Unit 3 : Developing a course outline

Contents page

Introduction

A writer's first job will usually be to develop a course outline. Often, course planning is still at an early stage when a writer is appointed, and much work will have to be done before writing starts. Editor and writers should work closely together. How can you advise a writer on developing an outline? This unit will help you to do this.

When you have completed the unit, you should be able to:

* list and describe the stages in planning an outline;
* describe different methods for developing an outline;
* define the likely roles of an editor in planning the outline;
* brief and advise a writer on developing an outline.

This unit does not attempt to train you in developing an outline yourself, but it will guide you on working with others. You will need about 2 hours to work through the unit. Assignment B is an important project, and you should be prepared to spend several hours on it.

1. What is a course outline?

A course outline is a document which serves as a guideline for all those involved in course development. It will normally state:

- the course title
- who it is for
- aims and objectives
- the course contents
- how it will be taught (including media used)
- how it will be assessed
- how long it will take

A course outline is therefore considerably more than a syllabus or list of lesson titles.

Example 1 shows a course outline for a correspondence course developed by the Zambian Co-operative College. A team of five people prepared this document before they started writing.

EXERCISE 1

Study the outline again and check that each of the seven points mentioned earlier is covered. Do you have any comments on the outline? Note them below.

(10 minutes)

Comment

The outline is on the whole simple and clear. Note that since it is a correspondence course (that is, printed lessons), the heading 'Other teaching strategies' describes support materials such as audio-tapes. In this case, the writers have been cautious, as they are unsure about resources. On the other hand they want to arrange a residential course, perhaps rather a long one for such a short correspondence course. An editor would want to discuss this proposal with the writers.

The final heading, 'Resource Material', needs some comment. The writers agree that they will all use the same book for reference and ideas for their writing, and they have noted it here as a reminder.

COURSE OUTLINE

Basic business calculations for co-operatives

Target Group:

Salesmen and ladies both in primary societies and Provincial Unions' consumer shops, boards of directors of primary societies, depot supervisors and other interested persons not necessarily operating within the co-operative movement.

Minimum academic qualifications : Grade VIII

Aims and Objectives:

(i) To enable participants to work out simple business calculations as a basis for decision making

(ii) To enable participants to collect and present data for management decisions in the daily business operations

Lesson Titles:

Lesson 1 : Basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division
Lesson 2 : Fractions and decimals
Lesson 3 : (i) Rounding-off of figures
(ii) Rough estimates and averages
Lesson 4 : Basic percentages
(i) Introduction to percentages
(ii) Percentage changes
Lesson 5 : Mark up and margin
Lesson 6 : Discounts and interest and member's bonus
Lesson 7 : Areas and volumes

Assessment:

(i) Out of 7 lessons there will be 6 assignments. The first assignment will consist of questions from lessons 1 and 2
(ii) Assignments will be part of the continuous assessment
(iii) Assignments will be sent after every lesson except for lesson 1
(iv) Multiple choice questions will be included but to a lesser extent
(v) There will be an exam at the end of lesson 7 and it will cover all the lessons

Other Teaching Strategies:

(i) Other teaching strategies will be added should resources allow
(ii) A residential course for a few days, will be considered

Study Time:

(i) Each lesson will require 5 to 6 hours of study time
(ii) Duration of the course will be six months

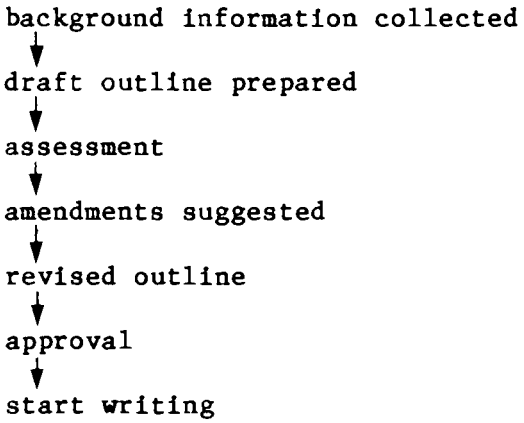
Resource Material:

The main source will be the booklet produced by the Co-operative College on Basic Business Calculations.

EXAMPLE 1: Course outline for correspondence course 'Basic Business Calculations for Co-operatives', Zambian Co-operative College, Lusaka, Zambia

2. Stages in developing an outline

Example 1 showed what is, strictly speaking, a draft outline. The diagram below shows the stages of developing an outline.



The first three stages will be discussed in some detail below. But first, let us consider who works on the outline.

3. Who prepares the outline?

It is important that at least one subject specialist is involved in developing an outline. Apart from that, it could be a group of writers, a mixed group of writers and editors, or a course team chairman. Usually an editor will advise on background information, but may be more centrally involved as well.

