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How Much Work to Assign in our Courses?

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Instructional Design

No matter what type of course we are designing, we have to keep in mind how much time we are expecting learners to spend. When thinking about time expectations, there are a number of things to consider, beginning with the expectation set by those who are asking for the course or training module.

When designing training courses in the corporate world, we often get specific requirements for how long the training should take to complete. Those might be altered based on initial analysis and generating outcomes, but by and large we often get a particular amount of time to work with. When we create the learning guides for face-to-face instructor-led trainings or the eLearning modules for self-paced online trainings, we can relatively easily gauge the time they will take to complete. We can walk through the instructor guides and have colleagues or volunteers go through our eLearning modules to test how long they take to complete.

In the academic world, however, estimating course completion times is a bit more complex. In designing a course for an institution of higher education, time estimates are governed by credit hours. While there are alternatives to this, government regulation for programs that receive federal financial aid are largely locked in to using credit hours (Laitinen 2012).

We could debate the issue of credits vs. direct assessment, but I will leave that to my colleagues in higher education leadership. For now, let us consider the issues involved with credit hours. When we are given a 3 or 4 credit hour course to design, the institution usually has an idea of how much work that should be, as measured in time. This is because the federal government has set a standard for programs that receive federal financial aid. This comes out to be anywhere from 30 to 45 hours of activity per credit hour depending on the institution and their accrediting bodies.

It's important to go one more layer into this and ask what caliber of work a student is able to produce when working the full

number of hours estimated by the federal government. While the time estimates are intended to provide the hours necessary for “satisfactory” completion, i.e. a C, or technically a D for undergraduate non-major coursework, some universities have laid it out clearly that this is the work required for average students to earn an average score. This means that the coursework may take more or less time depending on the caliber of student and the desired grade they are working toward (Credit hours, 2012).

So that is where the parameters are set for the design. Yet, even with that knowledge about how long the course is supposed to take, how do we know how much reading, writing, and other activities to assign in order to stay close to that university-set parameter? While many of us probably proceed based on gut instinct, there are significant problems with that approach, the most important of which is the novice-expert gap.

Traditionally we think of this gap in terms of content knowledge and the ability of subject-matter experts to impart their knowledge to novices in the field. Here however, I am thinking about it slightly differently, in that the knowledge I am referring to is not the content of the course being designed but rather knowledge about the academic process. What is at issue here is not how much I or the subject-matter expert I am working with knows and how much we forget that a novice doesn't know. The issue surrounds how much I know or don't know about reading for understanding, researching for writing, and outlining, drafting, and revising. These are even more basic than the specialized content knowledge I have about instructional design or anthropology, and therefore are more easily forgotten if I just go with my gut with regard to how much reading or writing I should assign.

The obvious solution to this is to go with researched estimates of reading and writing times. However, you might be surprised how little these topics have been researched. And, while it might be nice to attempt to research this ourselves, many of us simply don't have the time. Fortunately, Drs. Elizabeth Barre and Justin Esarey have already done so and built a [Course Workload Estimator web app](#). This [blog post](#) details the genesis of the estimator.

What I find most helpful as an instructional designer are the data tables they created regarding reading rates and writing rates. Drs. Barre and Esarey note quite clearly that these are estimates, but they are the best researched estimates that are readily available to instructors and instructional designers on the web. If you are at all interested in looking at how much time it likely takes to do the work you are assigning, I highly recommend reviewing the tables found in Drs. Barre and Esarey's estimation details [here](#). You may be surprised. I found that I was significantly underestimating the time required for many tasks I was assigning.

Cover Image Credit: Photo by [Jon Tyson](#) on [Unsplash](#)

References:

- [Barre, E. \(2016\). How How Much Should We Assign? Estimating Out of Class Workload. Center for Teaching Excellence, Rice University.](#)
- [Credit hours. 8 University Senate Rules, The Ohio State University §24 \(2012\).](#)
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About the Author

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