

3.6 PACING THE COURSE

3.6.1 INTRODUCTION

Paced courses are ones in which various devices are used to require students to follow a timetable for the course.

Unpaced courses are ones where students are free to work at their own pace and can start and finish the courses whenever they like.

This part, using information from Freeman (2004), looks at the relative merits of the two types of course and the mechanisms that an instructional designer can use to pace a course.

Issues for instructional designers

1. Should learners be paced or left to study at their own pace?
2. What pacing devices can be used?

3.6.2 SHOULD LEARNERS BE PACED?

There are two ways to answer this question, each reflecting a different philosophical stance towards distance education.

Primacy of student autonomy

Those people who see distance learning as a means to promote student autonomy would probably say that learners should not be paced.

Primacy of course completions

Others believe that distance learners should be directed and supported towards successfully completing their courses. Such people would probably say that learners should be paced.

3.6.3 THE EFFECTS OF PACING

The evidence indicates that pacing helps students complete courses. Completion rates in one study of university level distance learning found that pacing led to doubled course completion rates (Coldeway, 1986).

In another study, Gibson and Graff (1992) described pacing as 'crucial' in preventing early dropout and went on to say:

Providing assistance with pacing, timelines, detail, interface with other students taking the same course or with peer tutors, and incorporation of optional face-to-face or mediated distance meetings with the instructor represent just a few ways early direction and support could be provided [in order to prevent dropout]. One might hypothesise that these types of direction and support could be gradually diminished without a parallel diminishing of student success in later coursework.

It is also worth noting, that higher course completion rates are a key contributor to lower unit costs per completed course.

You may also need to take account of your learners' attitudes towards pacing. There is little research on this, but it has been found that university students taking selected modules by distance learning consider pacing to be acceptable (Holmberg, 1995).

3.6.4 PACING DEVICES

Pacing devices can be usefully classified under four headings as follows.

Release of materials

One way to pace students is to send course material to them in small amounts – say, once a week or once a month. However, this is expensive.

The advent of the internet has opened a new possibility here. When learning materials are on web pages or sent over the internet as attachments, the ODL provider can make the materials accessible on certain dates.

Events at fixed times

One of the most common ways of pacing is to have events that take place at fixed times, such as:

- tutorials held at local centres, and
- online tutorials (in this case, the tutorial might take place over a week).

Deadlines for completion of parts of courses

Another common method of pacing is to require that certain tasks be done by set deadlines. These include:

- assignments to be completed by given dates,
- online assessments to be completed by given dates, and
- exams to be completed on set days.

Pro-active interventions

Finally, the provider can pro-actively intervene to encourage students with their studies. For example, a tutor might telephone students once every two weeks to check on their progress and talk over the next bit of work to be done.