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Ann T. Luck, an instructional designer at Penn State,
helps Gary Kuhne create an electronic version of his course.

GREG GRIECO FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Turning Traditional Courses Into Distance Education

## Instructional designers translate professors' teaching styles into electronic content

BY DAN CARNEVALE

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NOT LONG AGO, a professor of adult education told Ann T. Luck that he asks students in his classes to break into small groups when they have a topic to discuss. He likes to walk from group to group, taking part in the discussions, before returning to the front of the classroom to lecture.

For an instructor, that's a simple tactic. It was Ms. Luck's job to let him do the same thing in his online classes.

"You can do it," she says, a smile coming as fast as her words. As the senior instructional designer for Pennsylvania State University's distance-education division, the World Campus, she takes faculty members' classroom courses and converts them into online courses. "I've never run across anything that couldn't be done," she says. "It just had to be done differently."

. In the adult-education course, for example, Ms. Luck created a system in which the students form e-mail circles to discuss a topic among themselves. The professor, Gary W. Kuhne, pops in occasionally to see what they are saying and offer comments himself—just as if he were walking among groups in a classroom.

Most computer-savvy faculty members could do an adequate job of converting lecture notes into a single online course. But as colleges begin creating ambitious online-education programs, they may need individuals who can work with a variety of professors—some of whom may still be struggling with e-mail—and help them

transform their face-to-face courses into online versions with no loss of integrity or effectiveness.

Many colleges and companies that are venturing into online education have created systems for converting classroom courses into online formats. The World Campus pairs faculty members with instructional designers. The designer gets to know the professor and the course, then parcels out the work of putting the course online to members of a team of computer experts.

The instructional designer can hold the instructor's hand the entire time, play an advisory role, or disappear entirely from the picture to meet the faculty member's needs.

Depending on their experience and how much responsibility they're given, instructional designers at Penn State earn from $31,800 to $65,668 per year. ·

### CONNECTING THE DOTS

Administrators at Penn State see the instructional designers as a vital link between the traditional campus and the World Campus. "There's a rare faculty member who may be able to do it all himself or herself," says Graham B. Spanier, the university's president. "But the instructional designer brings it all together."

The designers will help determine the success of online education, he predicts: "The instructional designer will influence the extent to which students come back for additional courses."

Penn State has offered distance-educa-

tion programs since 1892, when it relied on the U.S. Post Office, which had just begun to deliver mail to rural areas. With the advent of radio, television, video, and now the Internet, distance education at Penn State has grown, with the World Campus opening for business in 1998. Last year, it offered 18 certificate and degree programs, comprising 155 courses. "We evolved as the technology evolved," Mr. Spanier says.

### EGOS AND DEADLINES

Ms. Luck is the senior instructional designer among the seven working for the World Campus. Armed with a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Vermont and a master's in curriculum and instruction from the University of South Dakota—as well as with relentless enthusiasm and a fondness for color-coded text—she faces competing egos, deadline crunches, and high expectations.

At any moment, she may be working on seven projects, all with different faculty members, and she may also be training new instructional designers. On any project, she has to establish what each professor wants and organize a team of specialists to do it.

Although Ms. Luck's colleagues tease her about being exceedingly well-organized, her approach to transforming courses has become a model for instructional designers, and her lengthy checklist is the basis for a standardized procedure that all the designers at the World Campus

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now use. The checklist, four pages long, goes from "Hold initial author meeting" to "Course begins."

### KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

Colleges and universities are experimenting with different methods for encouraging the creation of online courses. Some let faculty members do their own thing, while others hire outside companies to guide the efforts. A number of institutions, like Penn State, are using the instructional-designer model to maintain control over production and keep costs down.

Ideally, instructional designers should have some expertise in a given discipline, which they can put to use in developing a course platform, says Lawrence C. Ragan, director of instructional design and development at the World Campus. But that isn't always the case. Administrators look for instructional designers who also have experience in project management and meeting deadlines, instructional-technology expertise, and a background in education. "You're not going to find anyone who has all of these," he says.

In fact, instructional designers are hard to find, period. With the high-tech economy booming, anyone with that sort of expertise is difficult to hold on to. In the past year, about 75 percent of the instructional-design positions for the World Campus have had to be filled as employees were lured away by other opportunities.

Because of the turnover, Mr. Ragan made course-design models more standard and also created more paths for advancement, to hold on to personnel. "We work more like a business here than we do like an educational institution," he says.

Before the standard template was developed, creating online courses took individual designers too long, called for too many bells and whistles, and often involved methods that could not be easily understood by another designer, Mr. Ragan says. Penn State settled on a model that administrators say sets clear standards without restricting creativity on the part of those creating the courses. The accepted template was based largely on Ms. Luck's model.

