ONLINE COURSE DESIGN GUIDE: DEVELOPING AN INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCY MODEL FOR COURSE DESIGNERS

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Abstract: This article describes the collaboration between Russian and American colleagues in developing an international and flexible competency model for online course design.

Our *Online Course Design Model* was inspired by the great need for faculty who have skills not only in online teaching, but in online course design. The article first introduces a competency model developed through an extensive environmental scan, literature review and a design thinking process. The authors elaborate on the kinds of intercultural differences faced by the teams, and the ways those differences were factored into the project outcomes. Secondly, it lays out the resulting competency model, explaining its four components: human and cultural factors, information and regulation, design, and digital literacy. The developed model reflects a critical set of competences required for course designers and can be recommended for training course designers working in the international contexts.

Keywords: online course design, competency model, competences, online teaching, cultural competence.

The *Online Course Design Guide* is the product of an international research collaboration between National University of Science and Technology MISIS (Russia) and Union Institute and University (the US). It was largely inspired by the growing demand for degree and certificate courses online in Russia. This demand creates challenges for teaching professionals who need to acquire new skills of designing and delivering online courses for various types of learners. There are currently no established professional standards for teachers working in higher education, either for in-person or online delivery.

The model is innovative in that it focuses on course design competencies. While there is much discussion about online teaching competencies in Russia, there is insufficient discourse on course design competencies. These are essential for those faculty who are teaching higher-level courses, which they design themselves.

The model acknowledges and incorporates both universal and culturally-specific aspects of course design. Russian universities are currently using the Russian National Model in terms of

Teaching Competencies, which is considered to be obsolete as neither ICT competence nor digital course design competences are present.

National University of Science and Technology MISIS is a major Russian university with a reputation as a leader in educational innovations. It was the first in the country to introduce the blended learning model in its language training and has recently launched the international master's program *Second Language Teaching and Pedagogical Design in Digital Environments*. The American partner, Union Institute and University, is a small, adult-oriented, largely virtual university with a half century of experience in distance and online learning. Both countries' project team setups represented diverse professional backgrounds, including teaching, course and material design, instructional design, educational psychology, educational technologies, academic marketing and project management.

This paper describes an 18-month period over which several stages were covered. As our methodology we used a design thinking process to develop an extensive competency model that included performance indicators and necessary skills / knowledge to drive training. Our model is designed specifically for faculty members designing online courses. It has advantages over the two dominant ones in the field, *Quality Matters* (QM) [QM] and The Online SUNY Course Quality Review (OSCQR) [OSCQR], particularly when it comes to course design outside the US. Firstly, both QM and OSCQR were designed as means for assessing and evaluating courses; while they can certainly be used by faculty designing courses, their primary design was for evaluation by administrators. Secondly, both QM and OSCQR are US-centered.

Our model was jointly designed by our Russian-American team and explicitly recognizes and builds in culturally specific elements. It has the potential to be alluring in global contexts.

We also developed showcase courses, using the model, to teach the competencies. Our model received great interest at international Higher Education conferences, including POD Online – the major international conference in the educational development field [POD].

We described the development and implementation stages as well as key outcomes in a previous paper [Teachout et al., 2022]. In this paper we will present the resulting model, describe its four domains and nineteen competences in detail.

As our model, tailored specifically to the needs of teachers designing online courses, introduces components which reflect the process of course creation from multifarious perspectives. Not only were teachers regarded as those whose primary aim is to transmit knowledge and mediate student-university relationships, but also as those who foster cultural awareness on local and global scales. While the model might be used to evaluate both up-and-coming and mature online courses, its primary aim is to provide a step-by-step guide for teachers to design new online courses.

