

**FAST FORWARD: DESIGNING AND TEACHING ACCELERATED COURSES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This informative and interactive session explores the challenges and key considerations in designing and teaching accelerated courses. The focus is on how to create a high-quality learning experience while dealing with the time constraints related to fewer contact hours and the busy schedules of working adults. Topics will include depth versus breadth of course content, teaching methods, sequencing and pacing of activities, choosing assignments, and more. Working in small groups, participants will share their own experiences and ideas and develop a shared set of guidelines for designing and teaching accelerated courses.

Keywords: Accelerated courses, teaching methods, adult learning

## **PLANNING DETAILS**

Proposed audience:	New and experienced faculty who teach courses in accelerated degree programs
Maximum number of participants:	No limit. We will break into smaller groups for discussions
Type of session:	Introduction followed by small group discussion to share ideas and experiences
Special requirements:	Room with movable tables and chairs
Length:	60 minutes
Proposal level:	Course: Design and teaching methods

## INTRODUCTION

Accelerated degree programs are one of the fastest growing segments of higher education, but there is a lack of information in the management education literature about designing and teaching accelerated courses. Participants in this session will learn about some of the challenges and key considerations in designing and teaching accelerated courses. The emphasis will be on how to create an effective learning experience while dealing with the time constraints related to fewer contact hours and the busy schedules of working adults. Topics include depth versus breadth of course content, teaching methods, sequencing and pacing of activities, types of assignments, and more. Working in small groups, participants will share their own experiences teaching accelerated courses, the challenges they faced, and develop shared set of guidelines for designing and teaching accelerated courses. Participants will leave the session with their own set of guidelines and an instructor-prepared handout outlining key considerations in dealing with the challenges of designing and teaching accelerated courses.

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## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

Accelerated degree programs are one of the fastest growing segments of higher education. These programs are designed to allow working adults to earn a college degree more quickly than in traditional programs. According to the Commission for Accelerated Programs (CAP), accelerated courses are credit-bearing, shorter in duration (8 weeks or less) and have fewer contact hours (32 or less) than a traditional semester course (<http://www.capnetwork.org>). To be included in the Accelerated Programs Database, a program's courses must meet the specific criteria indicated in the parentheses. To accommodate the schedules of working adults, accelerated classes meet less frequently than in a traditional course, typically in the evening or on the weekend, but each class session is longer (Wlodkowski, 2003). For example, a class may be held one night per week for four hours. Although this review will focus on classes that meet face-to-face, accelerated courses are often offered in online or hybrid formats.

Despite the popularity of accelerated degree programs, there is a lack of research on designing and teaching accelerated courses. A search of the three major management education journals (The Academy of Management Learning and Education, Journal of Management Education, and Journal of Education for Business) located only one article related to this topic. Singh and Martin (2004) examined students' attitudes towards a proposal to accelerate an existing MBA program, but their study did not deal with course design and teaching methods.

The purpose of this section is to review some of the challenges and key considerations related to teaching and designing accelerated courses. It draws on research on accelerated learning in adult and continuing higher education, as well as the author's experiences teaching accelerated courses at three colleges. Factors that will be addressed include depth and breadth of course content, teaching methods, the sequencing and pacing of activities, choosing assignments, and the importance of organization. The emphasis is on how to create an effective classroom learning experience within the shorter time period of an accelerated course. Although this review will focus on classes that meet face-to-face, the information provided may also inform the development of online and hybrid accelerated courses.

In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (1998) asks, “What is the optimum use of the brief time my students and I share in the space called the classroom?” (pp. 121-122). Greene and Henseler (2003) note that although Palmer was not talking about accelerated courses, he could have been. Because class time is limited, decisions about course content, teaching methods, and assignments are particularly important in accelerated courses.

### **Course Content: Depth and Breadth of Coverage**

Unfortunately, some instructors—particularly those teaching an accelerated course for the first time—respond by trying to cover as much material as possible in the limited time available (Greene & Henseler, 2003; Palmer, 1998; Scott, 2003). Most experts, on the other hand, recommend that accelerated course instructors should emphasize depth over breadth of knowledge (Donaldson, 2003; Donaldson & Graham, 2002; Greene & Henseler, 2003; Scott, 2003). They state that doing so creates a more meaningful learning experience—by providing more time for reflection and critical thinking—and helps minimize information overload. Adult students also recommend this approach. According to Scott (2003), “students preferred to delve into fewer areas in more depth and concentrate on major concepts, rather than learning larger amounts of seemingly inconsequential information” (p. 33).

