

# Staying Mission-Centered:

## How a Curriculum Development Model Can Help Keep Online Courses Focused

If you have ever thought that spending time on institutional mission statements is a waste, you are not alone. It can be frustrating to devote seemingly endless hours crafting a statement that, at times, seems to do little to guide practice. And despite the good intentions of their developers, these statements rarely become what they intended—a guide to everyday decision-making. In this article, we'll share a process to help make the mission statement a reality—the Mission-Infinity Model. (See Figure 1 on page 6.)

Created to guide the designing and developing of online curricula and instruction, the model starts and concludes with mission. It begins by identifying the focus or purpose of the course and ends by checking to see if the desired outcomes were realized. It was named the Mission-Infinity (M-I) Model because it looks somewhat like the mathematical sign for infinity ( $\infty$ ). The M-I Model is thus a reminder of the need for continuous development—throughout the entire process of curriculum development.

Designing and developing curriculum involves two parallel processes: thinking and doing. The M-I Model reveals the dualistic nature of this process. Of course, thinking and doing are not, and never should be, wholly separated. However, it can be helpful to think about them independently in relation to curriculum development. The Thinking Stage deals with activities that are necessary to achieve clarity in the following areas: (1) the broad purposes of the course, (2) desired student outcomes, (3) ways to obtain those outcomes, and (4) instructional methods and materials that are likely to accomplish the goals. The Doing Stage deals with the activities necessary to produce the desired results: (5) constructing, (6) implementing, and (7) evaluating the outcomes of the course. The model thus ends up with seven primary steps—a quintessential number for Adventist educators.

**By Randall J. Siebold and Jim Jeffery**

### **THINKING STAGE: Step 1—Mission**

First, consider questions such as these: Why do you want to develop this course? What part does it play in the larger school program? Who are the learners? What are they like? How does it fit into the mission and vision of your school, department, or—arguably even more important—into your personal mission?

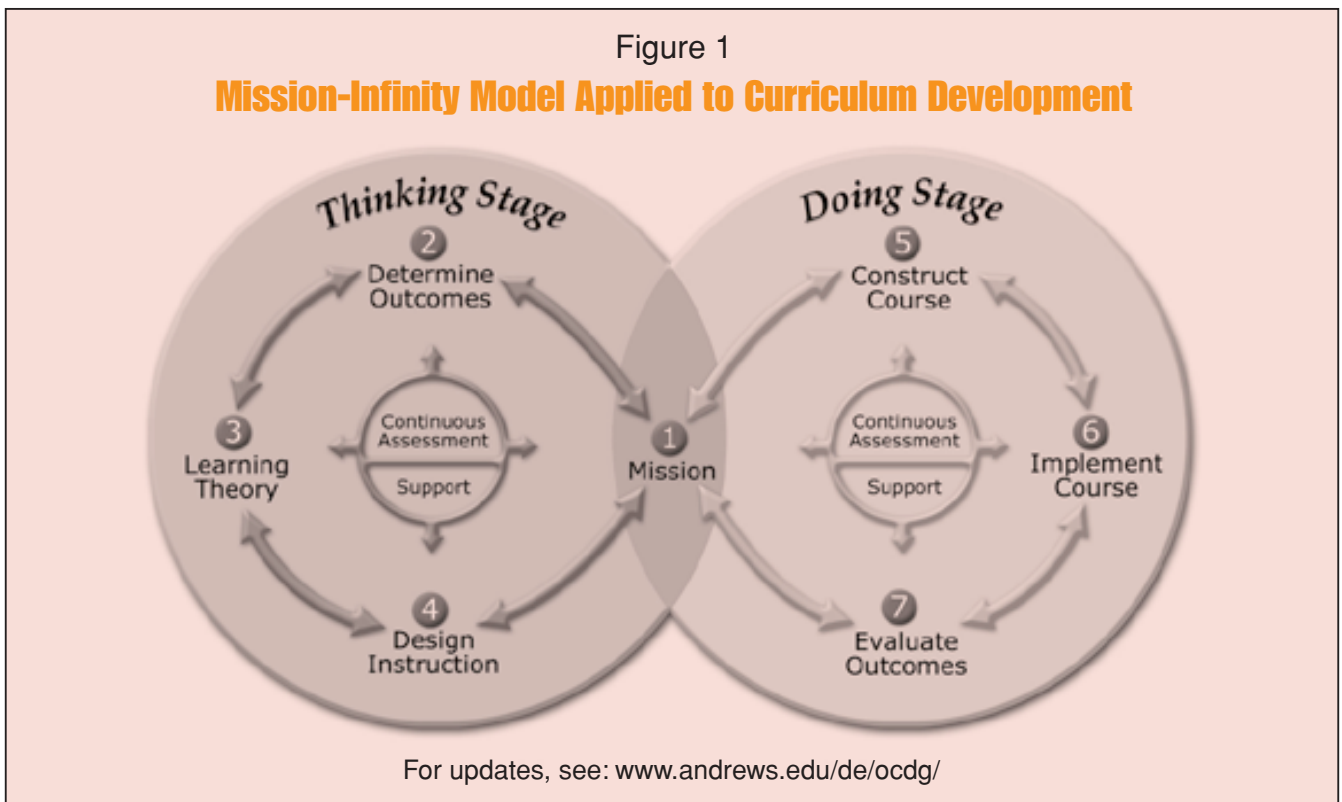
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These questions, especially for those with a practical bent, may be tempting to discard. Nevertheless, they must be thought through and clearly addressed. Another important component of course development is ensuring the material's congruence with the philosophy of Adventist education,<sup>1</sup> which seeks to renew the image of God in humankind. Using these guidelines to reflect on the goals of the course will help focus your planning.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another component of mission is knowing your audience. Are there target groups you can reach only with an on-line presence? What technology do they need to own and understand to take the course? Do they have the determination and commitment to overcome the gaps of time and distance to stay engaged?

