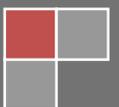


2015

Converting to a Distance Learning Format

Pre-Planning Strategies for Consideration

A growing number of companies are transitioning from face-to-face training sessions to an online format due to various aspects that reflect an ineffectiveness in classroom training endeavors. Creating an effective student-centered learning environment online involves more than converting existing files into an online format using a "craft approach." This guide will serve as a resource for considering what must be done in the pre-planning stage to develop an online distance learning program within your organization



CONVERTING TO A DISTANCE LEARNING FORMAT

A growing consideration for many companies is to transition their traditional face-to-face training sessions into an online format. With online courses becoming such an integral part of education, in 2013, Huss, Sela & Eastep (2015) reported the total number of students in the United States taking at least one online course had risen to 7.1 million, which proportionally is 33.5% of all higher education students (Allen & Seaman, 2014). As a training manager with an opportunity to convert all of the company's current training modules to a blended format, a first impulse could lead you to look through the printed materials of what had already been created to see what course could be easily converted into the online environment (Minnaar, 2013). However, before doing that, there are some strategies to consider first.

Most people that have been teaching face-to-face courses usually don't have any formal experience in developing an online course. As a result, this can lead most to adopt a "craft approach" in their eLearning initiatives (Moller et al., 2008, p.67). Using the craft approach leads a teacher to fully design and develop an online course, along with related materials, based upon what worked for them in the traditional classroom (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This would be a mistake as the learning management system your organization is likely to choose has features and tools that promote student interaction and communication that are different from the traditional classroom experience.

To develop an online learning experience that is focused on meeting the needs of your students, before converting anything to a distance learning format, consider the following:

- ❖ Deciding on an LMS
- ❖ What are the technology requirements for the organization
- ❖ Who are the learners?
- ❖ Course design

The following information should serve as a resource to be used as a best practices guide in developing an online distance learning program within your organization.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

A learning management system's environment can be set up to complement face-to-face instruction in a blended or hybrid approach that is a widespread approach to distance education (Daffron & Webster, 2006; Epstein, 2006; Orellana, Hudgins, & Simonson, 2009). There are many learning management systems (LMS) available on the market. Some LMS systems are free and considered open source, while others may require a fee. Open source LMS systems are attractive to many because they are free, but you need to consider the hidden fees associated with managing your own LMS system.

Hidden fees are manifested in the time it takes to get the LMS system up and running. The organization will need a systems administrator to evaluate their current system and initially install the LMS onto their company-owned server. The number of

concurrent connections by students will need to be addressed at some point to determine the load that the system can handle before crashing. Once it is installed, access will need to be granted to those that will be creating the courses. Once access is granted, the course creators will need to learn the new system on their own since training support on how to use the LMS is not available.

Be aware that the learning curve associated with the lack of instruction for those that are designing the courses can lead to frustration and resistance toward getting involved in distance learning courses. Also, the amount of time required to develop online modules that some consider time-consuming as well as labor intensive are reasons for faculty resistance (Brogden, 2002).

Fee-based learning management systems can be a little easier to work with. Contracts can be set up month-to-month or paid on an annual basis and the organization does not need to install anything on their in-house servers since the LMS is managed by the chosen company. There are usually different levels of support available to resolve issues, based upon a plan that the client elected when they signed up for service. Training is also a feature most fee-based services offer as well.

Features of an LMS are usually designed around a student-centered learning experience and are compatible with a variety of Web 2.0 technologies. For fee-based learning management systems, this could be the center-piece of their marketing strategy. For open source products, these could be features, but the initial program has the bare essentials. Additional features may need to be installed and configured to work properly on the company's network.

Before choosing a learning management system for your distance learning needs, consider the following:

- Do you have the staff to manage an in-house LMS?
- Will you need to upgrade the technology infrastructure of the organization?
- How will you provide professional development for staff?
- What features are included with the LMS?
- What support is available to resolve issues?

TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

Determining how the instructor and students will be communicating, accessing the LMS system, training materials and resources will be impacted by aspects of the organization's infrastructure. Creating a student-centered learning environment can incorporate the use of online Web 2.0 resources, video, audio as well as graphics. To ensure students and instructors have uninterrupted access to these resources, what they use and how they access them will need to be addressed. Consider the following:

- How will the instructor and students connect to the LMS system?
- What technology will be made available to the instructor and students?
- Will a wireless solution be provided?
- What will be needed to manage wireless connectivity?
- Will a computer lab be available to access the LMS system?
- What will be the computer lab's hours of operation?
- Who will manage the computer lab, to include staffing and software updates?
- Will learners have access to the online system from home?
- Do they have access to a means of connecting from home?
- What are the minimal PC requirements to access the course resources?
- What type of software is needed to view/edit the online resources?
- Will the online system be compatible with mobile devices?
- How will the instructor and students communicate from home?
- What internal system within the organization is in place for communication?
- How will student progress be tracked?

WHO ARE THE LEARNERS?

Adult distance learners bring a unique characteristic to a distance learning setting that involves a world of experience related to learning, life and their profession (Simonson et al., 2015, p.190). To be successful in an online course, the distance learner should be a self-starter and require little initiative to get interested in the content of the course (Simonson et al., 2015, p.190). This can be seen in how the student approaches assignments during the course and understands what is needed to complete each assignment.

