Leading a faculty development session: Contributing factors in course design

In preparation for leading a faculty development workshop on course design, I wrote down a list of questions I ask myself when writing or updating a course. They are in no particular order, but collectively they represent the complex task of choosing content and creating an effective student learning experience.

1. What do my students need to be able to do by the time they graduate in order to gain entry-level positions in the field? This includes not only software operation but also problem solving, professional behavior, historical awareness and creative exploration. This question is answered based on my personal experience in the field, keeping tabs on industry development (which can come from professional networking, periodicals, even students), and feedback from Professional Advisory Committee members.

2. Where does this particular class I'm designing fit into the continuum of other core classes, and even general education classes? The latter is difficult as there is not a prescribed order for taking these classes. Also making things difficult is course decisions made by other instructors, keeping tabs on what is happening in courses before and after this one, etc. I have control over my own classes but not others. I can make recommendations to other instructors but compromises must be reached at times, or others may not act on your recommendations.

3. What general skills do I want students to demonstrate by the end of this course? Are they prepared to learn these skills as they come in to this course (have they been given the necessary preparatory education)?

4. How do I teach these skills? What projects are appropriate? The projects must challenge students at the right level and in the right ways. Is this a class where portfolio work is expected to be produced, or is it preparatory for that?

5. How long should I allow for each project? How much work can I expect the students to produce in a given amount of time? How long does it take a student to produce something? How does that compare to my own experience of how long it would take me? Am I giving the students what they need to produce the work?

6. What level of quality do I expect from my students at different levels of the program? My philosophy is to see professional level of quality by the end of every course -- the difference between the student and the professional, however, is the difficulty of the project and how much time they are given to produce the work. In an intermediate-level animation class, a student should be able to create a professional-quality bouncing ball over the course of a couple of class sessions. The professional could do it in less time, and is capable of doing more complex things, but the student should demonstrate mastery regardless of the course -- intro level through portfolio level. This philosophy may not necessarily be shared by all instructors and so may lead to difficulties in student preparation as they enter a particular course. This difference in philosophy may be supported by varied interpretations of syllabus competencies (Bloom's taxonomy etc.).

7. How do I assess the work? Rubrics? Large-group critiques? Small-group crit? One-on-one? Binary yes they did the work/no they didn't do the work? How much time will these various assessments take? How useful are they for the individual and for the class? What is the appropriate amount of feedback to give a student with consideration of his/her personal development, the needs of the class as a whole, and the practical limitations of my time?

8. Do all of these objectives fit with the listed competencies of the course syllabus? How do I deal with perceived weaknesses or ambiguities in these competencies?

9. How do I build an individual class session to maximize understanding and retention of concepts/skills? I am constantly battling a long list of skills I want to teach with a limited amount of class time and the "20 minute rule" of human attention. I must also consider my own visual/tactile nature, which affects how I learn, and influences how I prefer to teach, with the learning styles of the students. Can I assess these styles? I believe many of my students to be visual and tactile as well but how can I try to cover the spectrum of learning styles on a day-to-day basis?

10. How much do I give the students in terms of prepared notes? How often do I have the students practice new skills through in-class exercises vs. applying directly to their larger projects? Am I sacrificing understanding/retention if I give them more work time (which they all want) vs. exercises/exams/other assessments?

11. How often do I evaluate work? Larger projects (3 weeks or more) require milestones, usually graded to motivate students to meet these checkpoints. More work for instructor however, which if it becomes overwhelming can take away from other useful activities like helping students troubleshoot, keeping up on industry developments, etc.

12. How do I handle deadlines? No late work accepted? A scale of deductions depending on how late work is submitted? Turn it in before the end of the quarter? I have recently started using the "Stuff Happens" card suggested at a faculty development last year (can be used one time in the course to turn a project in one class late; otherwise no late work accepted). Forces students to take responsibility but allows for some leniency in the face of life's unexpected challenges. Other faculty in the animation program have started using the card as well, with their own variations. Word on the street is Graphic Design and some other programs do not accept late work at all?

13. If I am thinking of making a change to the course, do I need to teach myself something new? How do I acquire this knowledge? Do we have the tools to implement this change at the school? If we are missing something, it can be difficult to acquire it (new software, new equipment, different facilities, etc.).

14. How do I communicate what I am doing in my courses to my A.D. and fellow instructors, who will hopefully make use of this information in assessing their own course designs? Regular assessment and re-assessment of our own courses is useful.

Specific considerations in determining a weight value for a particular evaluation (project, in-class exercise, critique, etc.):

1. How long does the project take within the 11 weeks of the quarter? That time percentage strongly influences the grade percentage.

2. Longer projects require milestones/checkpoints. How many checkpoints? When do they occur? How are they assessed? Which are graded and which aren't? For my animation classes, checkpoints are often determined by stages of the process: storyboard phase, blocked-in motion phase, refined motion, final (for example). I make sure to emphasize the importance of each phase by NOT placing most of the weight on the final but distributing points more evenly throughout the production timeline.

3. I try to balance out lecture/demo with in-class exercises to apply new information, and then work time for their projets, but it's difficult when there is a lot of information to cover throughout the quarter. Some in-class exercises contribute to the course grade, some do not, and it is for my own sanity that not every exercise is assessed. I make sure, however, that usually no more than a week goes by without something contributing to the course grade.

4. I do not tie attendance to the course grade. Sometimes I want to.

5. I also struggle with how rubrics translate to grades. In my recent grad school liberal arts class it was a 5-point scale translated to percentage. So I either got 100% A+ (5/5) or 80% B- (4/5) on my papers with no gradations between. The next step down would be a 60% D-/F (3/5). Not much granularity but easy for the professor. It was a pass/fail course so maybe that changes the approach to grading a bit. I have translated the 5-point scale of my own rubrics to percentages equating to letter grades -- so the column of my rubric that might otherwise be the "5" column is a "90%-100%" column and I reserve the right to score within that range for each category of the rubric. I have found no perfect system for use of rubrics. Perhaps this would be a good point to discuss at the session? Or it may be diving too deep for the time we have. Part of course design: communicating project parameters, expectations, manners of assessment. I do this through my school web site as well as in class.

6. I do not ascribe too heavy a course grade weight to one thing. No 50% midterm, 50% final stuff. An upper-level class where the student produces a single 11-week project contributes 100% to the course grade but there are many milestones that break it down. No single event more than 30%.