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Converting Courses to Online

by

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The Top 10 Issues to Note When Converting a Traditional Course to an Online Course

On the surface, building an online course appears pretty simple. With:

- a solid (meaning, robust) course management platform,
- a comprehensive (i.e., thorough, well-documented, and digital) set of course materials,
- a dedicated staff member (someone who has been trained to use the course platform, and who has time to maintain and monitor the course regularly), and
- a good marketing strategy (to attract student-users), an institution can be successful in placing an online course onto the Internet in about six to nine months –or faster, if good planning, good content, and solid online course management is in place prior to the course launch online.

In all honesty, it really isn't that hard to put an online course "online" and offer it to the public as an alternative or supplemental learning tool. What has given online learning the perception of difficulty, however, are those issues that were unforeseen, or, more precisely, unplanned. Unfortunately, these unexpected management and planning-related issues (essentially, critical incidents) tend to arise only once the course is actually in place and functioning on the Internet. This makes sense if you think about it –online education is new to many organizations and institutions; there has been no prior frame of reference for online education in order for instructional developers and institutions to use as guides to avoid worst case scenarios. We are, in fact, learning how to deal with these critical incidents in online learning as they arise, and it can be frustrating managing them as they evolve.

This paper will share information about how to manage some of these critical incidents that arise unexpectedly in the implementation of online course. Some of the pointers we list below are important because they shape the structure, the marketing, and the development that inevitably come with creating online education courses.

Issue number one: By the time you read this, there's probably 10 new competitors out there offering online courses exactly like yours, or very similar to what you offer. The first thing many

course developers think is well, why bother with putting up a new online course if there is so much competition out there anyway?

Well, the reality is that there is a lot of junk on the Internet masquerading as an online course. Also, many organizations define courses differently; for instance, one organization may put all of their handouts that support a traditional course online, and nothing else, and call that a "course" (actually, what this constitutes is putting information online, which is not necessarily education to everyone). So, when we think of who it is that is our competition, we have to look at the product a little more closely and determine what it is that is actually going on in their "course!"

Also, there is the fact that there will always be some kind of competition out there, regardless of how excellent your product really is. Seeing what else is out there is a great opportunity to learn how to differentiate your course from other people's courses, and to find the instructional gap that needs filling, per se. Your competition, essentially, is giving you the opportunity to see what is working or not working or, an opportunity to provide a better course to the public.

Finally, think about whether or not your competition really is your competition. In other words, consider these folks your partners in building even better online courses together. Get to know these folks well; partner with them. Consider that because of the competition not everyone in online education will make it as an outstanding online course provider. It seems logical that not all of them will be excellent or "the leader" in online education forever. There is a limited amount of success in the online learning space and you can get a share of it.

Issue number two: There tends to be about four different perceptions of "online" courses out there, all of which have different audience, delivery, and internal management needs, according to Dr. Judith Boettcher of the Corporation for Research and Educational Networking (CREN). They are:

- Web presence –essentially, a course catalog on a web page. This isn't really considered a course by online education standards.
- Web-enhanced delivery –this uses the web to distribute your course materials, such as your handouts, your lecture notes, and perhaps, a discussion board. However, it is not considered a true online course because the primary delivery of the course takes place elsewhere, as in a telecourse or in person.
- Web-centric course –this uses the web as the main source of communication for education; in fact, this is considered a course by online education standards because the main communication activities take place online. What makes this different from a full, 100 percent web course, according to Boettcher, is that there is still some requirement to complete the course elsewhere, such as a proctored exam, or a lab experiment, and such.
- Web course –this is considered a 100 percent online course, where all communication and course functions take place online, and there is no other side fulfillment step needed to complete the course (such as a proctored exam, a site visit, and so forth). (Boettcher, 1999)

Obviously, the requirements and uses of these different definitions of online courses depend on what your end user is most comfortable with in learning, and how these models fit your organization's view and plan for online learning. In other words, each different type of course needs different levels of staff, technology, user support, development, and maintenance. What some organizations find after they have launched a web-enhanced course is that they really do need to move more of the communication between faculty and learners online, so that the faculty member is more accessible. This may mean upgrading to include a listserv-type delivery system of communication, and establishing protocols for sending notes to the faculty member, sending in assignments via attachments to e-mail, and the like.

Issue number three: If you have done your budgeting for online courses, be prepared to double it (or even triple it), even with the best of planning, at this early stage of the game in online learning. What we find with online learning is that organizations tend to underestimate the development and production time –for instance, course materials once thought suitable for both traditional and online delivery may need significant reworking to suit an asynchronous learning environment. For instance, most online courses require graphics, or interactive models, to ensure the best level of understanding, and to make the pages more interesting and useful to the learner. Often, graphics must be created or purchased to supplement learning content.

Also, depending on the kind of course you are offering, content will need regular review and redevelopment, particularly if the issue relates to standards, codes, and practices that are licensed and change fairly regularly. Finally, in creating online courses, remember that the most significant cost is time –according to Boettcher, it can take between six to eight hours of faculty time to migrate one hour of instructional time on the web (Boettcher, 1998). Why: the online course must compensate for lack of actual “presence” of real faculty, and so content has to be carefully written, notes presented in a proper academic “dialog,” and course management notes must be edited so that there is as little misunderstanding as possible.

