John Falkin, an instructional designer at Rolling Hills University, was on unfamiliar terrain and definitely outside his comfort zone. When faced with challenges in the past, he had always been able to rely on his training and past experiences to help him sort things out. This time, although he was excited about the prospects of going beyond what had become routine, he was wondering if this was beyond his skill set.

John was an Instructional Designer at Rolling Hills University (RHU), a fairly large university located in central Canada, with about 35,000 undergraduate and 4,500 graduate students enrolled. The university was becoming increasingly involved in developing online learning courses in many programs but did not yet have the infrastructure to support faculty and expand to a large scale. John had been hired three years ago as part of a growing multi-faculty support team at the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) with the mandate to expand RHU’s online learning offerings. Thus far, John had worked exclusively on high-enrollment courses at the undergraduate level, designing asynchronous, discussion-based courses that attracted hundreds of students per term.

This term, John had been approached by his boss, Roy Barrow, the RHU Teaching and Learning Center Coordinator, about an issue he had recently been made aware of: “John, I’m glad you could come by. I just got off the phone with Dr. Jan Fellows, the Chair of the Graduate Studies Program over at the School of Social Work. She told me the school is having trouble maintaining enrollment levels in one of their graduate programs. She said that the program itself is sound but that potential students are highly mobile and spread all across the country; there simply aren’t enough students who can come to campus to take the program.” Jan also told him that, unless enrollments increased, they would have to shut down the program. So Jan invited Roy to a meeting with the Program Committee to discuss what might be done to make the program viable by offering it online. Roy asked John to join him at the upcoming meeting.

When John heard that the chair was considering taking the entire program online, he felt an instant sense of apprehension—he had never converted a graduate course to an online format, let alone an entire graduate program. He knew he could count on a junior, recently hired instructional designer, Bob Campbell, to pitch in despite the fact that he had
been hired mainly to assist faculty who were migrating from an older Learning Management System to a newer one. There was also the tech team, but, given the potential magnitude of the task at hand with regard to the actual capabilities of the TLC team, resources would likely be stretched.

Meeting with the Program Committee

At the meeting, besides Roy, John, and Jan Fellows, four other faculty members from the School of Social Work were present: Dr. Patricia Bello, Dr. Michael Hatty, Dr. Eliza Bainsbridge, and Dr. William Sears. These faculty taught the introductory courses in the program, and most likely their courses would be slotted for online delivery. There was also a graduate student member of the committee in attendance, Frank Jones.

Jan started out by explaining why they were meeting and then went on to describe the overall structure of the graduate program—its goals, components, and target population. She emphasized the specificity of graduate courses, or seminars as they were commonly designated. Turning to her colleagues, she said: “Here at RHU, up until now, we’ve mostly been involved in designing and delivering high-enrollment, undergraduate courses. But now, we need to start looking at the viability of graduate courses as potential targets for online learning.” Turning to Roy and John, she added: “As you may know, a graduate seminar is quite different from an undergraduate course. Off the top of my head, I can think of three major differences, regardless of whether the seminar is on campus or online:

“First, enrollment numbers tend to be different between undergraduate and graduate courses, which often leads to different teaching strategies.

“Second, our faculty approach undergraduate courses differently than they do graduate courses. In the former, the lecture method is the norm (whether we like it or not), whereas in the latter, the seminar method is usually the norm.

“Third, when undergraduate courses are offered online, they typically require high-level, labor-intensive, front-end design, whereas graduate-level courses, in which content changes much more rapidly, do not.

“As a result of these differences, any decision we make must take into consideration the specific technological requirements of the seminar method and the ultimate viability of launching online courses for 15 to 25 students.” In conclusion, Jan mentioned a worrisome trend she had observed: “Another thing we might want to keep in mind as we discuss our options is this: Over the years, there has been a gradual decline in the quality of students we are admitting, according to what I’ve witnessed and to what my colleagues have been telling me.”

She described this as a threat to the program’s credibility and expressed her hope that, by going online and opening up the program to a larger population of potential students, they could become more selective. Concluding, Jan reminded them all, “Inaction is not an
option if we want to maintain our graduate program.” She then invited Frank to say a word about how students felt about the current situation.

Looking around the room, Frank began: “I’m glad to have been invited to this important meeting. I’m confident that I represent my fellow students when I say our program is relevant, it is high quality, and it needs to be kept going. I really hope it will be taken online and become accessible to more students, because according to our statistics, all of the program graduates have found gainful employment in the field. As a matter of fact, a lot of students find a job before they even finish the program and they have to finish part-time, such as in my case. So going online will really make it easier for a lot of us.”