At this point, let us consider the idea of a course team. When the Open University of Great Britain starts planning a new course, it creates a team of writers, editors, educational technologists and broadcasters, all of whom develop the course together. In practice, an individual may work on one bit of a course, while a small group may work on another bit. The team as a whole, however, has responsibility for the final product and must plan their work as a group.

Several other institutions have a team approach to writing, while others will only have one writer for each course. However at the course planning stage, team work of some kind is desirable. It may be a team of two, writer and editor, or team work between writer and a temporary advisory group. For assessment (see section 6) some sort of advisory group is essential.

4. Collecting preliminary information

In order to prepare a draft outline, some preliminary information is needed. It is often the editor's responsibility to collect this information, and the next exercise asks you to think about this.

EXERCISE 2

You want a writer to prepare an outline for a correspondence course on programming a microcomputer to go with a twelve-week television series (one broadcast a week). What information must you get in order to brief the writer? (You do not need to know anything about computing to complete this exercise.)

(10 minutes)

Comment

First, obviously, the writer needs to know what the subjects of the television programmes will be - the syllabus. Will students study by correspondence over exactly the same period as the television series, or can the course be extended after the series is ended? Is the correspondence course restricted to covering the same topics, in the same order? Or can it have aims which go beyond the television series? What, in fact, are the constraints on the writer in preparing the outline? Are the aims of the course broad or narrow?

Next, the writer will need to know if he or she will be able to use any other printed materials besides the course units. There may, for example, be an instruction manual that goes with the microcomputer. Such a manual may already cover certain topics adequately, and it may suggest an order of presentation for the topics.

Third, the writer needs information about the potential students. Who are they? What sort of background do they have? Why are they expected to be interested in the course? What will they hope to gain from it? How much time will they be likely to study each week? In what circumstances? And, important for this particular course, will they all have access to a microcomputer? If so, how often and where? In their own homes or in a study centre?

The writer will also need to know about plans for tuition. How many correspondence assignments can be planned? Will there be meetings with tutors? For everyone, or just some students?

Information on the budget is also needed. This is not directly relevant to the writer, but will allow the editor to make suggestions on design possibilities, quantity of illustrations or total number of pages that may help the writer to shape the outline.

Finally, any evaluation data on previous similar courses could offer guidance on teaching the subject at a distance.

The same kinds of information are needed for any course: the syllabus;

textbooks, other resources or media available; the students' characterstics, tuition arrangements and face-to-face support, design constraints and possibilities; and evaluation data. Most writers will need an editor's help in sifting through this information, particularly if they are new to distance education.

5. Preparing the outline

The course outline in Example 1 looked simple, but it took a long time to develop. Let us consider why. We will start with the familiar idea of an examination syllabus.

EXERCISE 3

Why might a course outline differ from a printed examination syllabus? How might it be different? Think about this for a few minutes, and jot down some ideas.

(5 minutes)

Comment

The examination syllabus defines the knowledge that must be learned and the skills that must be performed. It does not necessarily present them in an order suitable for teaching, and it does not concern itself with how the learner is going to obtain the knowledge and skills. It does not indicate how thoroughly the material should be covered. It is a convention for some syllabuses to cover a wider range of topics than students are expected to have studied. An exam syllabus may suggest how learners are to demonstrate their knowledge (a 3-hour essay paper, a 2-hour practical examination). It will not describe the skills the student must master on the way to that ultimate performance.

Suppose, for example, you teach a foreign language. The examination will expect students to be able to understand, speak, read and write that language with a level of fluency specified in the syllabus. To achieve that fluency, students have to learn, gradually, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and gain experience in using the language. They have to acquire skills in, for example, developing arguments, writing descriptions, analysing the meaning of prose. Advanced skills are developed slowly and systematically; you put words together first in sentences, then in paragraphs, then in essays. In order to acquire these competencies, you need to call on yet other skills, those of studying. You have to read carefully, select points to focus on, make relevant notes, memorise efficiently. Students generally need help in developing such study skills.

You must also consider the learners themselves, and their background. A

university student of languages, for example, might learn well from a relatively traditional type of course containing a fair amount of grammar; an adult immigrant with a poor formal education may, on the other hand, need a functional approach to the language of his or her host country, starting with everyday phrases. And what about the study environment of the learners? Will they only study a little at a time? Or are they committed students who will expect to spend two or more hours at a stretch in intensive study? For the first group, the study material has to be broken into small segments, while for the others, topics can be given a longer treatment. What kind of face-to-face or correspondence tutorial support will they have? What other media will be used, and what will their function be? All these questions can affect the choice of subject matter and teaching priorities and the sequencing of the curriculum.

5.1 Choice of subject matter

The final choice is a matter for the subject specialist, but an editor can direct attention to the issues by asking questions such as these:

- Are all the topics suggested necessary?
- Have any important topics been omitted?
- Has sufficient priority been given to the most important topics?
- Has enough emphasis been put on each different aspect of the subject?
- Will the choice of topics enable students to develop their understanding of the subject?