As in a face-to-face class, distance-education teachers get to know their students as the class progresses (unless they



have taught them previously).

When planning the course, be sure to allow for individual variability. Permitting learners to choose different ways of completing assignments, using the principles of multiple intelligences, will relieve student anxiety. Include in your syllabus a statement asking students to inform you about any special needs they may have.

If you are flexible and committed to “do whatever it takes” to keep students active and involved, the class will be enjoyable for everyone.

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### Step 2—Determine Outcomes

Once the audience and the purpose of the course are understood, you must ask yourself, What are the anticipated outcomes? What goals and objectives do I expect to accomplish? What specific skills, knowledge, or attitudes should the learners acquire from taking the course?

Still being debated in distance learning is whether the out-

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comes of online courses should be the same as those of traditional courses. While we initially leaned toward the notion of keeping the outcomes, goals, and objectives the same, our view has changed somewhat. We have found that the *method of delivery* shapes the course, changes the instructional methods, and alters the experience; in short, the outcomes are different.

### Step 3—Learning Theory

The next, and often forgotten, question is: How do students become like what you have envisioned? In other words, under what circumstances do people attain the goals or outcomes that you have set? When writing or teaching a course online, it is important to understand how people learn in this environment. How can you use an electronic environment to

facilitate learning?

It helps, at this point, to refer to the research on learning theories (i.e., behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, etc.) to see how they can be applied (through instructional design), based on the outcomes you have chosen. If you have selected “renewal of the image of God” as an outcome, you must ask: How is that accomplished? While secular research on learning theory has made great strides in understanding the learner, on this outcome it appears to be silent. Until spiritually discerning learning theorists address this objective, Christian educators must combine their beliefs about how people learn with their knowledge about God’s attributes (relational, collaborative, one who values service, choice, the individual, etc.) in order to design instruction that is consistent with their understanding of the divine character.

### Step 4—Design Instruction

After clarifying the mission, determining course outcomes, and clarifying your understanding of learning theories,

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it is time to begin the instructional design process. (Keep in mind that this process is not necessarily sequential.) At this point, various approaches to instructional design can be used (i.e., problem-based learning, direct instruction, etc.), provided they are consistent with Steps 1 to 3.<sup>3</sup> While not advocating any particular method, we do encourage course developers to find ways to connect the mission, outcomes, learning theory, and instructional design approach. Here is one approach that has worked well for us: (a) choose a general instructional approach, (b) select learning experiences or activities based on that approach, (c) identify the resources that learners will need, and (d) develop appropriate evaluation or assessment activities.

