

Best Practices Guide:

Convert Classroom Training To Blended Learning Format

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Facilitating Student Communications and Learning	•Keep all Learning within Students' Grasp •Set High Expectations for Students •Use Private Email •Select Media Tools Appropriately	Top 19 Free Email Services
Original Aspects Best Enhanced in the Distance Learning Format	•Put between 30-79% of content online •Decide Which Aspects can be Self-Paced	Five Blended Learning Examples More Approaches to Blended Learning
How Trainer's Role will Change in the Distance Learning Format	•Increased Communications •Rely Heavily on Discussion Area	Virginia Tech's Discussion Board (Provides tips and charts)
Adapting to Technology	•Remember the Students Technical Needs •Use Visuals Wherever Possible •Help Students Feel Comfortable	Resources to become a tech-savvy educator! (One Hour On-Demand Video Online Courtesy of WebEx.com)

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"A successful online environment moves away from the teacher"

to the student as the key to the learning process”

(Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2012, p. 196).

I. Pre-planning Strategies

Use a Course Management Software (CMS) for the Online Instruction Pieces

Set up a CMS because “although usually thought of as primarily tools for distance education, they are also used to support the face-to-face classroom” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 162). A course Management software will let you store all your assignments and course materials on the Internet so that your students can have 24 hours access. A CMS offers organization by content or by modules or “around themes or ideas that directly relate to student activities or learning” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 117). You should look for a CMS that provides easy, intuitive navigation capabilities which “permit students to move through the learning activities at their own rate and pace, in a route they determine themselves” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 119). Also, a good CMS will provide tools to insert hyperlinks, graphics, photos and embedded videos so that “learning materials are available across the entire Web” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 125). Finally, a CMS provides administrative “manageability: Can [the course site] system track the appropriate information about the learner and the content?” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 140). Mining for data about how trainees use the system would provide invaluable information not only for the you to revise content, but also for monitoring and clocking which learners have completed which modules. Click [HERE](#) to look at a great comparison chart for a few top CMS offerings.

Allow Enough Time to Rework Your Course

“It would be an advantage for the instructor planning an online course for the first time to consider working 3 to 5 months in advance of the beginning date. This will ensure that the materials will be planned and prepared in a timely fashion”(Simonson et al., 2012, p. 163).



Consult Subject Matter Experts

You should talk to an expert like an experienced instructional designer for online learning, for example, in order to help you properly plan and determine the content and outcomes of every course. “Learning outcomes are those observable, measurable behaviors that are a consequence of online instruction. It is important that students demonstrate learning outcomes by using a variety of technology-based activities”(Simonson et al., 2012, p.116). These outcomes flow directly out of the course objectives and “good instructional goals should form the basis for instruction, regardless of the medium used” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 158). Not only should you plan time and careful communication with the SME at the outset of a course, but also once more during the testing stage because “designers can never catch all of their mistakes. Ideas that sounded good on paper may not work in the virtual classroom”(Laureate Education, n.d.a).

Create a Story Board and Site Plan

“The storyboard is key to any type of [online] learning” (Laureate Education, n.d.b) because it breaks down the content into manageable chunks and it helps visualize the major concepts of the course. The site plan shows the flow of actual screens and linked activities to illustrate how the student may navigate the course step by step. It’s best to “stick to an intuitive layout or students will become frustrated trying to figure out the website rather than working on the content or activities” (Laureate Education, n.d.a).

Create a Detailed Syllabus

In learner centered instruction, planning a detailed syllabus is crucial and just plain common sense. “It is necessary for students to know exactly when assignments are due. [For example], a

calendar or timeline is very important”(Simonson et al., 2012, p. 164). You should care for the organization of the instruction, the syllabus to ensure communication, etiquette for creating a respectful online learning community, facilitating active learning practices and addressing assessment (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 202). Make sure also that your outcomes or course expectations are clear because “standards alignment is one aspect of the design of [distance] instruction” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 197).

Care for all Technology Considerations

The course video featuring Dr. George Piskurich points out that there are two technology considerations that can make or break a good course: 1. make sure the students have technology and 2. Make sure learners can actually use it.(Laureate Education, n.d.b). You will soon discover how unreliable technology can be and without a back-up plan, your blended learning course may be doomed. “Be prepared in the event that technical problems occur. If the equipment fails, it is important for students to have projects and assignments independent of the instructor and alternative means of communication” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 153). Just in case you may not be too sure what types of technical matters you should care for in your planning. Click [HERE](#) to see a New York University frequently asked questions (FAQ) for the blended learning environment. You should address these same questions in both the design of the course and in the instructor materials (Simonson et al., 2012. p. 235). Click [HERE](#) to see one more example of FAQ for blended learning.