5.2 Order of subject matter

In any learning, there are certain skills to be mastered or information to be learnt before the student can move to the next stage. When we arrange topics in order, we need to ask which ones are dependent on others, or which require skills to be learnt beforehand. The editor, again, can ask questions about order, such as the following:

- Is the basic material before the advanced material?
- Is the specific material before the general material?
- Is the easy material before the difficult material?
- Is the simple material before the complex material?

The most suitable order for teaching is often different from that given in a syllabus or textbook.

5.3 Generating ideas

There is no best way of doing this. You can act as a catalyst, suggesting approaches. Many approaches work, and each team or individual would do well to gravitate towards an approach that suits them. Here are some ideas for different approaches:

a. Make a list of topics or unit titles. Juggle them around till the order seems to make sense.

b. Define all the skills students should have on completion. Formulate these as behavioural objectives. Put the objectives in order.

c. Brainstorm in a group. Each person in turn mentions something that must go into the course, one thing at a time. All ideas

are written down. When people run short of ideas, you look at what you have and try to put it in some sort of order.

d. Assessing other sources. Look at textbooks, curricula at other universities or colleges, different syllabuses in the subject, and any other available models of how to teach the subject.

An outline may take weeks to prepare. The editor will have to give regular encouragement to the writers.

5.4 Organising material into an outline

You can provide writers with a list of headings to help them finalise the outline. Here is an example.

1. Title of course/study programme
2. Target group
3. Aims and objectives
4. Course components (media used, number of study units, etc.)
5. List of unit titles/objectives
6. Number and placing of assignments; other assessment
7. How media are used (eg purpose of radio programmes)
8. Any special features/problems
9. Other resources to be used (eg textbooks)

Some institutions prefer outlines to be presented in a standard manner. If this applies to you, you may like to use the list above to design a form for your writers to fill in with their course outlines.

6. Assessing the outline

It is wise for the writer to seek advice on the outline before moving ahead, and the editor should organise this assessment. Assessment may be carried out in several ways. An outline may be submitted to an academic advisory committee, discussed in a course team, or considered by simply an editor and an academic assessor. In a writing workshop, the outline will usually be agreed by the participants, and this group assessment can replace outside assessment. A complete course outline should always be prepared and checked before much writing is done. It is, however, often useful for a writer to prepare a sample unit at the same time as an outline is developed, to get an idea how the course will work out in practice.

As part of the assessment, the editor checks on some practical points. If the outline suggests residential courses, or laboratory work, will it be possible to make arrangements for these? If broadcasts are proposed, will it be possible to get air-time at suitable times of day? If a course is to be based on a textbook which students must have, is the book available at a suitable price? To check, you must refer to the source of supply. Make sure that the director of educational broadcasting, for example, knows of your plans, and check on a book's availability with the publisher, not just the local bookshop.

7. The editor's role in planning

The previous sections show that the editor has three functions during the planning of an outline:

* to co-ordinate, making sure everything proceeds smoothly

* to facilitate, by providing information and identifying sources of assistance

* to advise, raising questions and suggesting approaches to problems

EXERCISE 4

Go back through the unit and make a checklist of things to do during course planning.

(15 minutes)

Comment

My list would include collecting information as outlined in section 4, suggesting approaches to making an outline, discussing the outline, finding advisors to contribute ideas or to assess the outline, checking on resources, and arranging meetings and target dates so that the process is complete by the specified time.

Summary

This unit has looked at how a course outline is developed and considered the editor's role. I have suggested that you should take an active part in the development of the outline, where necessary taking the lead in arranging team meetings. In particular, you should:

- collect background information for writers
- suggest approaches to generating ideas
- discuss critically their ideas
- design a standard format for presenting the outline
- arrange the assessment
- check on any outside resources proposed

A further role is to support the writers throughout what may be a long process, and ensure progress by firm scheduling.

ASSIGNMENT B

This is a long-term project. Find out all you can about the students your institution aims to teach. Who are they? What educational background do they have? What circumstances do they study in? What resources do they have access to, such as libraries or laboratories? What are their aspirations? What problems do they have? Find out all you can, from research reports, student records, and any other written sources. Try to arrange discussions with student advisers and tutors. And try to arrange to meet some students; you will learn a great deal from a few conversations.

This assignment will help you marshal the information you need for briefing writers. But it is also essential for the rest of this manual. Without a good understanding of your students, you cannot be an effective editor.

Institutions vary a lot in the amount of information they have available on their students. If you find your own institution has very little available, or if you work for a new institution which has not yet accumulated much, try to read a report on students from another distance-teaching institution in your own country or your region of the world.

Be prepared to spend several hours on this project. You can, however, carry on reading Unit 4 before you complete the assignment.