Whatever the instructional approach, we have found that many outcomes are best achieved through brief, well-directed, real-life activities. In addition, we suggest giving students an abundance of resources. These can be made available by providing links to a multitude of Web sites.

In an online class, devoting the first week for introductions or even scheduling a pre-week can be an effective way to get to know your students. Include specific directions in the syllabus to encourage students to participate. (Be sure to include the Web site they are to access for the class and instructions on how to use passwords to enter the site and obtain relevant resources such as library information. Double check this information to be sure it is listed correctly in the syllabus.)

Keep an open mind as you develop the course. Don't mechanically apply traditional techniques or unthinkingly draw upon previous course work. Instead, review what others have done and reflect upon your own beliefs about how people learn, as well as your own educational experiences. These will help provide a framework on which to design the instruction.

### **DOING STAGE: Step 5—Construct the Course**

Once the instruction has been designed, it must be constructed. This is the first step in the “Doing Stage.” Keep in mind that the instructional approach, with its corresponding activities, resources, and assessments, should be the basis for media selection and application. The characteristics of the

learner and the impact of the designed learning environment are important.<sup>4</sup> The visual and information design (also referred to as interface design) should be aesthetically pleasing and in harmony with the learner's skills and understandings. As you select the visual elements and resources, be sure to review the rules relating to use of intellectual property. Obtain copyright permissions for articles, photographs, graphics, and multimedia elements that you wish to use in your course.

If you feel intimidated at the prospect of creating your own Web site, you may want to consider a course management system (i.e., WebCT or Blackboard). At the EduTools Web site,<sup>5</sup> you can find comparative reviews of almost 40 course management systems like ANGEL, Colloquia, First-Class, The Learning Manager, Anlon, COSE, IntraLearn, Theorix, Avilar, WebMentor, and eCollege. Many of these systems have features like bulletin boards, chat rooms, whiteboards, quiz options, and calendars you can choose. While most of these systems require a significant investment, other Web-based learning environments are free. For example, virtually anyone can set up a class in minutes and allow others to join at the Nicenet site.<sup>6</sup> With the recent improvements in course development systems, creating an online course can be

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relatively simple. You do not even have to know HTML or any programming languages. Many of the course management systems have helpful instructions that guide you through the entire process—including the creation of lessons and tests and the addition of graphics, sound, and a wide variety of other features. The outcome is a complete, easy-to-navigate online course. With the help of a good courseware management system, the learning possibilities are almost limitless!

If you still feel insecure about teaching using an online format, we suggest that you enroll in an online course. You could take (1) an online class in your discipline from a recognized university or (2) a course about how to teach online. “Active Online Teaching” (through AVLN) has modules on creating stimulating learning experiences and integrating faith.<sup>7</sup> Also, don't be afraid to ask for help. Consult your campus tech-support department, call the software manufacturer,

talk to people who have taught an online class, and ask your students for assistance. Students can be a marvelous help in course construction, since they tend to have strong technology and Internet skills. They are also on the cutting edge of pop culture and know what kind of design appeals to young people. They are excellent Web surfers and can find relevant links (course resources) on the Web much faster than the average teacher can.<sup>8</sup>

Several suggestions: Avoiding “shovelware” (a derogatory term for pages upon pages of text placed on Web sites for students to read). Break up assignments or activities into small chunks. Research suggests that when reading online, most people don’t read the whole page. Accordingly, you might try highlighting the main points with bullets, or use graphics to make a point or to clarify or reinforce important concepts. If the type is to be read on-screen, use larger fonts to ease eye-strain. Consider your learners’ developmental levels and access to technological support before choosing and inserting sound and video clips.

A final word of advice: Avoid animation that may look “cute” but distracts from the essential message of the text.