For her part, Ms. Luck says the most important job in putting a course online is establishing a good relationship with the professor. Working in a high-tech, team-oriented environment is a big shift for many faculty members, who aren't used to collaborative work. Sometimes she has worked with professors who didn't interact much with her or weren't comfortable with changing their courses to adapt them to the world of online education.

Mr. Kuhne, the assistant professor of adult education, was accustomed to working by himself. Now, having worked with Ms. Luck on several course conversions, he reflects on the experience while sitting in her office. "It was tough to get used to," he says. "Before, things that I wanted were simply done." Ms. Luck sits nearby, sipping from a can of Diet Coke with her initials "ATL" written in black marker on the top. "Now," he jokes, "I have to work with *her*."

The use of an instructional designer also can change the relationship between the university and the professor. At Penn State, online courses created for the World Campus with the aid of an instructional-design team are owned by the university, not the professor. Ownership issues concerning online courses have caused controversy on many campuses, and Penn State is in the process of reviewing its policy with an eye toward updating it to reflect the growth of online education.

### WORKING AS A TEAM

Each instructional designer at the World Campus is in charge of a team responsible for putting the course together. The team includes an instructional technologist, who helps with computer programming; a graphics designer, who livens up Web pages with images and animated artwork; a technical typist, who polishes the final copy and helps with other duties; and a production specialist, who does such things as getting copyright approval and handling other documents.

Even though the team members may have never taught a course in their lives, they're still encouraged to offer their views of the pedagogy of the online course and suggest ways to present the content.

In one meeting in June, Karl Leitzel, a graphics artist, asked questions and rattled off ideas about how a professor of public policy and community systems could have students work on projects in groups as a way of building a sense of community in the course. The professor, Drew Hyman, was intrigued by the suggestions.

The boundaries between each member's expertise break down as everyone pitches in. "As we get used to working together as a team, we get used to everyone's end of it," Mr. Leitzel says.

The instructional designer coordinates the activities of the team members, but faculty members have final say over the courses themselves. "I'm much more interested in how they normally teach it," Ms. Luck says. "We want to help them teach a course in a way that's comfortable for them."

### CONSTANT REVISIONS

Ms. Luck and Mr. Kuhne have just finished Adult Education 460 and are revising Adult Education 507. It takes about two semesters to create an online course in adult education, and courses often have to be revised every couple of semesters.

Adult Education 507, which is about research and evaluation methods, needed a little help before it was taught online for the first time. "You could tell it was written by three different people," Ms. Luck says. It has been revised once already, but Mr. Kuhne is having at it again, to make the homework assignments more easily manageable.

Although interaction is the goal of most online courses, a course can be *too* interactive, and too confusing to both students and the professor. The trick is to find a good balance, Ms. Luck says.

In Adult Education 460, which is about the history and methods of the discipline, for instance, Ms. Luck and Mr. Kuhne decided to tone down the number of times students were required to post something on an electronic bulletin board. "Otherwise it would take me 40 hours a week just to read all the postings," he says. "All of those things tend to mushroom."

At one time, Mr. Kuhne says, he was halfway through teaching an online course and had already had 600 e-mail exchanges. Courses usually follow a typical semester schedule, with 20 to 25 students at a time.

On the other hand, professors often rely on informal interactions in a face-to-face course, he says. It's the little things, like talking to students outside class, that keep the exchanges personal, he says. "You have to plan for those kind of interactions with the World Campus."

Faculty members' No. 1 concern seems to be that their courses won't be interactive enough. "They still end up needing to learn for themselves," Ms. Luck says.

Spontaneity, however, falls by the wayside in an online course. In a conventional course, a professor can change lesson plans as necessary, perhaps grabbing a VCR and showing a video instead of sticking to the lecture. But online education requires any movie or film that is played to have copyright requests taken care of well in advance. "One of the things you lose in this environment is the ability to wing it," says Mr. Ragan, the World Campus director of instructional design. If students seem to be struggling, though, professors have the option of cutting out some lessons or deemphasizing others.

The final product is usually another work in progress. "A course is never done, it's only due," Mr. Ragan says. Faculty members often want to tinker with the course as soon as its first semester ends. It could be that there's too much interaction with the students, or that there are not enough additional features, like graphics and animation. Some professors "just don't like taking their hands off" the courses, Ms. Luck says.

Of course, just as a conventional course ages from year to year, an online course, too, often has to be updated. "You have to design it in such a way that it will maintain its integrity for a certain amount of time," Mr. Kuhne says.

Another result of creating and teaching online courses is that professors tend to take their new toys back to their face-to-face courses. Professors are learning that e-mail bulletin boards, interactive technology, and graphic designs can enliven a classroom just as easily as they can liven up a distance student's home computer.

Ms. Luck enjoys the challenges that come with each new project. "You get these little surprises," she says. "One size does not fit all."                            ∎