Pre-Plan Engaging Activities

In distance education, more technology is not always better. Every activity using technology should be carefully planned to enhance the learning not encumber it. On this point, you should make sure that every activity emphasizes the concept of relevance. You don’t want your trainees to lose interest in the online modules that you planned. “Build in little tiny activities to keep them going so they don’t walk away from their computer”(Facilitate Online Learning, 2012). These activities might include a simple survey, a question that requires a graded reply, or creating a creative visual to depict learning. Activities and assignments must be carefully planned to closely relate to the course outcomes. Still, because learners are so diverse, there “should be provide ample opportunities for online learners to learn on their own [giving them] a little bit of room to do the learning their own way” (Laureate Education, n.d.b).

II. Facilitating Student Communications and Learning

Keep all Learning within Student’s Grasp

“Develop a good lesson plan that’s not beyond their [the students’] ability to do” (Facilitate Online Learning, 2012). Your first responsibility is to insure an interesting, learner focused environment that challenges but does not frustrate.

Set Clear, High Expectations for Student Interaction

You need to keep the bar high by maintaining a presence in your online modules as constant as your face-to-face lessons. “Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students...Online courses need deadlines.... Challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work communicate high expectations”(Simonson et al., 2012, p. 179).



Use Private Email

Your online classroom allows you to use an email exchange for more personal and private communications with your students. Like most email systems, you can attach documents, images and videos with ease. The email allows you to broadcast one message to lists so that you can distribute one email to many users such as all your students online. Do remember, however, that all “materials placed on the Internet, represent intellectual property” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 310) so the online email must still be managed professionally like any work email. Most of your communications for the course, though, will be through the discussion board.

Select Media Tools Appropriately

You should create a variety of engaging, “active learning experiences ...[like] small group discussions, hands-on experiences, presentations or similar types of strategies” (Simonson et al, 2012, p. 201) to keep the distance learner “actively participating in their own understanding of the content” (p. 202).

III. **Original Course Aspects Best Enhanced in the Distance Learning Format**

You can employ the Internet for any situation in which you feel that online activities are more productive learning experiences (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 125). “Students access their course web sites several times a week, taking advantage of available features, access to course information and the opportunity for enhanced communication with instructors and peers” (Ballard, Stapleton & Carroll, 2004). Remember that hybrid or blended courses can have between 30-79% done via the Internet and the remaining face to face (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 5), so you have some considerable flexibility in choosing which aspects of your course are best enhanced by the distance learning format. Students will adapt to whatever aspects you decide to make a virtual module, but do consider how easily students will be able to manage that piece independently. Choose those topics or modules which can be mastered in more of a self-paced environment.

IV. **How Your Trainer’s Role will Change in the Distance Learning Format**

Increased Communication

The roles of the face to face and the online facilitator are basically the same, except in communicating with the learner. As the virtual facilitator, you have a more difficult job doing the communication with the learner and in seeing what’s happening with the learner in a blended learning format because the learner is not physically present all the time. “It’s very difficult for facilitators to keep in touch with every student all the time, but you gotta’ try. You can’t disassociate yourself. You must carefully watch discussion boards and monitor what’s happening” (Facilitate Online Learning, 2012).



Heavy Reliance on Discussion Area

“To promote an open, supportive, and respectful online environment, an instructor can create a discussion area where students post their questions and the instructor posts answers”(Durrington et al., 2006, p. 191). You should monitor these discussion areas frequently and post your own questions and assertions because this is motivating to your students.

V. **Adapting to Technology**

Remember the Students' Technical Needs

As a “best teaching practice” learners want “ease of access and usability, accurate instructions and intuitive navigation and well-integrated tools” (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 194). Your online facilitator duties also “involve organizing the course, including such items as class schedule, grouping for activities, and expectations for interaction” (p. 198). This organization process must also provide guiding materials such as a syllabus, contact information, a clearly defined list of student responsibilities, technical requirements and what to do for technical help.

Use Visuals Wherever Possible

“One method of reducing the likelihood of students copying others’ work is the use of visual representations, which produces a unique product that cannot be copied from others, facilitating original work and thoughts”(Smith, 2006, p. 61).

Help Students Feel Comfortable

Equally important, you must develop activities such as icebreakers to help create a collaborative learning community for the students. It’s critical that students feel connected to other students in the online environment and to the teacher, so you should build various methods of communication into the course. This selective design should carefully consider which technology tools best match the outcome desired and which best suits the level of learner knowledge. “The challenge is to select methods of teaching that provide learners with enough interaction to keep them on task while encouraging them to explore their learning experiences”(Simonson et al., 2012, p. 204). Your task for adapting your course to distance learning is a challenge so you need “to be creative and imaginative in the design and structure of the course” (p. 215).

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