

## Chapter 3

# Developing a Course Rationale

After completing this chapter, the reader should:

1. Understand the relation between a rationale and a set of ILOs.
  - a. Know that a rationale guides curriculum development by providing overall direction.
  - b. Know that a rationale serves to justify a set of intended learning outcomes.
  - c. Know why a particular rationale may justify many different sets of ILOs and a set of ILOs may be justified by many different rationales.
2. Know that a rationale incorporates a set of values within three frames of reference (that is, the learner, the society, and the subject matter), together with a statement of educational goals. This knowledge should include an understanding of how each frame of reference provides distinct bases for justifying the educational goals.
3. Be able to construct a rationale for a given set of ILOs. This rationale should include all component parts.
4. Be able to analyze a statement of the rationale for a course into its component parts, to determine whether or not the goals are well stated, and to identify the values and assumptions implicit in the statement.

“Why do we have to learn this stuff?” “What good is this going to do me?” “This is a waste of time, I’m never going to use this!” Such expressions, if not frequently voiced by students, are frequently thought by them. And answers are all too often not readily available or are unsatisfactory to both students and teachers. This lack of purpose and justification is also reflected in the conduct of a course. As a teacher, you should always be thoughtful about your work, able to articulate your goals and to justify the time and resources spent striving for those goals. This chapter is about justification. It is not just an exercise in rationale

writing but a framework for dealing with the “why” questions that could and should be asked about the course.

A course rationale is a statement that makes explicit the values and educational goals underlying the course. The rationale serves the purpose of justifying the learnings that students are to acquire during the course as well as justifying the methods and procedures employed in teaching the course. The rationale also serves the related purpose of guiding the planning of other course components. The values and educational goals expressed in a rationale reflect the rules and expectations that will underlie the way the course will be taught; they express the emphasis and tone that the teacher will give to the course. Lastly, the rationale serves as a check on the consistency of the various course components in terms of these values and goals. The values and goals expressed in a rationale are related; that is, goals are desirable only as they reflect certain values of the planner.

## Values and Assumptions

As any parent of a preschooler knows, the answer to a “why” question can be followed by another “why” question *ad infinitum*. Although an educational goal answers the “why” question for a given set of ILOs, we can always ask the question “why these educational goals?” and follow the answer to that question with another “why” question. Our answers to successive “why” questions are framed in terms of more and more basic values and assumptions regarding education and, ultimately, life in general. Rarely do course planners examine these basic values and assumptions; nevertheless, they underlie the course’s rationale.

The values and assumptions underlying the rationale concern the role of the individual in society, the societal role of education, the nature and purposes of society and human beings, the relation of the future to the present, the question of what knowledge is most useful, and the purpose for which it should be useful.

## Questions for Discussion: Values and Assumptions\*

### I. Individual–Society

Is education an investment that should pay off to the society or is its main purpose to increase self-realization?

What is the individual’s proper role in society—passive participant, rebel, agent for encouraging rationally directed change,

\*Adapted from Grobman (1970, pp. 107–108).

middle-class conformist, rugged individualist, warrior, peaceable resister, employed person, parent, competitor, cooperater?

## 2. Societal Role of Educational Institutions

Is it the job of educational institutions to perpetuate present society or to encourage a restructuring of society? If the latter, what direction should the restructuring take?

## 3. Societal Purposes

What is it that makes a good society? Are free enterprise and capitalism as we now know them essential to democracy?

What constitutes progress—technological advances, increased Gross National Product, improved social conditions, increased knowledge?

## 4. Present–Future Orientation

Is education preparation for adulthood or should education help individuals live their present life to the fullest? Is the future predictable? Can it be used as a basis for planning?

## 5. Gratification of Needs

Should needs be gratified when they arise or should gratification be delayed?

## 6. Termination–Recurrence of Education

Should education terminate or should it recur throughout life as needs arise?

Should education before adulthood be devoted to the pursuit of individual interests rather than providing basic skills? Can the individual afford to wait for these basic skills?

## 7. Utility of Subject Matter

Is a subject matter useful if it enables the individual to solve a relatively narrow range of problems and perform a relatively narrow range of skills?

Is a subject matter useful if it influences the way an individual experiences things, as the arts often do by enriching the individual's imagery?

Is a subject matter useful if it enables an individual to interpret the world by providing concepts for use in processing information?

Is a subject matter useful because it is helpful to adults in today's world? because it will probably be of use to the individual in the future? because it will be of use in further learning? because it can be applied in everyday practical situations?

