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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Make Your Online Course More Effective with I.R.A. and the Ws

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Effective online teaching requires applying sound pedagogy, the same as those practiced in the classroom experience. One such practice is *induction*—and, you can never overdo it.

When I was in parish ministry, our staff met weekly to do worship planning. In addition to reviewing text, sermon topic, music, hymns, and other components of the worship service we would always decide on the questions, “how will we enter the room?” and “how will we close the service?” That is, how and when would the worship leaders (choir, pastoral staff, etc.) enter the worship space so as to lead the congregation into the worship experience? How would we signal the “start” of the worship experience? We wanted to “set” the tone, affect, and focus of the worship experience by creating expectancy at the start, helping the congregants know how and what to pay attention to during the service, and moving them toward response and closure at the end of the service.

The same principles apply to learning. In a learning environment, induction (or, “set induction”) refers to those actions by the teacher designed to introduce the students to the learning experience, be it a course of study or a lesson. Induction helps the learners relate their experiences to the objectives of the lesson or course (building on what they know to acquire what they do not). Using set induction will orient your students to the course (or lesson) and put them in a receptive frame of mind that will facilitate learning.

Two purposes of set induction are: (1) to focus student attention on the lesson or course—its purpose and relevance to the student; and (2) to create an organizing framework for the ideas,

concepts, principles, or information which is to follow. Effective application of set induction will provide important instructional functions for your students. It will serve as an advanced organizer, create expectancy, and identify why the content is meaningful, which is an important motivator for learning.

In a classroom setting many instructors use the course syllabus as a tool for course induction. Walking your students through a well-designed course syllabus will provide a framework for helping your students answer the Ws that are anxiously rattling around in their minds: who, what, when, where, and, how? Admittedly, most instructors do not take enough time using this technique. Which is why you may get asked several times during the course, "When is the final exam due, again?" Or, "what should I write my paper on?"

When setting up your online course environment practice I.R.A. and use the Ws. I.R.A. stands for "Information Reduces Anxiety." When your students begin a course, they have a level of anxiety and are looking to understand what the course is about and what will be expected of them as a learner.

Front load your course site with as much information as your students need to answer their questions; but no more than that. When you design your introduction/orientation page, embed the Ws (who, what, when, where, why, and how). These are the questions for which they are seeking answers. As your course progresses, cut back on the course orientation content, reduce content coverage, and increase learner engagement activities and opportunities.

Does your course introduction or orientation answer the following for the students?

1. **Who** is this course for?
2. **What** is this course about? What is its focus? What is the big idea?
3. **What** are the expected student learning outcomes?
4. **What** background knowledge, skills, or competencies does the student need to succeed in the course?
5. **What** does the student need to do first to begin the course?
6. **When** will this course start? When will it conclude? When are the assignments due?
7. **Where** can the student find information and resources (course syllabus, schedule, handouts, readings, rubrics, links, etc.).
8. **Why** is this course meaningful? Why is the focus of study important?
9. **How** will the student successfully complete the course? How will the student demonstrate attainment of learning or mastery of skill? How will the student's work be assessed?

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