This does not mean that instructors should omit major topics. Because accelerated courses are often criticized for lacking substance and academic rigor, Donaldson (2001) cautions, “it is critical to make sure accelerated programs cover the same essential ground as regular courses” (p. 16). However, instructors do not have to spend the same amount of time on each element of the course. For example, time can be used more efficiently and effectively if instructors “recognize that content that students already know from outside a class ... can be covered more quickly if the previous knowledge can be drawn out and the proper connections made” (Donaldson, 2001, p. 14).

### **Teaching Methods: Variety, Sequence, and Pacing**

We already know from adult learning theory and research that experiential teaching methods (e.g., small group exercises, case studies, and role playing) are the most effective ways to teach adult learners. By actively engaging students, these approaches not only enhance learning but keep students

student interest levels high. For this reason, Scott (2003) recommends using a variety of teaching methods within a longer class session to avoid monotony.

The sequencing and pacing of activities *within* a class session is important. Because many employee training workshops are half- or full-day sessions, the training literature can be a useful source of recommendations/techniques for developing session plans. In my experience, it is important to carefully schedule the activities for each session, but be flexible enough to realize when student attention is waning and it is time to switch activities or take a break.

I have found that the longer class sessions in accelerated courses can provide an opportunity to use more in-depth cases and exercises that integrate several topics; debriefing can occur in the same session and there is more time for meaningful discussion compared to a traditional 50- to 75-minute class session.

### **Assignments**

Students in accelerated courses are expected to accomplish more work outside of class (Johnson, 2006). Donaldson (2003) stresses the importance of eliminating unnecessary assignments, but cautions that “this does not mean instructors should cut out important material or reduce the legitimate assignments and content and ‘water down’ the course” (p. 13). Assignments that require adult learners to integrate their learning with their own work-life experiences are often the most meaningful and allow them to use their time effectively. Scott (2003) makes several recommendations, including redesigning existing assignments or using smaller assignments, giving students several options on assignments, and using more in-class group assignments. On the other hand, instructors should consider using forms of evaluation other than in-class exams (e.g. written papers, hands-on projects, and class presentations). I use written case analyses and exercises to assess student learning.

Some accelerated degree programs require students to attend one study team meeting outside class each week, but this does not guarantee that learning is taking place. Instructors should provide specific assignments for the study team to complete together or their time may be wasted. I have

assigned team projects in my human resource management course, with specific deliverables due after each study team meeting.

### **Organization**

Good organization is essential to the success of accelerated courses (Johnson, 2006). Scott (2003) states that “because intensive courses progress so quickly, instructors need to be organized and present the material in an easy-to-follow manner. Without organization, intensive courses quickly become overwhelming and chaotic” (p. 32). Organization starts before the course begins. Students should receive the syllabus several weeks in advance, so they can purchase the textbook and complete assigned readings before the first class session. I provide step-by-step instructions that students can use to prepare for each class session.

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

**Introduction** (10 - 15 minutes): This session will begin with a brief introduction and overview of some of the key considerations and controversies involved in designing and teaching accelerated/intensive courses. Participants will receive a handout outlining these factors.

**Small Group Discussions** (20 - 25 minutes): Participants will break into small groups to discuss the topic. Drawing on their own experiences and the material presented, they will generate a list of principles or recommendations for teaching accelerated courses. They may choose to focus on one topic (e.g., course assignments) or several, depending on the members' interests. Each group will have flip chart paper and markers to record their results.

**Class Discussion** (15 - 20 minutes): Each group will share their principles or recommendations with the rest of the class.

**Wrap Up** (5 minutes): The facilitator will summarize the key points at the end of the discussion.

Note: Actual time spent on each step will depend on the number of participants their experience levels and extent of discussion.

## APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

This session fits with two of the conference themes. It returns to the “roots of OBTC” by demonstrating how the basics of adult and experiential learning apply in a different context—the accelerated/intensive course. Some of the topics addressed include course design, experiential teaching methods, and choosing assignments.

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