Which is of more utility, an exposure to, and an understanding of, the popular culture or the classics?

## 8. General–Specialized Education

Are liberal studies less or more useful to those secondary school students least likely to pursue them further in college?

As the level of necessary training increases with an increasing

technology, does the level of general education required to profit from training (and probable retraining) increase or decrease?

These questions are obviously difficult for an individual to answer, let alone for a group of individuals to achieve consensus on. No wonder, then, that value differences and disputes about goals underlie much of the debate about what our educational institutions should teach. Although it would be overly ambitious to attempt a conclusive answer to these questions, a careful consideration of the purposes and significance of a particular course at this point in planning can contribute greatly to the coherence and validity of that course.

## Rationale and Entry Point in Planning

Logically, the rationale comes first in course planning. This is the oft-cited position taken by Ralph Tyler (1950).<sup>\*</sup> Nevertheless, other factors may influence what comes first in course planning. The “entry point” (that point at which the actual process of course planning begins) may be determined by any number of considerations. As we mentioned in Chapter 2, motivation to develop a course may come from a mandate or a philosophy. A grant, materials, the availability of an expert, or physical facilities such as a laboratory or special audiovisual equipment may suggest that the course-planning process be begun.

In the absence of other compelling factors, the statement of the rationale fits best as a course-planning step immediately after the initial thinking about ILOs and before the step in which ILOs are refined. This is true for several reasons. First, anyone planning a course has a notion, however vague or unarticulated, about the overall aims of the course. The task of clearly articulating this rationale is best accomplished after some thought has been given to the particulars of the course. Second, a well-articulated rationale provides a guide to the refining of course ILOs as well as to other steps in the planning process. This guide can serve to help keep the course components consistent and focused. In the writing of a rationale you will probably make decisions or confirm implied aims. Subtle or even major alterations in your viewpoint may make some ILOs no longer consistent with the rationale. In this case, it will be most appropriate to consider the ILOs a second time. In any event, a carefully constructed rationale, one that accurately represents your overall purposes and shows how the ILOs express those purposes, is essential in helping you to refine your ILOs.

<sup>\*</sup>But note that Tyler (1975) now recognizes the need to be flexible with regard to entry point in planning.

## Components of a Course Rationale

Every person holds values that express conceptions of people, practices, and institutions, as well as other aspects of that person's world. A course rationale, if it is to be useful and complete, should express a planner's values at least in terms of the learner, the society, and the subject matter. These valuative considerations, expressed in a rationale, are the "determinants" (Gwynn & Chase, 1969), "sources" (Tyler, 1950; Zais, 1976), "influences" (Tanner & Tanner, 1980), "data-sources" (Goodlad, 1966), or "criterial sources" (Johnson, 1967, 1977) for the course. Historically, a major curriculum issue has been what values shall underlie the purposes of American education. Proponents for a society-centered, child-centered, or subject-matter-centered curriculum have at times opted for their value position to the exclusion of all others. Our view is that course planners must give careful consideration to all three of these value areas, although a completed rationale might emphasize only one or two of the areas.

### *The Learner*

Values regarding the learner express conceptions of what individual learners are like and what they need. Smith, Stanley, and Shores (1957) identified two variations in conceptions of learners. The first one emphasizes education that prepares the individual for achieving maximum social and economic success. The second conception views individual needs and interests in terms of developing a well-balanced person. These two sets of values would probably underlie different sets of educational goals.

Expressing a conception of the learner gives you the opportunity to deal with the issue of the individual learner's unique interests, abilities, learning style, and needs. It is important to specify the intended audience for the course and what you assume to be their unique needs and interests. The following examples illustrate conceptions of the learner as expressed in actual course rationales.

*Literature, High School:* Students may be seen as people working through life, looking for satisfaction, for pleasure, and for value. Every person needs to find beauty and meaning in their world. Beauty and meaning—these elements make the world more enjoyable in good times, more tolerable in bad. The worst situation is seeing life devoid of sense and without aesthetic pleasures. Many studies provide access to beauty and meaning (including science and religion, for example) but the study of literature, because it may be

written about anything (including science or religion, for example), affords the student a direct and broad approach. Not every student may find interesting questions or tentative answers in literature, but if a literature course opens that form of art and knowledge (often depreciated in our technological society) to a few students, it is worthwhile. For young people trying to make sense of the world and themselves, reading works of literature may provide some insights. This means that students must have the opportunity to bring their own meanings to the text; a course that depends on the use of secondary sources and simply presents literature as others have read it will distance the works from the students.

