A Guide to Converting a Face-to-Face Class to a Blended Learning Environment

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Converting to a Distance Learning Format

A training manager has been frustrated with the quality of communication among trainees in his face-to-face training sessions and wants to try something new. With his supervisor's permission, the trainer plans to convert all current training modules to a blended learning format, which would provide trainees and trainers the opportunity to interact with each other and learn the material in both a face-to-face and online environment. In addition, he is considering putting all of his training materials on a server so that the trainees have access to resources and assignments at all times. What should he do?

The following is a best practices guide for a trainer faced with a similar situation to follow when converting a program from the classroom environment to a distance learning format. The questions that will be answered by this guide will be:

- What pre-planning strategies should a trainer consider prior to converting a program to an online format?

- What parts of the original training program can be enhanced to better fit the online format?

- How does the role of trainer change from the classroom environment to a blended learning setting?

- How can online communication between trainees be encouraged by the trainer?

When answering these questions, an overriding principle must be kept in mind. "Keep it simple; make it better; and resist the temptation to do otherwise" (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d., p. 23).

Pre-Planning Strategies

The ADDIE model starts with the analyze step, where the instructor should begin pre-planning the course. Many of the concepts that need to be reviewed are the same whether the course is presented in a classroom, completely online, or in a blended environment. No matter which distribution method is chosen, the course designer should identify the goal of the instruction, determine the learning objectives, identify the relevant content, recognize the target audience and identify the constraints of the course. Distance education classes are not identical to face-to-face classes but the learning experiences provided must be equivalent (Simonson & Saba, n.d.).

A simple step by step process for pre-planning a course for the classroom or blended environment should follow the same general steps in ADDIE.

- Analyze current state

- Storyboard

- Sitemap

- Structure the course

  o Collect assets and update

  o Create shell

  o Setup website (online only)

  o Finalize software options (CMS) (online only)

  o Create sections

  o Break sections in to activities and resources

  o Alpha test

  o Fix mistakes

- Beta test

- Obtain feedback

However, there is more to think about when dealing when migrating a course from the classroom to the online world. Based on the information provided by The Center for Teaching Excellence (n.d.), Table 1 provides an overview of various concepts that a facilitator should keep in mind prior to transitioning a classroom based course to an online environment.

Topic	Content	Examples/Questions
Content	Information	Is it worth reading? Is it relevant?
	Interaction	Are they functional? Is it worth seeing?
	Activities	Is it worth doing?
Resources	Guide	Provide worth while information only
	Simplify	How to find the right information
	Organize	Connect the resource to the lesson
	Directions	How do the students use it?
Interaction	Student to Student	Discussion boards Blogs
	Student to Instructor	Chat sessions Question and Answer Board
	Student to Content	Web interactivity Online testing
Tools	Internet Tools	CMS Streaming Video Discussion boards Blogs Chat sessions
	Software	Adobe Acrobat Adobe Flash player Sound Recording Video Capture Word Processors
	Computers	Operating systems Processor Requirements Memory Requirements Internet Connectivity Cross platform compatibility
	Other Hardware	Webcams Microphones DVD players
Organization	Page Layout	Visually consistant Aestheticly pleasing
	Information	Functionally consistant Base distribution on a template
	Links	Navigation should be obvious
Feedback	Peers	Other blended learning staff
	Students	Previous distance learners Distance learning newcomers
	Tech Savvy	Non-student, technologically capable people
Assessment	Content	Did the content match the goals? Were the course objectives met? Was all the information presented?
	Learning	Students should demonstrate learning Online quizzes and tests
	Design	CMS Layout Was the online infromation easy to find? Did all the links work?

Table 1 – Pre-Planning Topics

Enhancement of the Program

The course designer should innovative the teaching with technology (California State University, Chico, 2009). A facilitator should use a variety of technology tools to assist in both communication and learning. However, there is a caveat to keep in mind when selecting technology. Do not use technology just for the sake of using it. There must be a reason of using any technology, just like there must be a reason for adding content to the course. Any technology that is added must be implemented with a purpose. One of the goals of online training creating is to eliminate any extraneous information (Bozarth, 2011). This same concept should be used when evaluating technologies. Table 2 provides a sample checklist for potential technologies that could be incorporated into an online classroom. A quick check in any search engine will show that there are many more that are available for use.

