

Adapting for online delivery; selecting the right technology

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Adapting for online delivery; selecting the right technology

By Phil Garing

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It goes without saying that whatever technologies are used, they have to be effective training tools. Previous Updaters have detailed how to determine the profile of the learner and what the training is designed to achieve, you're now in a good position to make an effective decision on appropriate technologies.

The most common difficulty is in balancing operational issues and a need to use existing structures, against the particular needs of the learners. The sorts of operational pressures often encountered include:

- Competing budgetary constraints. Often developmental initiatives compete with other 'special' projects in an environment of reduced and uncertain funding.
- Organisation wide change. Significant as the spread of elearning is, it still must integrate with other organisational change issues such as restructuring and the internationalisation of education.
- Institution-wide IT systems. Often, existing IT systems were originally designed to support the administration of organisations, rather than the provision of training. Where delivery software is purchased, the decision is often based on cost and ease of integration within existing systems.
- The development of courses has traditionally been seen as one part of the job of lecturers rainers. 'Getting a course going' was something that educators did as part of their wider delivery role. It sometimes demanded additional resourcing, which was negotiated as part of annual workload. As such, it was a cost to be minimised.
- Time pressure. Pre-determined course start dates often dictate small development timeframes.

1. Select the delivery tool.

Relevant factors here are:

- The existence of legacy systems such as generic online delivery tools
- The 'best fit' for existing course resources, with a focus on minimising the adaption process. For example, online availability of PDF documents generated from presentation materials.
- Lowest implementation cost.
- Minimising the need for staff training or upskilling in order to implement delivery.

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2. 'Path of least resistance' development.

Collate existing resources (usually print) and adapt for online/distance delivery.

3. Supplement the core.

Provide communication, support or learner feedback to the extent permitted by timeframes and budgetary constraints.

Adopting such a model involves running a number of risks. Many of the elements that make up effective face to face instruction are not readily adapted from course resources. For example:

- Much of the actual content is often in the head of the presenter, not on paper.
- The role of a presenter as motivator can be missed in the adaption process.
- The ability to provide immediate feedback to learner's concerns or problems is part of the face to face

environment. Elearning often involves delays in providing feedback. Good online delivery will address this issue by developing extensive feedback resources that are immediately available to learners.

- Much of the value in face to face learning is derived from the types of activities and interaction that takes place. Simply adapting resources does not necessarily result in learning activities or the level of interactive engagement that brings about deeper learning.

Working from existing resources also means that alternative resources and activities are often not included in the design of the course, so much as tacked on the end. For example, existing Internet resources are often listed as background material; learners are invited to go beyond the structured course resources if they choose to. Such an approach misses the opportunity to broaden the depth of learning available through existing online resources. Designing the learning process to incorporate such resources allows more effective use to be made of them.

The issue then is about selecting the appropriate technologies for the learners and training objectives. The respective advantages of core technologies can be summarised as:

1. Internet resources

- Provides access to training in a range of situations that learners might otherwise not be able to study in.
- Less suitable for modelling verbal skills or physical behaviours.
- Facilitates communication between students and tutors at a distance.
- Limited ability to provide feedback on behaviours (e.g. practical presentation skills)
- Provides access to current worldwide resources.
- Less interactivity/depth of learning experience than multimedia.

2. Multimedia resources

- Makes available a wide range of learning resources and realia
- More complicated to access 'live' and update.
- Incorporates a range of activities that stimulate and motivate learning.
- Generally more involved development process

3. Print resources

Adapting for online delivery; selecting the right technology

- Provides a permanent record
- Difficult to update.
- More transportable and can be used in a wider range of situations.
- Costly to distribute

Don't assume that only one resource type should be used. Well designed customised training solutions will often combine a range of resources that, packaged together, provide a learning experience that draws on the strength of each one. For an example of training that combines multimedia, internet and print based resources, see www.tess2000.com, a course in study skills preparing learners for University tertiary level study.

Phil has been involved in a number of projects in the field of flexible delivery, both research based and product-based.<http://www.toucanhouse.co.nz>

Adapting for online delivery: Is Online the best option?

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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 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 consultant.<http://www.toucanhouse.co.nz>



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