*Basic Math, Ninth Grade:* Basic math is intended to help the individual gain self-confidence through success in math and take pride in the ability to meet or exceed societal standards for performance, including job-related uses. Most important, a knowledge of mathematics increases an individual's versatility in communicating with others, and in understanding the world through observations and through the media.

## **The Society**

The assignment of societal values might involve informed voting, environmental awareness, rapid social change, racial intolerance, uncontrolled technology, and so forth. Values with respect to the society concern conceptions of social responsibilities or societal constraints and how the course can help the individual meet these responsibilities or deal with these constraints. The attitudes, knowledge, and skills learned in a course are, from this perspective, those required for participation in the social group.

Societal values vary and may be directed toward socialization, preservation of the social order, or preparation for citizenship. Occupational or vocational preparation is a societal value when implemented as a means to supply the work force with the skilled people needed by society at any particular time. Conceptions of society also include those views that express the need for a restructured social order or the "destructuring" of present institutional arrangements. Whatever conception of society is implied by your course, it should be articulated in the course rationale. It should make clear your explanation as to why the course goals are of value to society. The following examples are illustrative of conceptions of society as expressed in actual course rationales.

*Indian Music, High School:* The U.S. is a young nation. Speed and practicality are her watchwords. There is no time for waiting. In-

stant tea, instant success, instant art, instant culture, instant salvation . . . these are the hallmarks of life here. The stress is more on “reaching outness,” and “out-goingness” than on introspection or self-knowledge. A dash of orientalism through the music of India, if made available to the young, may inject a badly needed counter-influence to the speed of life here.

*English for Speakers of Nonstandard English, High School:* If these symptoms (reading problems) do not have a pathological cause, perhaps the problem is social in nature. The job situation is one example that points to this possibility. Studies have demonstrated a high correlation between reading failure and supposed “speech irregularities,” especially extraordinary slurring and deletion of consonants. And statistics indicate that candidates for employment who do not speak “standard English” (and, therefore, cannot read “standard English”) are shunned by the nation’s employers. Clearly, this is a social judgment, since many jobs do not entail reading or writing.

Although most courses serve both individual and societal needs, the distinction between the two is important and may reflect significantly different curricular emphases. For example, an occupational education course may view work or a career primarily as a means to self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment and thus respect individual purposes and life-styles. However, another occupational education course may view as its primary purpose the supplying of society with workers in the proper number and with the proper qualifications. Such a course may attempt to produce an “organization man” and may derive its curriculum solely from labor data and task analyses. Some courses (for example, literature and art) may aim exclusively at self-fulfillment with society receiving only the indirect benefits attributable to being populated by fulfilled individuals. Other courses (for example, social studies) may aim solely at “good citizenship” with the individual receiving only those benefits that all citizens gain from living in a stable or progressive society. Whatever the emphasis, the rationale should clearly indicate the planner’s values with respect to the individual learner and to the society in which the learner lives.

### ***The Subject Matter***

The conception of the subject matter is the third area of values that needs explication in a course rationale. Values with respect to subject matter reflect the way you are approaching a particular subject and your conception of why that subject matter and that approach is significant enough to warrant a course. The rationale may stress the importance of

a particular topic or discipline. Ancient history as the vehicle of our cultural heritage, mathematics as a necessary way of ordering the physical world, and literature as a storehouse of humanity's great thoughts are examples of the manner in which a rationale may treat subject matter. The balance of nature in science, the inquiry approach to history, and the Renaissance as the most magnificent period in art are examples of approaches to subject matter that might be justified in the rationale.

A rationale should express the value of the subject matter to its particular audience. Tyler (1950, pp. 27–33) asks, “What can this subject contribute to the education of young people who are not specializing in it?” In part, your answer to this question will express the value of the subject matter.

The following examples illustrate conceptions of subject matter expressed in actual course rationales:

*Poetry Unit, High School:* Poetry is the speech of a man speaking to men, in the words of the poet William Wordsworth. In a sense, at its inception, language itself was poetry. The poet Karl Shapiro states, “Poems are what ideas feel like.” And in this light, every word at its birth is a new flash of poetry by which an individual sees a thing in a new way. Thus, poetry has always been a method of discovery as well as a way of knowing. What we seek to know through poetry is the world and ourselves, perhaps mainly ourselves.