Then Jan asked Roy, the TLC coordinator, to say a word about the design team. Roy explained how his team operated and what resources were available. He said: “Other programs here at RHU have achieved a significant measure of success by working with our team to integrate varying combinations of blended and online learning. For instance, ever since the Business School took their MBA program online, they have had higher enrollments and generally positive assessments as well as having achieved sustainable cost-effectiveness. So, rest assured that our team can support you in whatever course of action you decide to undertake.”

John then spoke, explaining how the design process was actually conducted, emphasizing the kind of involvement faculty generally have to consider making for their project to be a success. He ended by saying, “It’s often a lot of work upfront but, down the road, faculty usually recoup their time investment and more, leaving them with more time to invest elsewhere.”

Patricia, an associate professor, jumped in. “I’m glad we’re discussing this now, because there is a lot at stake here. I always look forward to starting work on my course, but I’m a little worried that I just won’t have enough time to devote to it. I’m at a critical stage in my research just now, and it is taking up a lot of my time. So I’m concerned I won’t be able to devote the time I should to redesign my course.” Then she added, “I also have a question. Given the fact that this is a graduate-level course in which I’m constantly adding new material, how much redesign will it actually require?”

John responded, “You have a valid point; quality course design does take time and commitment but, depending on your course objectives and what you’ve already accomplished, the workload is usually manageable. At least many of your colleagues find it to be so.”

Eliza, a young, recently hired academic, said she considered herself a “believer.” “But as much as I’m convinced the future of university teaching is online, I am also convinced we, as faculty, have to be concerned about copyright and intellectual property issues that are far from being clear in our collective bargaining agreement. I’m fine with developing an online course, just so long as I maintain not only intellectual property, but copyright as well, on any materials I develop. So, before I agree to sign up, I want the university to sign off on that.”

Michael, a full professor, said with a twinkle in his eye, “I think this all sounds great. As a former program director, I know full well that an increase in enrollments would not only save our program but would likely enhance its relevance in the eyes of our colleagues. The only downside,” he said, “is that I, myself, am what you’d call computer illiterate.
FIGURE 10-1 Dr. Sears’ Seminar Design Model.

Contextualizing, synthesizing, evaluating

Group Work
In class

Team Work
analyzing, critiquing, problem-solving, etc.

Outside class

Individual Work
reading, viewing, researching, etc.

Basically, I’m a champion of hunt-and-peck!” He went on to explain that he only used his computer for e-mail and some occasional online navigating, adding that he was unaware of how an online course actually worked. “Besides,” he said, “In our seminars, as Jan was saying, students interact spontaneously, exchanging viewpoints based on readings I hand out before class. Therefore, there is really not much need for computer stuff.” He concluded by saying that, although he realized that outreach was necessary and that time was of the essence, he wondered “if it just might be a little premature to consider taking the entire program online.”

The attention of the group then turned to William, also a full professor in the program. He began by providing a handout to his colleagues to explain his idea of a graduate seminar (see Figure 10-1). “Basically, like Michael, I have my graduate students do a lot of preparatory work before coming to class, which is to be expected. As they do this work, I expect them to take notes, write down ideas and questions and generally adopt a critical attitude towards what they are reading or viewing.

“I then require them to meet in teams of two or three before class and discuss their ideas, critiques, and questions so that, when we meet as a group in class, they have already resolved the minor issues. Then we can devote our time together to working on the major issues.” Waxing philosophical, he said, “A course is more than just a collection of materials to be perused casually; it is an ancient and sacred covenant between the learned and the learner... a meeting of the minds.” He emphasized the criticality of the pedagogical relationship—“the intellectual to and fro”—the Socratic approach to learning. He then paused thoughtfully and added: “This relationship must never be sacrificed simply for expediency’s sake; on the contrary,” he said, “we must never lose sight of this approach and any use of technology should only serve that purpose and in no way detract from it.”

After the meeting, John sat down at his desk and decided to collect his ideas so as to chart a course for this project over the next few months. He felt he first needed to jot down what he knew—the facts—as opposed to the lingering questions about what he did not know and go from there in trying to articulate possible courses of action (see Figures 10-2 and 10-3).
John felt that these questions could keep him busy for a long time... but the clock was ticking.

