Online Learning
Tips, Tricks and Best Practices

EncoreTech
Productivity through Software Training

A Headline-grabbing 2009 Department of Education study concluded that "on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction." Shortly after the article was published people began predicting the end of classroom training, but some of us are still struggling to get our online learning efforts off the ground. Why? Well it's not because our students aren't willing. The reality is that, in order for online training to really develop its full potential, more classroom trainers are going to have to make themselves familiar with best practices for setting up and managing online learning events.

THE BIG THREE

When it comes to teaching people how to use software, learning "online" provides the instructor and the student with more flexibility than live classroom learning. We think about online learning as any learning that involves the internet and computers, but there's a big difference between mobile learning (mLearning) and a webinar. It's helpful to organize online learning into three general categories. Each category has specific strengths and weaknesses.

mLearning/eLearning

➤ Asynchronous
➤ Self-guided
➤ Available anytime and anywhere (mLearning)
➤ Can be used as performance support

Webinars

➤ Synchronous
➤ Minimal interactivity—content is typically delivered as a demo
➤ Sessions usually last about an hour

Online Training

➤ Synchronous
➤ Interactive
➤ Sessions may last a full day, or even multiple days

MLEARNING/ELEARNING

mLearning (Mobile Learning) and eLearning are typically used to teach users in little burst of information. Both are ideal suited for teaching people how to perform a specific set of steps to achieve a particular objective. Software simulations are one of the most well-known uses of this kind of learning.

➤ Make it easy for students to distinguish between the narrative (nice to know) and the instruction (need to know)
➤ Lessons should be 2-5 minutes in length.
➤ Use **progressive disclosure** to reduce the clutter, confusion and cognitive workload
➤ Longer topics should be divided into multiple lessons or use a Table of Contents and bookmarking to allow the learner to come and go without penalty
➤ Interactivity should be no more than 20% of the overall lesson
➤ A non-interactive version should be available for students who intend to use the lesson as performance support

WEBINARS

Web-based seminars (webinars) are a great way to provide an overview of how software performs in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing. They are especially useful for "knocking off the new," and building confidence in the software.

➤ Encourage the attendees to use the full screen button so that the webinar takes up their entire monitor
➤ Practice, practice, practice. A large chunk of the time will likely be spent in a non-interactive demo. No one wants to sit through a lot of dead air while you try to find your demo document
➤ Don't constantly ask your attendees for positive reinforcement after the introduction and initial chitchat. Instead, let them know that they should ask you if they have a question
➤ Plan for adequate time after the demo for questions, answers, and wrap up. Attendees will likely have sat on their questions during the demo and be anxious for answers

ONLINE TRAINING

Online training is the type of online learning that is most closely aligned with classroom learning. In fact, online training courses typically move at the same pace as classroom training. Do not assume that online training is going to move at a more accelerated pace; if the pace seems accelerated, you are probably not doing enough to get the students involved. In other words, online training is not a remedy for those of us who are pressed for time. The advantage of online training is that students and instructors don't need to be in the same physical location. There's also some evidence that some learners are less intimidated in online training courses, and actually benefit from the anonymity.

➤ Initiate the virtual training room 30 minutes before the class begins

➤ Grab your students' attention from the moment they enter the virtual training room and keep them engaged throughout the course

➤ Students should not run the online training software full screen. Spend some time up front helping students optimize their layout

➤ If possible, students should have two monitors. One monitor should display the instructor's desktop and the other monitor should display the student's work environment

➤ Online training should be highly interactive. Students should have the opportunity to lead the class when feasible. The best way to engage students is to turn them into presenters

➤ Use quizzes and surveys throughout the training to keep users engaged

➤ If possible, monitor students' activity. At a minimum keep an eye on the chat panel. If a student is having trouble with their audio, chat may be their only lifeline to you

MORE BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Below are some of our favorite best practices that can be applied to almost any online learning situation. In fact, all of these ideas would also be welcomed in the classroom!

➤ As the presenter, your voice is the anchor to online learning. Be sure to vary your cadence and volume or you may end up with snoozing students

➤ Take your time. The mechanics of online learning often require students to do things like unmute their connection or type on their keyboard. Don't rush to fill every silent moment. Give your students enough time to manage the technology

➤ Keep an eye on the mix between narrative, instruction and practice. Not every online training situation lends itself to all three. Webinars, for example, are not a great medium for practice

➤ Mix and match the different kinds of online learning for the best possible results. Create a self-running eLearning lesson that demos how to use the meeting space. Play that lesson on a loop at the beginning of your session as the students are arriving or create a companion mLearning module for an online training class

➤ Avoid fillers. "Um"s, "you know"s and "like"s are magnified in online learning events. You don't want to be known as the "um" guy, or gal. You know?

➤ Learn to phrase questions so that the affirmative is assumed. In a self-paced activity, don't ask who's done. Ask who's not done. Students who are done don't need to say a thing

➤ Ask individual students direct questions instead of asking the entire group. This puts the students on notice that they should pay attention, because they might be called on

➤ Consider using an additional facilitator for large groups, longer sessions or especially complex topics. Having someone else administer the class allows the instructor to relax and focus on teaching instead of technology

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