*Film Making, High School:* This course attempts to introduce the language of film in much the same way that a parent might introduce a child to English; the course focuses on the problem of getting the student to speak. Thus, the course is more interested in helping students *express* themselves adequately through film, that it is, say, in filling their heads with notions of proper cinematic diction or syntax. Just as a parent might steer a child away from obviously incoherent phraseology, this course will attempt to steer the student away from the use of unintelligible images or image groups.

Thus the rationale should include a description of what the course is about. However, equally important is a description of what the course is not about.

*Wildflowers Unit, Sixth Grade:* This should *not* be considered a course in floral biology or botany. The children will be studying wildflowers as organisms—not the flower as the reproductive part of a plant. Therefore, parts of a flower, pollination, and seed formation are not covered in great detail. Rather, the emphasis is on ecological relationships and man's interest in wildflowers. (If the

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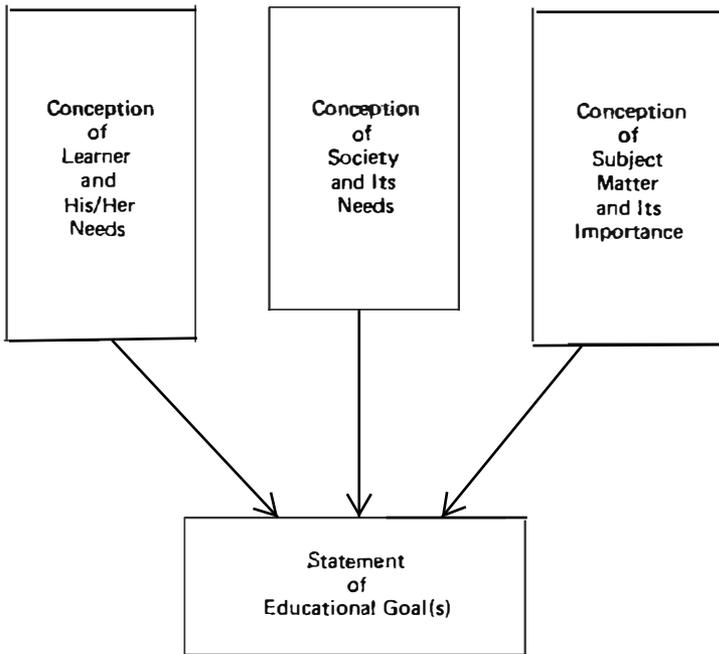


Figure 3.1. Components of a Course Rationale.

other topics are to be covered, the course will have to be expanded considerably.)

As Figure 3.1 indicates, conceptions of the learner, the society, and the subject matter form the framework for the course's educational goals.

### ***The Educational Goal***

Goals found in a course rationale should be educational goals. In considering what distinguishes educational goals from other types of goals, it is useful to consider the distinctions Zais (1976) makes. Zais distinguishes between curriculum aims, goals, and objectives. Aims are described as "life outcomes, targets removed from the school situation to such an extent that their achievement is determinable only in that part of life well after the completion of school" (p. 306). Goals refer to "school outcomes," which are long-range and reflect schooling in general rather than specific levels of school. Objectives are viewed as specific outcomes of classroom instruction. Zais's description of goals and objectives corresponds closely to our notions of educational goals and ILOs, respectively. The goals expressed in a rationale should capulize the intentions of the course and thus should be more general and inclusive than learn-

ing objectives (that is, ILOs); yet they should remain school related, the cumulative effect or result of many learnings. Goals describe anticipated educational results. *Goals are attributes or characteristics of the well-educated person rather than the specific skills or knowledge that constitute that education.* Furthermore, the educational goal stated in the rationale must be consistent with the planner's conception of the learner, the society, and the subject matter.

The following guidelines should help you to state appropriate educational goals:\*

1. Educational goals should describe the desired product. What units should be offered, what instructional procedures should be used, and what environmental conditions should be maintained to achieve those results should be determined later. This means that a statement of goals should not advocate the "opportunities" to practice this or experience that. It should describe the consequence of such practice and experiences, preferably in general terms of what the students should be like as a result of education.
2. Educational goals should be stated as desirable characteristics attributable to *learning*. Educational institutions may well be expected to achieve certain social goals, such as racial balance, reduction of dropout rate, and nutritional supplementation, but these are not *educational* goals because they are not achievable through learning.
3. If more than one goal is stated, priorities should be indicated. If all goals cannot be fully achieved, which goals should be given preference?
4. The goals should indicate what each *individual* should derive. Let society's benefit be indirect and implicit. Individuals with certain characteristics result from education. They, not the schools or colleges, will create the good society. Let not the "good citizen" be a stereotype; the properly educated *individual* is the best kind of citizen a democracy can have.
5. The scope of educational goals is an important consideration. Goals should not be so broad that they give purpose and justification to anything and everything and thus mean nothing. A statement such as "a person needs to be well educated" provides no guidance, purpose, or meaningful justification for any set of learnings. On the other hand, goals should not be as narrow as ILOs. A statement such as "a person should know the names of

