team for a minimum of two subsequent semesters. Members of the course-development and peer-review teams are required to sign letters of agreement, committing to the timely and high-quality completion of the master course, as well as meeting all other requirements.

Online instruction provides a new kind of educational opportunity, offering greater accessibility and availability. It is not meant to replace face-to-face, on-campus instruction—and never will. There always will be a place for both. Online courses are best for students who are self-motivated and willing to pursue knowledge actively. Because online instruction requires independence, in combination with high levels of interactivity and community building, and because it is such a fast-changing environment, challenges and room for improvement will continue to be considerable. It is an area rich in opportunity to search out, develop, and integrate new technologies with quality course development and instructional design.

Although the master course program is still in its infancy, HCC believes it successfully encourages faculty to redesign and improve online instruction. Larger numbers of both full- and part-time faculty can integrate the particulars of these courses into their teaching activities, and students are offered a more consistent level of quality, online instruction. Houston Community College foresees that master courses will make a significant and positive instructional impact on its ever-growing online student and faculty population.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

February 17, 2006, Vol. XXVIII, No. 5

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545.
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