

Adapting for online delivery: Is Online the best option?

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By Phil Garing

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Advocates of total online training solutions point to the following sorts of advantages for the learner:

- Learn anywhere at any time
- Fit learning around personal commitments
- Access a wide range of resources

And for the producer of learning materials, it means:

- Potentially lower delivery costs
- Access to wider groups of learners
- Organisation-wide delivery of training
- Integration with organisational goals such as knowledge management and organisational change

Totally valid reasons and significant benefits that justify considering online delivery of education. However they are not enough on their own to justify assuming an online solution is best. There are three main issues:

1. The online environment will not suit some learners
2. There may be other combinations of delivery tools that do the job better
3. There are some distinct disadvantages as well

The learners

Online learning works well for learners that have moderate or better computing abilities. It is easy to underestimate the skills required. Challenges include managing internet connections, using browsers, downloading plugins or third party software, trouble shooting and file management. They also need to be good at managing their own time and competing commitments. Learners who need extensive support in managing their study programme may well not complete. This profile is not limited to people new to study. Those with extensive work commitments often drop out despite high initial motivation and good study skills.

Other Tools

Despite improvements in bandwidth, few online training courses offer the degree of interaction found in

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classrooms or on CD Rom multimedia products. While technologies such as streaming media and videoconferencing do offer high end solutions, they are only useful if the learners have genuine access to them: fast connections and current hardware and software.

These issues may not be relevant if the content can be taught using lower level technological solutions. Often however, such solutions lead to superficial learning of facts only. There is a real danger in assuming that such solutions will lead to significant training outcomes. Everyone may complete, and pass, but will they have actually learned anything useful? More on this when we discuss designing for online learning.

Another common trap is dumping text online. Text is inherently more difficult to read on screen, learners will almost invariably print out text and read off paper when given the chance. Unfortunately,

much online text is not set up to print cleanly. Online text is also often broken up into smaller blocks and linked for multiple access points. This is great for learners navigating to find what they need, not great if learners need to repeatedly refer to or work with volumes of text.

Finally, the most effective 'resource' in the face to face environment is of course the presenter or lecturer. Often projects to go online simply adapt the existing print and media resources. Effective online courses find ways to maintain that personal contact, or develop tools that go some way to performing the same functions. Simply offering chat or bulletin board facilities does not, of itself, resolve this issue. The analogy is putting a learner in a car, but not showing them how to drive, or giving them a reason to go anywhere. The delivery methodology needs to be designed to stimulate and guide online communication.

Disadvantages

For the learner, the technology can be intimidating, or actually impede learning. More self-motivation and discipline are often required, and communication technologies may be a poor substitute for face-to-face contact.

For the producer of the learning, significantly higher development costs are likely, and specialised skills are required. There are also the problems of overcoming scepticism amongst potential users, and adapting the organisation's culture and systems for the new delivery method.

Despite the range of challenges and issues inherent in online learning, there is no doubt that it is revolutionising the face of training and education. In the race to assimilate technology into educational delivery, it is not the development of training that is the goal, it is the depth of learning that results from it. Be wary of claims by vendors of online training solutions that one product is all that is required to develop and deliver an effective (online) package. Any educational course will require planning and good educational design. Subsequent articles in this series will overview that design and development process.

Phil has been involved in a number of projects in the field of flexible delivery, both research based and product-based. In addition he has developed a number of industry based flexible delivery packages and open learning packages in the Polytechnic sector. He also works as a staff development

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Adapting for online delivery; clarifying outcomes

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When adapting existing course content, it's tempting to assume that there's nothing to do when it comes to the training outcomes. Just use the existing ones, right? Not necessarily. Changing the way you offer the programme can result in a whole raft of 'process' related training outcomes being introduced. For example, online/distance programmes often expect students to find and assimilate information from Internet based resources. They also need to manage their own study, and are often expected to identify what they don't know and articulate this through the online environment.

These expectations are often not present to the same degree in face-to-face training, due to the immediacy of trainer/lecturer support. That's why you'll often find students baulking at the degree of independent study expected of them in online/distance courses. It seems like a lot of unnecessary extra work, when the trainer/lecturer could just give the information. There are two implications here for training design:

1. If we're going to add process related outcomes to the programme, we need to be sure that the volume of work is still realistic, and that the programme is designed so that learners are trained in the skills, not just assumed to have them.
2. There will be much better buy-in from learners when these outcomes are clearly articulated as part of the programme. They won't be seen as an unnecessary extra, they'll be a legitimate part of the programme. In point of fact, these sorts of (enterprise) skills are becoming recognised as core to many programmes, both academic and corporate. The online/distance environment is a great place to develop them, so long as they have a legitimate place in the programme.

Also bear in mind that in a face-to-face environment, the trainer/lecturer is in a position to clarify, update or change outcomes as the course progresses. An ambiguous outcome can be clarified with a quick question. However eLearning/distance courses generally leave learners in more isolated environments. Sure, there are messageboards and email tools for communicating course information, but how will you know when there is a problem with an ambiguous outcome? Online/distance communication is slower and less homogenous. Often you may not be aware of a problem until assessments are submitted, and it's a little late then to be clarifying objectives... The lesson here is; the more remote the student, the more explicit the instructions need to be.

The design process is now at the point that you have a clear picture of your learners and what will work for them. You have also articulated your training goals.

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