The model covers 4 major domains of course design: human and cultural factors, information literacy, teaching design, including front-end design, and digital literacy (Figure 1). The first three factors might apply to both online and offline contexts, whereas the latter one is specific to the digital educational environment. Culturally specific competencies that have found their way into the model are not allocated into a separate competence domain, but are interwoven into the major ones; hereinafter marked as *UIU* or *MISIS CS Competency* depending on the institution which identified them as essential for their context.
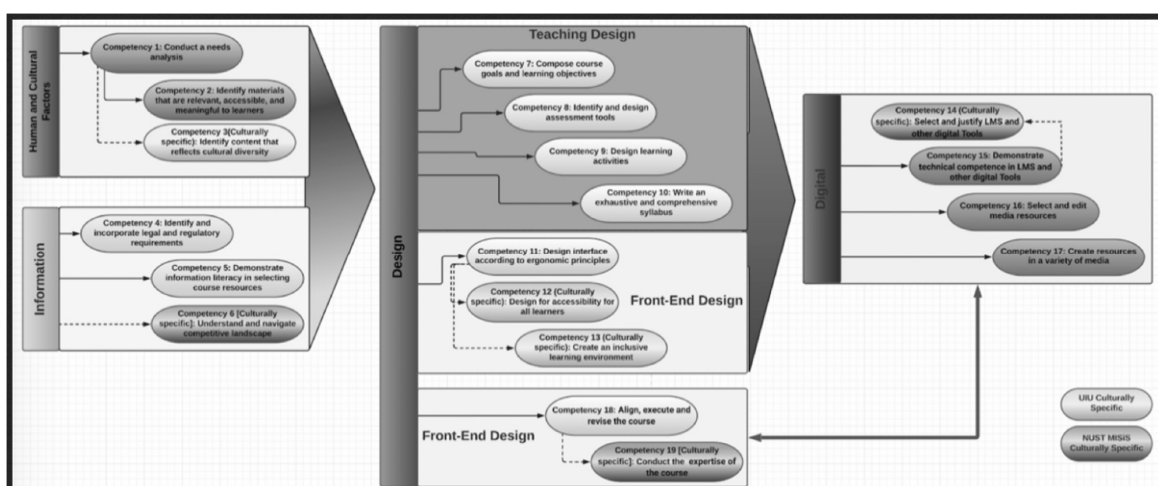

Figure 1 – Competency Model for Online Course Designers

Human and Culture Factors focus on the needs of students as a target audience and involve conducting a needs analysis before setting out to create a new course or revise the already existing one (Competency 1) and identifying relevant content materials both from educational (Competency 2) and cultural (UIU CS Competency 3) perspectives.

Information literacy presupposes teachers' ability to work in a competitive environment (MISIS CS Competency 6) and, thus, be able to identify and incorporate legal and regulatory requirements (Competency 4) as well as to demonstrate general information literacy in selecting resources for the course (Competency 5).

The domain of *design* is the most extensive one as it includes both teaching and front-end design. It provides instructional course developers with a solid battery of competencies which might enhance the quality of online courses. They include composing course goals and learning objectives (Competency 7), identifying and creating learning activities (Competency 9) and assessment tools (Competency 8), designing an exhaustive syllabus (Competency 10) and interface with ergonomic principles in mind (Competency 11) to create an inclusive learning environment (UIU CS Competency 13) accessible for all students (UIU CS Competency 12). Owing to the fact that students from different social and cultural backgrounds are to access and interact with the course, the front-end design section of the model encourages teachers to execute and revise it (Competency 18) as well as to conduct its expert evaluation (MISIS CS Competency 19).

Last but not least, *digital literacy* components describe teachers' technical competence in selecting and justifying the use of learner management systems (LMS) in the course (MISIS CS Competency 14), teachers' skills in choosing an array of digital tools which might be instrumental in the course (Competency 15) including the use of various media resources (Competency 16) and teachers' ability to create media resources specifically tailored for the course (Competency 17).

While working on the competency model, we discovered that although the main domains were consistent across both countries, certain competencies held significance in one country while

considered irrelevant or, on the contrary, an integral part of other competencies in the other country.

For NUST MISIS, the culturally specific competencies such as "Understand and navigate competitive landscape", "Conduct the expertise of the course", and "Select and justify LMS and other digital tools to achieve learning objectives" turned out to be crucial elements. Let us delve deeper into these competencies and provide a rationale for their inclusion.

In the context of contemporary markets, characterized by a wide variety of training courses and intense competition due to globalization and widespread Internet connectivity, the competency "Understand and navigate competitive landscape" comes across as paramount. It involves conducting thorough market research to comprehend the competitive landscape. By delving into factors that influence the success and positioning of the course in relation to other market offerings, course developers can identify key points for course promotion, and confirm their course idea. This competency stems from the understanding that market research aids in analyzing market data, gauging demand, assessing competition, and minimizing the risk of failure. By validating the course idea before investing significant resources, this competency ensures a higher chance of success.