Issue number four: The biggest challenge is bridging the gaps among your users, your users’ technology, and the content. You’ll find that no one has the same kind of computer, the same speed of connection to the Internet, the same browser, the same facility with software, the same comfort level with learning, the same comfort level with technology . . . the list goes on and on. When all of these issues are compounded within one course (and sometimes, they are), it is up to the skilled faculty member and online course manager to ensure that there are enough instructions, and there is enough help to bridge the gaps between the learners and your program. Often, online faculty members find that they not only have to be expert in their course content, but in technological troubleshooting . . . they are the first line of defense for problem resolution because they are the most available to the online learner!

That’s why it is very important to have well-developed student and faculty user manuals, training sessions (before the courses launch), demos of what the courses are like (so that adult learners can test drive their skill with the programs in advance), an e-mail help desk, and (very important) a **live** help desk, if at all possible. Most online learners struggle answering simple e-mail; the thought of having to troubleshoot a new learning program intimidates them and many will not seek help (even though the problems may be easy to resolve).

Remember, the only way to be successful with online learning courses is to have the courses used by students. Do yourself (and your learners) a favor by making it as easy for them to use as possible!

Issue number five: Knowing your users’ technical and educational limitations is half the battle. This relates to point number four, but with some additional significance –the learning opportunity must (initially) coincide with the learners’ limits with technology. When you are developing an online course, do not make it so glitzy (or high-end, or plug-in heavy) that it will intimidate the basic, first-time user. Address the learning needs of the majority of your users, and have them come and grow along with you and the online courses! Of course, you can have more than one technological version of a course later, but initially, it is best to work with the needs and expectations that the general user will have at first. It is also easier to scale up (and less time consuming) than to have to rebuild entire programs in a simpler (more scaled-back) manner.

Issue number six: When we think about online learning, essentially, it really is about a whole new way of learning. For more than 90 years, it has been about the same –traditional style. The way of learning was set up, the learners came to it, and had to achieve upwards to where the “sage” or

faculty member was at that point. No more. We are talking about now a way of learning whereby we, the content experts have to reach out to the learners, and find out where they are in their learning styles and preference and needs, and make the learning applicable to that. The research shows that learning is very much on an individualized level, meaning that cookie-cutter type courses that you may find in traditional learning don't really fit the model for online learning.

Meanwhile, what can we do to find ways to be successful with developing and instituting online learning platforms?

Issue number seven: Even if you already have a course in mind or one online, always have a plan to use to reinvent yourself, or at least, re-check, or re-assess what you are doing! Here's what the plan should include:

- a. A regular needs assessment of your users and how your organization uses learning technology;
- b. A regular examination of what your organization can do within current business/budget/staff parameters;
- c. A regular examination of what your organization's goals are for online learning, where you want to be in one year, three years, five years, and so forth (if applicable);
- d. A regular review of what your organization will need from others to make current and future goals happen with online learning;
- e. A regular review of budgets that will scale with these concepts;
- f. A regular review of educational platforms from which to deploy the courses (to ensure that yours is updated from a programming perspective on a regular basis, and that the tools to deploy the courses are still practical for your content); and
- g. A regular training program for staff, users, faculty, and everyone who will come into contact with the platform.

Issue number eight: It is important to know how online learning fits into your organizations' business model. Online learning affects an organization from the ground up; everyone has a stake in its success. Budgets will be needed to address different stages of the program as different levels of educational development and management evolve. How does your organization plan to reap benefits from the technology? How does your organization plan to evolve along with this brave new tool of learning? Don't think about this after you deploy your first course.

Issue number nine: Do you have content ready to go or an existing course that you would deem comprehensive enough for development into an online course? If so, great! But remember . . . the content must be top quality, and it must be current.

Issue number ten: Provide access to your content in as many ways as you can manage and afford. This is known as the "elasticity of educational content." It is available in lots of different forms, with online/digital existence being the most important. When we say "elastic," we mean "provide the online content in as many formats as you can afford or manage." For instance, written content as well as audio or video supplements (for those who may require audio learning).

Conclusion

Some of these items may seem obvious, but the point of all of these is that many of these issues have come up after a course has been deployed . . . and while we have the best intentions in mind when

we start out doing online learning, we often miss out on the obvious or nitpicky points that can easily sink the online ship.

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Dr. Judith M. Smith is the President of SiteTrainer.com, a Washington, D.C. consulting firm that specializes in Internet education. Judy is the former Director for Distance Education at the American Institute of Architect and the American Architecture Foundation. She has taught extensively online, and serves as an Adjunct Professor and graduate curriculum Chairman for the Master's Degree program in Information Systems Development for the University of Phoenix. She also teaches online at the American University and the University of Maryland, where she was nominated for the "Stanley J. Drazek Teaching Excellence Award." Her recent dissertation topic was titled, "Difficulties of Online

Judy has published several articles on adult education and nontraditional learning and teaching strategies. She currently consults with CES Providers, assisting them with the design, development, implementation, and reporting continuing education programs in a variety of different distance education delivery platforms.

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