Social Media	Twitter Facebook LinkedIn Flickr Instagram Pinterest Delicious Google Reader	Devices	Laptops Mobile phones Tablets
Cloud	Google Docs YouTube Wikis Dropbox	Content	Text Images Graphics Animation Audio Video
		Web Conferencing	WebEx Skype Wimba Yugma

Table 2 – Online Technology Check Sheet

The facilitator should also use new teaching methods that will enhance student learning and engage students interactively. Students must remain actively engaged when dealing with distance learning. Any activity that is planned must be done to increase the interactivity of the

learner (Piskurich & Chauser, n.d.). In addition to utilizing the technologies outlined in Table 2, the facilitator should include problem-based activities, games and simulations that add authenticity to the learning and may provide real world applications (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

Multimedia elements and learning objects should be used and remain relevant to the objectives of the course. When dealing with online content, the material that is being provided needs to be more visual in order to represent the key concepts being taught (Simonson et al., 2012). The use of tables, graphics, animation and video to present information is important but it must be shown in an engaging manner. This multimedia should also be designed to accommodate different learning style of the student.

Finally, the facilitator should attempt to optimize internet access to engage student in the learning process (California State University, Chico, 2009). The internet is the medium for which the online content will be accessed. Through the use of web search engines and research databases, numerous online articles and peer reviewed journals are just a keystroke away. The instructor should prepare a list of databases in a variety of categories to help direct the student toward legitimate sources of information.

Changes to the Trainer

The clear difference when switching to an online course environment is that it is difficult to see what is going on with the learner. When in a face-to-face environment, the trainer has the ability to read body language and facial expressions of the student to determine engagement. This is not possible in an online, asynchronous forum. Some of this issue can be mitigated through increased communications as well as constant involvement in the discussion boards.

Because the course is now more student driven, the trainer becomes a facilitator. Instead of lecturing, there is more of a need for direction and guidance. The student-centric nature of distance learning means the active role of the trainer is diminished in the area of directly providing information but increased in the area of guidance. One of the most important pieces of the online course is therefore the syllabus. The syllabus will offer the students both the course structure and an aid in identifying their role within the learning experience (Simonson et al., 2012).

Feedback is another way the role of the trainer will change. It is essential for the instructor to provide the learners with feedback in order to correct misinformation, confusing ideas, to provide acknowledgment of good work and to offer guidance (Simonson et al., 2012). Feedback is not limited to the content of the course, it will also be required when dealing with the various technologies used in the class. The trainer will also have to learn become a content and technology master. Facilitators will act as the first line of defense to provide support for technology and content. This means that a trainer will have to be fully trained in the use of the software and to know the lesson plan completely (Piskurich & Chaucer, n.d.).

Communication

Effective communication is essential to the operation of an online classroom. It is the role of the facilitator to foster this communication by providing group activities and adding visual, textual, kinesthetic, and auditory activities to enhance learning and accessibility (California State University, Chico, 2009). By crafting opportunities for interaction between students, the sense of community will be encouraged (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.)

There are many tools that are available to the trainer that will support communication in both the synchronous and asynchronous environments. Table 3 shows a small list of options in both categories that could be used to promote student-to-student communication as well as student-to-teacher communication.

Synchronous	Asynchronous
WebEx	Discussion Boards
Phone	E-mail
Skype	Social Bookmarking
Texting	Screencasts
Chat	Blogs
Instant Messaging	Podcasts (iTunesU)
Twitter	ePortfolios
Screencasting	Online Journal

Table 3 - Communication Options Check Sheet

One of the most powerful tools the facilitator's arsenal when promoting student-to-student communication is through the use of a discussion board (Simonson et al., 2012). By initiating the discussion with a thought-provoking question, the facilitator can move the learning toward the student. Students will be forced to use critical thinking skills to craft a response to the initial question and to find supporting documentation to respond to peer submissions.

Conclusion

When updating a class from a face-to-face environment to a hybrid or completely online style, you must first analyze the current state of the class, update and enhance the content, look for ways to develop interactivity between the students and then create the future state (Bozarth, 2011). The designer must remain aware that there are many tools that are available that can be incorporated into an online class but they should only use those that they are familiar with, are easy to use and learn by the student and those that directly enhance the concepts being taught in the class.

By following the tips for pre-planning, program enhancement, trainer changes and facilitation of communication that were outlined in this guide, the instructor will be able to convert an existing, classroom style class into one that can be taught in a blended format.

References

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