### **Step 6—Implement the Course**

Once the online course is ready to go, you can use many different strategies to implement it. In the traditional classroom, most of us are accustomed to leading out (usually from the front of the room). In an online environment, this may not be necessary or even desirable. Many online teachers find themselves becoming facilitators of student learning rather than lecturers. Online facilitation falls into three categories: facilitating synchronous, or live, events; moderating asynchro-

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nous discussions; and coaching learners. Be sure to respond promptly to each participant’s messages, especially early in the course, and stay in touch regularly. This will help ensure that all class members feel comfortable in the online setting. This requires a delicate balance—neither monopolizing the conversation nor abandoning online learners to their own devices. If participants do not routinely participate in discussions, try encouraging them with behind-the-scenes E-mail. Through frequent contacts with class members, you can keep the class alive, encourage community, and prevent stagnation. Through experience, we have found it useful to let our personalities show through. This helps us draw out our students and makes them feel more comfortable in the electronic learning environment. Many instructors use introductions, biographies, and photos to help encourage a sense of community.

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During the initial week of class, have students check in and do some introductory assignments. Their performance will offer clues about their ability to access the class (technological issues) and their commitment to fulfilling its requirements. Encourage students to introduce themselves in the bulletin board, explain why they are taking the class, and describe their comfort level with online learning. You could set up a chat room and have a synchronous discussion about your expectations for student participation and describe how online learning is different from face-to-face classes. You may find it helpful to have students take a learning-style assessment test and report their findings to you.

If students need to use library databases online, this would be the time to determine whether they know how to do so. Do not hesitate to telephone students who are having trouble functioning in the class. Further, if you have technical support at your institution, encourage students to take advantage of their services. If not, learn to problem solve. Is the roadblock with the Internet provider, the processing capability of the student's computer, or his or her inability to follow directions?

Achieving the spiritual outcomes of Adventist education is also possible online. Besides building this into the course design, the instructor needs to find ways to make this happen through interactions with students. It can occur serendipitously as the instructor and students suggest prayer in chat rooms, include praise and request spaces in bulletin boards, and in general, seek to keep the "tone" of the class spiritual.

### Step 7—Evaluate Outcomes

In this step, you compare the actual outcomes to the expected outcomes and the mission. This serves to emphasize the total goals of the course and allows change and adaptation as needed.

Assessment should not occur only at the end of the class, but also at regular intervals throughout the course. To ensure a successful outcome, you may need to change your behavior, attitudes, usage, and practice even while the class is progressing. Be sure to regularly review the nature of the discussions to see if it is necessary to adjust the activities to reflect the group's interests and progress. Then, when the class is over, join the students in reflecting on how things went. Use this data to determine whether your class objectives were achieved.

### Conclusion

Christian education is more than the transfer of information, "more than the pursuit of a certain course of study." Each of us needs to keep in mind the reason why we teach, why we invest the time to construct new courses. We must never lose sight of our mission in the glitter of technology. The design of instruction is more important than the technology. Instruction must drive the use of technology; the way people learn should drive instruction; the types of outcomes we have chosen must drive course design; and our mission must drive our choice of student outcomes.

Use of the Infinity Model can help to clarify the complex process of designing and developing an online course. We believe that the model can help teachers as they create online courses and programs—and perhaps even as they teach in face-to-face classrooms. ✍



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This article has been peer-reviewed.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See <http://circle.adventist.org>.
2. See <http://www.avln.org/faith/index.htm>.
3. While the model does not specifically explore instructional design, other such resources do exist. Most of these resources have significant overlap between other steps in the Mission-Infinity Model and the Design Instruction step: Walter Dick, Lou Carey, and James O. Carey, *The Systematic Design of Instruction* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 2000); Robert M. Gagne, Leslie J. Briggs, and Walter W. Wager, *Principles of Instructional Design* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992); S. Metrick, T. Dash, D. Ethier, and K. Johnson, *Distance Education: Software Tools and Design Criteria*. NEC '99 [online] Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC): <http://www.edc.org/LNT/workshops/process.pdf>; or Patricia L. Smith and Rillman J. Ragan, *Instructional Design* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999).
4. Possible constraints may include state regulations, accreditation requirements, time or financial barriers, and/or learner needs such as online requirements or technical skills or abilities. Refer back to the mission and learner analysis for solutions.
5. See EduTools 2002 at <http://www.edutools.info/course/productinfo/index.jsp/>.
6. See Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant at <http://216.218.240.180>.
7. <http://www.avln.org/learning/aot/index.htm>.
8. These suggestions are from Merlin Wittenberg and his student helpers in Educational Technology Services at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee.
9. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.