

Converting to a Distance Learning Program:

A Best Practices Guide

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<http://www.ncc.commnet.edu/dept/distancelearning.old/images/earth-and-mouse.gif>

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Pre-planning

According to Dr. Piskurich (Planning and Designing Online Courses, n.d), the process of planning is critical. When converting to a distance-learning program it is important to develop a good pre-planning process. Face-to-face training program plans cannot effectively be taught in a blended distance-learning environment unless modifications are made. Distance education should not be identical to face-to-face learning, but it should be equivalent (Simonson & Saba, n.d.). When converting to a distance-learning program you must first consider what changes need to be made.

What are going to be the changes to the learning environment? How much of the class will be taught in a synchronous setting versus an asynchronous setting? In a blended course up to 80% of the instruction could be taught online (Simonson, n.d). Going from a training program with 0% online instruction to 80% is going to warrant changes to the plan of instruction. In a blended environment, both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments will be used.

Synchronous environments are used in traditional settings, like lectures, live audio or video, and face-to-face discussions. The key to instruction in this environment is to limit the passive time of the learners and use a variety of strategies (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). The training program previously used this environment for 100% of the instruction. In the blended course, the synchronous environment may be around 20%-40% of the instruction. It will be important for you to consider what

synchronous learning tools to implement that will maximize the learners knowledge during these times.

The majority (up to 80%) of the course will be taught using an asynchronous learning environment. This means that the learners can learn at different times and places (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). There is no direct time that the learners will need to attend the course. The fact that there is no face-to-face-contact, means you will need to develop strategies that will engage the learners, and encourage the learners to assume responsibility for their learning (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Effective asynchronous learning strategies include online discussions, collaboration, and online assignments.

The next area to consider in the pre-planning process is the design phase. You will need to find out exactly what the learners need to learn (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). There may not be many changes to what the learner needs to learn, but the delivery of how they get there will change. Piskurich (n.d.) states that the design process should begin with writing good objectives that show the learners what they will learn and how they will learn. Following the development of the objectives you must create activities and assignment that directly relate to the new objectives. You do not want to take the traditional environment activities and assignments and try to fit them into the new objectives. It would be more beneficial to modify the old activities and assignments and create new ones. The importance of the distance-learning environment is providing opportunities for the learners to explore on their own (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.)

Enhancements

The first enhancement to moving the training program online comes with the access to the course training materials and resources. Converting the training materials and resources online is an enhancement for the learners because it provides equal opportunities for the learners and it gives them more access. According to Simonson et al (2012), “it is important for students to feel they have equal status in the class regardless of where they are located”(p.210). You want to create a blended environment that is fair and equal to all learners. Learners will have access to all the materials and resources at any time, and it will encourage learners to become engaged in the resources. Besides the suggested resources, the Internet is loaded with primary sources that can help the students develop a deeper understanding of the training program (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

The overall quality of the communication within the training program will be enhanced by provided online, learner-led discussions. The challenge will be to remain in constant communication with the learners (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). Face-to-face classroom communication can be difficult for learners. The classroom discussions are going on right in front of learner, and they may not think of anything to say right then on the spot, or they could be shy when trying to communicate their opinion on a certain issue. The benefit to an online student-led discussion is that the learners have the opportunity to review the resources and come up with good discussion responses. The learner may also choose to respond to discussions that they feel the most passionate about. This will enhance the training program because it provides learners with the time to think, and the contributions will be more meaningful, on topic, and organized (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Online discussions will provide an opportunity for the

learners to collaborate and become actively engaged in the distance-learning training program (Larueate Education, n.d.).

The Trainers' Role

The online portion of the training program requires much responsibility from the learners, and more communication from the trainer. The learners are expected to read the resources, meet the discussion requirements, and learn on their own. The online discussions are student-led, and the trainer must facilitate these discussions. You must participate in all the discussions, and respond in ways that make the learner think (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). Your role is to help engage the learners in the discussion. According to Simonson et al (2012), you want “to post a thought-provoking question that encourages higher-order thinking”(p.274). Following an online discussion, it is your responsibility as a trainer to provide feedback to the students. Your feedback provides the learners with information on how they can improve their discussion performance, and it should be returned as soon as possible (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Providing feedback brings to mind the increase role of the trainer to communicate with the learners.

Although there will be a small portion of face-to-face class meetings, it is your responsibility to stay in constant contact with the learners (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). The online portion of the class requires responsibility from the student, and without constant communication, some learners' may fall behind. Providing feedback on discussions and assignments is only one portion of communication with the learner. You should also communicate privately with learners who are not completing activities and assignments. You need to show learners that you are there to help them and that you do

care about their future in the training program (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). The best way to communicate with the learners is through email. You should have a list of all the learners email addresses, and they should have yours. Communicate constantly to remind students of due dates and activities, and check up on them when you feel it may be necessary. “Communication is an important component of ensuring successful distance learning experiences”(p.205)(Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

Steps to Encourage Online Communication

To encourage the learners to communicate online you will have to first provide the students with everything they may need to successfully communicate online. You will need to provide places within the courses management system (CMS) for students to communicate. You should have a question and answers section where students can post questions and receive answers that are good for all to hear (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Your email address should be provided with the class’s syllabus, and the syllabus should be located on the courses CMS. During part of the face-to-face synchronous learning time, discuss your expectations for learner communication, and show them how to locate the question and answer section, and how to find your email in the CMS. Next, you should communicate with the learners in the way you want them to communicate with you. You should be emailing the students on a regular basis, which will often cause them to respond, and make them more comfortable communicating online.

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