Turning to the competency "Select and justify LMS and other digital tools to achieve learning objectives", the task of comparing and selecting suitable LMS options from the diverse market offerings becomes essential for instructional course developers. The selection of an appropriate LMS is determined by meeting hosting and institutional requirements. In Russia, course developers often encounter the challenge of either not being provided with a platform by the institution or having multiple options to choose from. Moreover, considering the specifications and demands of the course, the available LMS options may not fully meet the requirements. Consequently, course developers need to possess the competency to evaluate LMS platforms features and determine which additional tools can be effectively integrated to optimize the learning

experience and align with the course goals and objectives. In such cases, strategies for LMS selection based on needs analysis and the anticipated outcomes of the course play a critical role.

According to our empirical studies, it has been observed that instructional design developers tend to proofread individual elements of their courses, but overlook the importance of conducting a comprehensive expertise of the entire instructional product. This gap highlights the significance of the final culturally specific competency for NUST MISIS, which is "Conduct the expertise of the course". This expertise goes beyond proofreading course materials and checking link functionality.

According to our analysis, the final expertise involves conducting a thorough assessment of the course, covering such aspects as layout, content, instructional methods, assessments, technical elements, and front-end design, all of which should be aligned with the needs analysis, course goals and objectives. By undertaking the expertise of the course, developers can identify areas for improvement, and ensure that the course is aligned with best practices and pedagogical principles.

By incorporating these culturally specific competencies into the broader competency model, our intention is to address the unique requirements and considerations that arise in the context of course development in Russia.

From the Union Institute and University, three culturally specific competencies were identified as essential to the American context. The first is "Identify Content that Reflects Cultural Diversity." While there is a good argument to be made that this competency could be covered by Competency 2 – Identify materials that are relevant, accessible and meaningful – a separate competency focused on cultural diversity was identified by the American team as essential. While Competency 2 focuses on making sure that learners were exposed to material that resonated with them, Competency 3 focuses on making sure that the material reflects the society and the world at large. Because of the central role that racial injustice has played in the United State's history, and the defining impact that immigration has had on our country's past and present, the team felt that

this needed to be a competency on its own. It is different from the other competencies in its explicit commitment to social justice. It is rooted in the conviction that course content has a political function and that the material that we post either upholds social norms or challenges them.

The second culturally specific competency is "Design for Accessibility to all Learners." Like the first, this competency is informed by American commitments to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB). On the macro level, this competency requires instructors to demonstrate awareness of universal design for learning principles: providing multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression. More specifically, faculty demonstrate this competency by ensuring accessibility to all learners, regardless of disability, by using accessibility checkers and tools such as alternative text, closed captions, color contrast, and appropriate font size.

Finally, the American team identified "Create an Inclusive Learning Environment" as a culturally specific competency. This is rooted in an awareness of the barriers that some students face in learning. This competency requires teachers to develop teaching practices that foster inclusivity, ensuring that all students are welcomed into classroom spaces. It also means that teachers need to foster cross cultural awareness through teaching and learning activities, acknowledging DEIB not only in the material that they choose, but in the activities that they design. And finally, it requires teachers to provide clear instructions for students, making explicit the practices sometimes known as the "hidden curriculum", including identifying the goal of the assignment, identifying the skills and knowledge necessary to completing it, breaking down the steps, and providing examples.

There are important commonalities in these three culturally specific competencies. Each is rooted in a vision of a diverse society, one that is informed by *Black Lives Matter* and other American movements. And each is "activist" in that it identifies power dynamics involved in teaching and learning and seeks to provide access and support to traditionally disempowered

groups. While these commitments are not specific to the United States, they are central to contemporary conversations in American universities.

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NEEDS ANALYSIS AS A PART OF RESEARCH ON TASK-AWARENESS

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Abstract: English as a foreign language has been taught in many universities. There are students who face substantial problems with studying English at the university, especially during their first year at the bachelor programmes. For teachers and methodologists it might be challenging to come up with the most effective English courses for such groups of students because the amount of such lagging behind students is not sufficient to focus on them particularly. Even though, they require specific approach of teaching. Awareness is one of the important concepts in SLA. Linguistic awareness of learners coincides with their higher performance in language assessment. However, task-awareness has not been clearly defined yet. Therefore, this concept is