In designing a course for students, careful consideration of the elements that would comprise an exceptional learning experience for the distance learner should always be taken into account. Because of the increased responsibility for learning placed on students at a distance, methods that focus on the learners and incorporate interactivity have been shown to be most successful (Miller, 2007; Smaldino et al., 2015). An instructor must remember to incorporate strategies that engage the learner in active rather than passive learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2007) and the key to achieving this is to encourage student interaction (Simonson et al., 2015, p.175).

In designing a course that is focused on the needs of the learner, the instructor should realize that distance learners are different from face-to-face students. The more an instructor understands about the members of the audience, the better the distance learning experiences will be for all involved (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Today's learners are more fluent with technology than we have seen in the past. This generation of

learners have more experience using many social communication tools (Smaldino et al., 2015) that may cause a need for instructors to reframe the strategies necessary to engage students (Simonson et al., 2015, p.201). However, accessing these available technologies often requires that the instructor determine the level of the lowest common technologies, that is, the type of computer and software used by all learners and the instructor should be determined to see what is available to them (Simonson et al., 2015, p.99).

Distance learners need to have a better understanding concerning technology, troubleshooting issues, using a computer and have better than average writing skills since this will be their primary means of connecting and engaging in the learning process. Understanding as much about the student's in the class as possible will be beneficial toward creating a quality online learning experience (Simonson et al., 2015, p. 131).

COURSE DESIGN

After addressing the hardware and software side of the house involving the learning management system choices as well as the organization's infrastructure, the next part is to consider the content and resources to be used with the online students. Content successfully used in a face-to-face training session cannot be copied and pasted into an online course with the expectation that it will be effective for online students. The goal of an instructional designer is to create an online learning experience with some sort of rationale behind why the course is designed in a particular way.

In instructional design, the method by which courses are designed are based upon a learning theory that gives structure to what tools should be used to engage students and how learning modules should be structured to produce a desired outcome. Learning theories such as Holmberg's Theory of Interaction and Communication is open to behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist and other modes of learning where interaction between the teaching and learning parties are at the core of teaching (Simonson et al., 2015, p.46-47). This learning approach between the student and teacher helps to motivate students, promote learning and make the information relevant to suit his or her needs.

Once you have decided what you would like the training program's outcome to be, the following list of technology tools can help to get you started toward developing a more engaging course to reach your goal:

- LMS Discussion boards
- Google Hangouts
- Blendspace
- Baiboard - Online Whiteboard Application
- Padlet – Online Collaboration Wall
- Blogs
- Wikis
- YouTube

THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Just as a trainer realizes that distance learners are different from face-to-face learners, so must the classroom trainer realize that the role they play in the online learning environment will be different. In a teacher-centered environment, the teacher does all of the talking while the students listen. In an online student-centered learning environment, the teacher takes on the role of a coach (Simonson et al., 2015, p. 105). According to Bar and Tagg (1995) in a learner-centered model, a teacher/trainer no longer provides instruction, they are now producing learning, instead of the classroom and learning being competitive, the learning environments are cooperative, individualistic, collaborative and supportive. In distance learning, a trainer would no longer be the primary lecturer, but instead would transition into being the primary designer of learning methods and environments that promote student success.

ENCOURAGING ONLINE INTERACTION

As a training manager frustrated with the quality of communication among trainees, the course you design should be prepared with the different readiness and motivation levels of your learners in mind. Your course should be designed with tools that allow for the highest level of interaction and collaboration while allowing the trainer to be more of a mediator/facilitator to the interaction. The students will be bringing a variety of experience levels to the online classroom and you should have an abundance of rich material to engage them. Your goal should be aimed at tapping into their experience and merge it with the material while giving them a chance to relate what they are learning to the reason that motivated them to sign up for the class, be it intrinsic or extrinsic. With the abundant amount of media-rich tools that you could consider using based upon the chosen learning management system's capability, it is important to remember that no matter which media formats are used in distance education, the trend is to reduce the amount of information delivered and to increase the "interactive value" of the learning experience (Simonson et al., 2015, p.134).

Bates (2003, Foley, 2003, p.833) proposed 12 "golden rules" for the use of technology in education and #7 on the list states that interaction is essential, #11 on the list states that teamwork is essential and #12 on the list states that technology is not the issue – how and what we want the learners to learn is the issue and technology is a tool (Simonson et al., 2015, p.147).

Despite your greatest effort to design the best student-centered media-rich course promoting interaction and collaboration, in any student-centered learning

environment, students must assume responsibility for their own learning (Smaldino et al., 2015). Even though many distance students are cited as being independent learners, they derive value from a collaborative learning experience (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Collaborative learning, which allows the students to work in groups and encourage them to share multiple perspectives in their views, is key to promoting interaction between students (Schrage, 2004).

In the collaborative learning process, not only should the learner be motivated cognitively, but also motivated to collaborate which will directly influence their level of participation as they interact with others (Susan, 2009). This interaction, that could involve a discussion forum (Winne et al., 2006), is able to promote various collaborative learning models with different tasks, tools, access to peers and theoretical perspectives (Gress et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

Having the opportunity to create an online distance learning program takes more than a craft approach. There are many things to initially consider, but you need to focus on the benefits of a distance learning program and how it can help you to achieve your primary goal that made you decide it was time for a change. By carefully considering the suggestions provided, you are more likely to develop a successful program that promotes a high level of communication, collaboration and teamwork that would benefit the organization overall.

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