A week later, Jan called Roy and said that she needed to meet with him and to ask John to come as well. Time was short and a solution had to be found before the end of the current term so that any design and development efforts that might be required could at least begin during the following term.
Prepping for the Second Program Committee Meeting

Before meeting with Roy and Jan, John called Susan, a good friend and former colleague who was now a senior instructional designer at Northern Plains University (NPU). She was what designers liked to call a designer's designer, always up on the research, always looking for innovative ways to design and redesign courses, and always very upbeat about meeting challenges face-on. She had moved to NPU in order to enroll in a PhD program in instructional design and technology, hoping to eventually become a university professor. John described the situation to her and told her he had never designed a graduate-level course, let alone an entire graduate program. He said he felt doing so was quite different from what he was used to doing and, basically, that he was at a loss for ideas for the first time since becoming an ID. "Help!"

Susan explained that she had indeed designed several graduate courses and that, before doing so, she had been required to rethink the entire design process. "John, I won't try to tell you what you have to do. I don't know because I'm not in your shoes. But a few things do come to mind, so here goes. OK?"

"Yes, Susan, please—shoot!"

"OK, first," she said, "how much front-end design is enough? As you know, graduate courses are usually conducted as seminars and faculty are constantly changing content, depending on what's new and hot in the field. Do you think they could get their grad students to pitch in and help out with content refresh?"

John answered, "Good idea. It would be an excellent learning experience for them."

"Second, in on-campus seminars, there is always a lot of back-and-forth between faculty members and students. You said you have one faculty member in particular who is adamant about maintaining that, right? OK, so, here's my question: how can you best accommodate this professor? Should you try to convince him to just use the asynchronous design and delivery model as you've been doing with faculty teaching their online undergrad courses? Do you think that'll work? If not, what's the alternative?"

John was silent for a moment and then said, "No, I don't see that working at all. It'll never fly, especially with Dr. Sears."

Susan continued, "It sounds a lot to me like your faculty really don't want to lose contact with their students when engaging in online teaching. Are you hearing the same thing? If so, how can you accommodate that? What technology is out there that will allow them to stay in close touch with their students? I'm not sure what you'll find, but it's got to be affordable and robust."

John responded, "Well, I have my work cut out for me. Technology review, here I come."

"Anyway," Susan concluded, "these are just some of the thoughts that come to mind right now. I hope you find them useful."

After talking to Susan, John went online to his own ID community of practice websites to see what his colleagues were doing with graduate courses. He realized he was playing catch-up and had only a short amount of time to provide the Department of Social Work with a viable solution. He had to find that solution soon. Then he had to get Roy's sign-off before meeting with Jan.
Meeting with Dr. Fellows

Jan started by referring back to the first meeting, saying a few words about her colleagues’ reactions to the idea of going online and concluded by reiterating that the program would be shut down if nothing changed. Roy said that he and John had talked it over and thought they had a viable plan. “Since it’s all John’s, I’ll let him present it.”

John started by explaining that, after consulting with his colleagues and doing some online research, he thought he could provide a workable response to the points raised by all of the faculty members. After explaining his proposal to Jan, she decided to convene another meeting with the Program Committee members the following week as well as to invite the department chair, Dr. Rodriguez, to join them, because there would likely be workload issues to consider. The meeting was set for the following week, in the computer lab.

Meeting of the Program Committee Members, the Department Chair, Roy, and John

John started the meeting by explaining that, since the last meeting, he had done quite a bit of research and had consulted some of his peers on the specificity of delivering graduate courses online. He then outlined what seemed to him to be the major considerations.

- RHU was primarily a research-based university
- Faculty were often hard pressed to devote enough time to designing (or redesigning) their courses
- Design-related resources were relatively scarce
- Graduate seminars required relatively small numbers of students
- Learning resources used in seminars had to be constantly updated
- Faculty expected high-level dialogue during seminars
- Administrators needed flexibility in scheduling courses, in light of actual enrollment levels

John then said, “So, given all of these considerations, this is what I think we should do...”

Preliminary Analysis Questions

1. If you were John and were faced with the challenges he is facing, describe the steps you would take to meet these challenges.

2. In this case, how important is the need for a faculty-friendly technological environment? How user-friendly can a technology be and still do the job? How do we decide the balance between ease of use of a technology and its ability to support high-quality instruction?

3. Divide into groups and present a plan that will effectively address the needs and constraints that John has identified.
Implications for ID Practice

1. Describe the advantages and limitations of moving a program online in order to address decreasing enrollments. Think critically about what taking a program online may mean to faculty, administrators, and support staff.
2. Discuss the instructional differences, if any, between an online graduate course and an online undergraduate course. How do time and human resource requirements differ between online graduate and undergraduate courses?
3. Research how copyright/intellectual issues are handled in university settings. What are the implications for online course development?
4. What advantages/disadvantages do you see to synchronous communications during course delivery? How can faculty determine the optimal mix?