

Converting to a Distance Learning Format

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Introduction

This guide will help you convert your face-to-face instruction to a blended learning environment. You will need to do some planning to address business and student support issues. You can take advantage of the online environment to add enhancements to your learning module. You must adapt your role as an instructor to a new role as an online facilitator. Lastly, you should find ways to encourage your students to communicate online so they retain the feeling of learning together.

Pre-Planning Strategies

The decision to move to a distance learning format, even a blended learning format, must be accompanied by sound planning. You must gain approval of all the plans from all of the supervisors and administrators before course development begins (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek, 2009). Some areas of planning include:

- **Business plan.** How will the organization pay for new hardware, software, or software as a service that may be required for distance learning? Will any consultants be required to help migrate the training to a blended format? Are there perceived increases in production and decreases in travel expenses that can offset some of these costs?
- **Support plan.** Who will students contact if they cannot access the distance learning materials? What happens if the website or server goes down?
- **Access plan.** Will the course materials be private and password-protected? Will they only be available through the corporate intranet?
- **Organization plan.** Who will facilitate the course? If it's the current instructors, do they know how to facilitate an online course?

Course Enhancements

You have a great opportunity to enhance your course when you move it to a blended learning format. You can add elements to the course that technology or resources may have prevented in a face-to-face environment. Some ideas include:

- **SME videos.** Record the SME talking about complex topics in their own words. It will lend credence to the instruction if the students hear it directly from the expert.
- **Interactive content.** Use technology to add vitality to the course materials. For example, if teaching a history lesson, consider an timeline that students can scroll or zoom in for more information. If teaching interpersonal skills, consider a branching scenario that allows students to choose different reactions or responses to the scenario so they feel the consequences of their choices.
- **Online assessments.** Create assessments that go beyond the knowledge level of Bloom's taxonomy to query the students' skills and attitudes (Simonson, et al, 2009). For example, in a course on Microsoft Word, do not ask the students to identify where in the UI to change margins. Instead, give them a document and make them change the margins. Make them demonstrate the necessary skills.
- **Links to additional resources.** Provide additional resources to allow students to explore more on their own. You do not have to create these resources. Point students to publicly available articles, journals, videos, and more.

Role as Facilitator

In a face-to-face classroom, you have a very active role as an instructor delivering the majority of the instruction. You may lecture, you may demonstrate, and you may ask questions to facilitate debate.

In an online environment, you must still be active but you are no longer required to be the focus of the learning. The course materials are online and your role is a guide to direct students to explore those resources. You must help them explore the learning materials and to foster their curiosity to dig deeper online if they want to learn more. One way is to create a strong lesson plan that indicates what resources are available and communicates expectations for viewing, reading, listening, and completion of those tasks (Piskurich and Chauser, 2010).

Another task you have as a facilitator is to encourage students. Often the online environment provides tracking tools that allow you to monitor students' progress on task completion or online assessments. If students struggle or fall behind, you must encourage them so they do not feel isolated in an online learning environment. It is difficult to communicate with each distance learner individually, but you have to try (Piskurich and Chauser, 2010).

Online Communication

Students need to be comfortable asking questions and communicating with peers in an online setting (Simonson, et al, 2009). You can foster this comfort level by encouraging early participation in the class. Consider having students post an icebreaker entry about themselves. Try to follow-up with the students with questions or comments to begin an online dialogue to encourage more interaction and posting.

During the class, you must respond as quickly as possible to questions so students do not feel adrift. You may need to post the equivalent of office hours so students understand when you will be checking email and discussion forums.

In other student discussion forums, do not dominate the conversation. Allow students to interact with one another without commenting on every post. You will need to monitor things to

make sure a discussion is appropriate both in terms of ethics and in staying on subject. When you do post, try to ask questions and stimulate further discussion and in-depth responses.

Conclusion

You have a wonderful opportunity to be able to move your instruction to a blended learning environment. Every year, more students shift to online learning and you are meeting their needs. Do some careful planning, take advantage of the opportunities presented by online learning, and be ready to facilitate the distance learning module.

References

- Piskurich, G., & Chauser, J. (2010), Video Podcast: Facilitating online learning. Laureate Education, Inc. Retrieved from <http://sylvan.live.college.com/ec/crs/default.learn?CourseID=4744647&Survey=1&47=6523831&ClientNodeID=984650&coursenav=1&bhcp=1>
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2009). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (4th ed.) Boston, MA: Pearson.