\*Adapted from Johnson (1972 pp. 4-8).

the major world capitals” is too restrictive to serve as a justification; it is more appropriately an ILO. Considering the proper scope for educational goals is a way to make sure that the rationale is more than educational rhetoric.

The following are examples of brief goal statements extracted from actual course rationales:

This course is designed for adults who are active in local voluntary organizations and is aimed at improving their confidence and skill in dealing with their local mass media.

Specifically, this course will provide good management and personnel for the parts function of the machinery business. Furthermore, this course will provide customers who are more knowledgeable as to what the parts function of a machinery dealership should be, so that they can make intelligent choices as to which dealerships to deal with.

The purpose of this course is not immediately to reject or regard as suspicious everything we read, but to learn how to understand the implications of what we read.

The curriculum hopes to provide parents with the necessary incentives to cultivate advantageous reading environments at home.

## Summary

Logically a rationale comes first in course design, but other considerations may put it in a different position in the actual planning procedure. In the absence of other compelling factors, the rationale should follow the initial thinking about ILOs (which it serves to justify), and should come before the refinement of ILOs (for which it acts as a background).

A rationale contains a general statement of educational goals. Conceptions of the learner, the society, and the subject matter form the framework within which the planner articulates these goals. The rationale serves as a guide and a check for all later steps in course planning.

## A Sample Rationale

The following example is an actual course rationale developed by a teacher in training. It is not perfect, but it does illustrate one approach used in course rationales.

*Writing from Experience, a One-Semester Course for College Freshmen.*\* Individuals who know who they are in a deep and secure way will be able to lead lives that are meaningful to themselves and probably useful to other people. Education should encourage the growth of people in this direction of self-knowledge, self-confidence, and self-direction; it should not force people to grow in ways that are twisted or unnatural for them.

One place where many students are “twisted” is in traditional English classes. In reading literature, students are all too often forced to accept, without believing, a more mature and sophisticated interpretation of the work than they ever could have developed on their own, and which they find far-fetched. Their need to look into and explain their own responses to written work in any depth is usually ignored. Students are forced to write about things about which they know very little and sometimes care less; thus they develop the ability to hedge and a sense that writing—at least as far as they are concerned—is a matter of superficialities.

Writing from Experience is a course whose purpose is putting students in touch with their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and encouraging them to develop their sense of themselves, through writing and through reading other students’ work.

Writing is a way of helping people think clearly. Almost all people who use writing regularly and seriously will say that writing helps them clarify their thoughts. Their descriptions of the process differ—some speak of fragmented thoughts on a topic coming together on paper; some of metaphors that suggest new possibilities; some of rough drafts whose ambiguities force the writer to rethink what he wants to say. In any case, good writers find a real connection between clear writing and clear thinking.

Similar processes take place when writers deal with their feelings as when they deal with their ideas. Since feelings cannot always be laid out as explicitly as ideas, a writer may have to work toward a kind of clarity that is not entirely verbal; he may have to establish a personal symbolism to deal with his feelings, for example, or he might find that he can best communicate by presenting a situation in a new and different form. However he writes about his experience, though, the writer uses writing to discover and develop himself in a way that goes below the surface.

\*This rationale is taken from a course design produced as a term project by Carol Lamm, Cornell University, 1974.

## Questions for Discussion: Sample Rationale

1. Having read the rationale, discuss how it conceptualizes the learner, the subject matter, and the society.
2. Is equal emphasis placed on all three considerations? If not, which conception is emphasized?
3. What are the educational goals stated in this rationale? Does it seem to strike a balance between generality without being grandiose or elusive, on the one hand, and specificity without being trivial, on the other?
4. What kind of course does this rationale imply? See if you can describe the ILOs and the instructional plan that might follow from it. How would this course differ from other possible freshman writing courses?
5. What assumptions does the rationale make with respect to the role of the individual in society, the societal role of educational institutions, the nature and purposes of society and of human beings, the relation of the present to the future, the question of what knowledge is of most utility and the purposes for which it should be useful? What would you like to ask the planner about her course in order to identify these assumptions?

