

What makes for good online learning?

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What makes for good online learning?

By Phil Garing

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Perhaps one of the strongest temptations when approaching online solutions is to start by converting existing training resources into web resources. Since much face-to-face delivery is backed up by print materials, putting print documents online is often a popular starting point. If learners are academic, highly motivated and good at organising their study, they'll probably cope with large volumes of text. They'll print it out, read it, file it logically and use it.

Is this the profile you're dealing with? Probably not. The reality is that the Web is a visual medium. It's also true that reading large amounts of text from a screen is unpleasant and learners will avoid it where possible.

One of the other advantages of online learning is that content can be linked and accessed in non-linear ways. Large blocks of text online can limit the potential to make learning a dynamic process.

The challenge is to design education and training solutions that draw on the strengths of the media selected. Future updaters will pick up on educational design as a tool for achieving this.

Generic development/delivery tools, what's out there?

The last 5 years have seen a raft of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) hit the market. They offer, in varying degrees, the ability to develop, deliver and administer online learning solutions. Mainstream products include:

- "TopClass" (<http://www.wbtsystems.com/>),
- "Learning Space" (<http://www.lotus.com/home.nsf abs/learnspace>),
- "WebCT" (<http://homebrew.cs.ubc.ca/webct/>),
- "Web Crossing" (<http://webcrossing.com/>)
- "CourseInfo" (<http://product.blackboard.net/CourseInfo/>)

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"FirstClass" (<http://www.firstclass.com/>)

Core features generally include:

- file structures for making materials available online
- chat and bulletin board communication systems
- administration systems for managing students' progress

Each touts a list a mile long of institutions that use them, but in our experience, often only part of the product is used. For example, the communication and student management facilities of FirstClass are popular, but some organisations choose not to use it for content delivery for various technical reasons.

If subscribers have an opinion on a particular LMS, they're invited to forward it to us. We'll collate your

responses and feed them back to the list....

Alliances and Initiatives

Announcements of e-learning collaborative initiatives amongst and between commercial and educational institutions are a daily event. Many are funded by venture capital, and often combine an IT company's expertise with the knowledge base of an educational provider. The following examples are illustrative of the range of initiatives taking place. There are also some trends starting to emerge:

- Globalisation of education and training means progressive educational institutions are combining forces to make available the capital and infrastructure necessary to produce online solutions that will tap into the new global market
- Education is becoming one of the core areas of venture capital investment in online solutions generally. The traditional idea that educational institutions were non-profit organisations working for the public good is fading rapidly.
- The most effective solutions usually involve a partnership that combines the technical expertise of a commercial organisation with the educational resources of a larger institution or institutions.
- Perhaps the area of greatest activity is providers offering delivery platforms for partner institutions' content. This meets the need of smaller institutions/companies wanting to offer training online, but not having the infrastructure or resources to develop online LMSs.

*Jackson State University (JSU) announced plans to spend US\$20 million to create a major technology research and incubation center in Mississippi, a move made possible by a \$17 million donation to the university by Allstate Insurance Company.

*The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) announced a partnership with British and Australian institutions to develop a for-profit online film program that will be offered globally.

*CYBeR-CARE Inc. (a telehealth technology company) and Wichita State University's College of Health Professions have announced an alliance to test the effectiveness of initiating and monitoring physical therapy and other rehabilitation services for patients in home settings using the Electronic HouseCall(TM) System.

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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>

Distance Learning Makes Life Easier

By Matthias Reightman

Do you have a desire to continue your education but are just not sure how to fit it into your busy schedule? Or perhaps you want to finish a degree but live too far from a college to make the drive for classes. Whatever your situation, do not be discouraged. Distance learning makes it possible for almost anyone to take a class or work toward a degree regardless of where they live.

Distance learning is becoming increasingly popular in higher education. Educators and administrators realize that people are busy and that gaining a traditional education is not realistic for everyone. Distance learning makes it possible for people of all ages to complete a variety of classes toward degrees of many kinds.

Distance learning can take place over the internet through online courses or by correspondence through the mail. Having internet is definitely helpful for distance learning, but it is certainly not required. All you really need is an address and a mailbox and you can be well on your way to finishing a degree.

If learning from home sounds like it might work for you, begin to research different colleges and universities that offer distance learning as an option for students. A simple internet search or a search at your local library should be able to highlight appropriate schools for you in no time. You will have to consider too what kind of degree or program you hope to study in. Don't rush into studying something until you have explored many options.

A great thing about distance learning is that you can continue with the rest of your life while taking classes. You do not have to stop working, change jobs, or stop spending time with your family and friends. With distance learning you can take as few or as many classes as you want to. Some times in your life may be too busy for more than one class but at other times you may be able to fit in two or three distance learning classes. Distance learning is flexible and it allows you to be in control of your schedule. You will have to look hard to find an option that is as flexible and accommodating as distance learning.

Is there a specific program or degree that you have always dreamed about studying? If so, now is the time. Let distance learning make your educational dreams come true while keeping your life simple and easy.

An advisor to many people thinking about gaining more education, Matthias Reightman is an advocate for distance learning. See if distance learning is right for you by visiting

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