Mi CASA Es Su Casa E-Learning:
A Simplified Approach to Designing Online Learning

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Abstract: This white paper describes research-based findings for designing online learning environments. The author has designed, delivered, assessed, directed, and instructed in online programs for nearly twenty years. He has published numerous articles related to online learning and teaching. Together, his research expertise and practical experience provide an ideal combination to recommend optimal approaches to online learning. Currently, there are many theoretic and practical recommendations for implementing sound online learning strategies. Many are complex and require extensive specialized knowledge. This is great for experts in the field. However, the litany of approaches can be confusing to those new or recent to online learning. This paper provides a simplified CASA approach to designing online learning environments. Four elements are key to this approach: incorporating (C)ontent, providing (A)synchronous as well as (S)ynchronous communication opportunities, and giving appropriate (A)ssessment. The approach is explained more fully in the paper.

Introduction

My early recommendations for designing online learning environments focused on an “asset class” approach. In this approach, I likened certain “classes” of online delivery to the equivalent of managing risk for financial portfolios. Instead of stocks, bonds, and real estate, which helps to balance financial risk, online learning should incorporate content, asynchronous and synchronous delivery, assessment, and, in some cases, even face-to-face collaboration. By providing these multiple categories, an online learning environment can appeal to different learning styles. Some students are excellent with reflection and responding in threaded discussions. Some students are social and like to discuss in real time. Some students like to think and write on their own without interaction. By leveraging multiple opportunities, there is less of a chance of leaving someone out and more of a chance of doing well overall. Consider this similar to the idea of not putting all your eggs in one basket.

Building on these early approaches that relied on portfolio management (Markowitz as cited in Armstrong, 2002), this white paper presents a simplified method for adopting an asset class approach. It allows students to be exposed to different forms of delivery and maximized there chance for overall success. Whether looked at from the standpoint of personality inventories, tools, theories, or strategies, the CASA approach helps flesh out general design scenarios for online learning. Certainly, CASA is simple conceptually but extremely complex in
execution – allowing designers to utilize the best of what they already know and understand and sometimes, even more appropriately, of what they have available to them in terms of resources.

**CASA as an Online Learning Approach**

In Spanish, the idiom “mi casa es su casa” while literally meaning “my house is your house” more accurately advocates for the gracious host. Guests are held in high esteem and provided the best of what one has to offer. In my online learning environment, I consider my students as guests and strive to provide them the best I have to offer; in essence, I strive to make my learning home theirs. They deserve the best from a gracious host.

The CASA approach is simple. Provide access to the following four basic but important components:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>(C)ontent</th>
<th>Content can include readings, video, animations, audio, graphics, websites, and more. It is generally what you expect students to learn.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>(A)synchronous collaboration</td>
<td>Asynchronous refers to activities that do not require all participants to be together in real time. For example, sending and replying to email or participating in a threaded discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>(S)ynchronous collaboration</td>
<td>Synchronous refers to activities that require all participants to be together in real time. For example, participating in a video-conference or attending a live streaming audio presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>(A)ssessment</td>
<td>Assessment refers to activities that can be measured to determine students’ level of understanding of the content presented.</td>
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</table>

In addition to the basic CASA components, learning environments should also consider the needs of various stakeholders. The learner is only one stakeholder in designing optimal learning environments. Other stakeholders include of course instructors but also designers. While not always possible in all cases, the best learning environments are created in collaborative teams, considering the perspective of learners, instructors, as well as designers. It is not my intention in this short paper to provide a lengthy discussion on the field and importance of instructional design, but at least a sense of design is key for anyone creating online learning and should be considered.

Finally, as with any endeavor, connecting design to research and standards is important. Research can be any resources that support the technologic tools, academic theories, and/or instructional strategies you choose to incorporate in your own specific approach. Standards are criteria that support the content and assessment of content of your topic. Certainly, standards are common in most school settings but other disciplines have professional and similar standards to help define key objectives.
In order to help consider both the components of CASA as well as the needs of multiple stakeholders, the following grid asks essential questions to help flesh out how one might adapt the CASA approach in diverse environments.

**Table 2: Essential questions for CASA adaptation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Learner</th>
<th>Designer</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Research/ Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>What is the essential content? How will the learner view the content?</td>
<td>How will the designer create the content?</td>
<td>How will the instructor support the content?</td>
<td>What research and/or standards in the area support the content?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asynchronous</strong></td>
<td>What asynchronous strategies will the learner experience?</td>
<td>How will the designer incorporate asynchronous tools?</td>
<td>How will the instructor use the asynchronous environment?</td>
<td>What research / theory supports the use of asynchronous experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synchronous</strong></td>
<td>What synchronous strategies will the learner experience?</td>
<td>How will the designer incorporate synchronous tools?</td>
<td>How will the instructor use the synchronous environment?</td>
<td>What research / theory supports the use of synchronous experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>What assessments will help to evaluate the learner?</td>
<td>How can the designer incorporate multiple forms of assessment?</td>
<td>How will the instructor provide feedback and assessment?</td>
<td>What research and/or standards are tied to assessment in this particular environment?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

There are many possible approaches to designing online learning. The CASA approach is simply one more. Its appeal to those new to creating online learning is that while simple, it can be adapted to many complex environments. Many studies (Cowan & Menchaca, 2014; Menchaca, 2002; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008) have shown the importance of providing multiple tools and multiple strategies when designing online learning. CASA’s research-based method affords students the strongest possibility of success. And with contemporary educational institutions relying more heavily on e-learning opportunities to reach the greatest number of students, creating optimal e-learning is a crucial endeavor.
References