**EXERCISE 3.1.** Below are four sets of statements, expressions, or words. Each set represents initial thinking about ILOs, and each set is for a different course. Read each list, then consider what a rationale for a course based on each list might include. Formulate for yourself (not necessarily in writing) conceptions of the individual, the society, and the subject matter, as well as goals that may be included in such a rationale. Lastly, try to justify these courses with another rationale that differs from the first and determine the ways in which the alternative rationale implies a different kind of course.

### 1. *Child Raising*

rewards  
discipline  
attention  
sister/brother  
older/younger  
family get togethers  
privacy  
fights  
everything begins at home

protection from the cold  
world  
overprotection  
the spoiled child  
permissiveness  
imagination  
stifling the child  
home medical care  
“shut up” and “you’re really bad”

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>good citizenship<br/>fights between parents</p>  | <p>divorce<br/>child abuse</p>  |
| <p>2. <i>Team Games</i></p>   |   |
| <p>football<br/>practice<br/>good physical well-being<br/>part of a health program<br/>physical coordination<br/>    taught by games<br/>a healthy body and a<br/>    healthy mind<br/>lacrosse<br/>baseball</p>          | <p>team games vs. individual<br/>    sports such as swimming<br/>    and running<br/>praise/cheers<br/>pride<br/>injury<br/>medical attention<br/>teamwork<br/>the need for play as a part<br/>    of growth</p>                                |
| <p>3. <i>Consumer Buying</i></p>  |   |
| <p>bargains<br/>what is a bargain? (It's not<br/>    a bargain unless you<br/>    need it)<br/>buy in season<br/>be sure to buy the sales<br/>    sensibly<br/>quality vs. quantity<br/>buying on time<br/>guarantees</p> | <p>where can you haggle over<br/>    the price?<br/>waste not—want not<br/>making use of leftovers<br/>our sometimes wasteful<br/>    economy<br/>returnable bottles<br/>recycling<br/>tools can be investment<br/>using the public library</p> |
| <p>4. <i>The Environment</i></p>  |   |
| <p>pollution<br/>food chain<br/>ecology<br/>balance of nature<br/>cows<br/>insects<br/>role of the predator<br/>industrial waste<br/>farming in India</p>   | <p>the pond<br/>life cycles<br/>human beings in<br/>    relationship to<br/>    their environment<br/>people should be aware of<br/>    the consequences of their<br/>    actions on the environment<br/>field trip</p>                         |

## Rationales for Elementary School Units

Many people planning elementary units find a complete rationale for each unit unnecessary. The term “rationale” as explained in this chapter is more descriptive of the justification needed for a semester’s or full

year's worth of planning. For an elementary unit, we suggest that you consider including an "introduction." An introduction should contain the following: (1) educational goals for the unit; (2) where the unit fits into the overall curriculum, that is, what should precede or follow it and how it fits in with the rest of the year's work; (3) your view of the learners, what they should know going into the unit, and why this content is interesting and appropriate; and (4) comments or suggestions that convey the manner in which the unit should be taught. The introduction is your chance to tell others what you might say to them if they were going to teach your unit. You should certainly use this opportunity to think about your goals and values. You may want to write the introduction to your unit as a final course-planning step.

**COURSE-PLANNING STEP 3.1.** Write a rationale for your course on the basis of your initial ideas and your thoughts about the course's focus. The rationale should clearly state the course's educational goals within the framework of the learner, the society, and the subject matter.

## Questions for Discussion: Course Rationale

1. Have your capabilities of the learner been taken into consideration sufficiently?
2. Is your course slanted more toward making the student conform to societal values or more toward arming the student against aspects of the society? Why have you given it that orientation?
3. Is your treatment of the subject matter in any way different from standard treatments? How do you defend this difference?
4. Do you consider yourself an educational conservative, moderate, liberal, or radical? What about your course shows this?
5. Does your rationale suggest other courses that would express the same general philosophy?
6. Where would the student get the skills needed in order to finish your course successfully?
7. For what activities does your course prepare the student?
8. What would the student have to learn if the course's educational goals were to be achieved?
9. Are there any ILOs suggested by your rationale that are missing from your list of ILOs?
10. See if you can find the educational goals of *Course Design*. What rationale (if any) is offered for the book?

**COURSE-PLANNING STEP 3.2.** Revise your list of ILOs from Chapter 2 in view of your course rationale.

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