

Facilitating online learning

This is the first of a series of articles in which we'll be exploring the possibilities for collaborative online learning in the workplace and the implications this will have for the learning and development professional.

The use of computers to assist learning at work is certainly not new; in fact we've had the capability to deliver digital, self-paced learning content for several decades now. But computer networks, like the Internet and employers' intranets, have transformed the landscape for computer-assisted learning. Networks allow us not just to share content but to communicate with tutors and other learners at a distance, to engage in what we are going to call here 'collaborative online learning'.

The purpose of these articles is to help learning and development professionals to engage with and successfully exploit the potential for collaborative online learning. If you're an experienced trainer or facilitator but not so comfortable with new technologies, you should not be put off – you will be able to bring many of your existing skills into the online arena and will soon be completely at home with this new medium for learning.

Coming to terms with online learning

Back in 1992, Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web and kick-started the Internet revolution. As the use of the Internet became more widespread, a wide range of commentators began to debate the potential of this new networking phenomenon to support education and training. Many thought it could be the time to leave behind the old, familiar classroom model and work towards something new, different and altogether more exciting. If they'd been able to look forward to the current day, they may have been a little disappointed at the pace with which this change has taken effect. No doubt this is because it is only relatively recently that the technology has been widely available and at a speed which makes its widespread use genuinely practical. They certainly did not predict the pace at which technology would move on and the implications this would have for society at large. They'd have been amazed at the possibilities for education and training afforded by such 'miracles' as instant messaging, online communication using voice and video, social networking, blogs, podcasts, wikis, YouTube, web conferencing and virtual worlds.

Before we continue we'd like to offer a kind of apology. We are told the Algonquin People have no word for "time". In English we do. We'd like to talk with you in plain English about two principal modes of online communication, but since our language has borrowed from Greek and Latin for adjectives that mean 'all-at-once' and 'in-your-own-time', the words *synchronous* and *asynchronous*

will just have to do. Asynchronous online communication was the first to gain popularity, principally because of its convenience and the modest demands it places on bandwidth (network speed). In a learning context, the most widely used asynchronous technologies have been email and discussion forums; more recently you can add blogs, wikis and social networks to the list.

Most recently, synchronous online communication has come into its own, starting with simple chat rooms and instant messaging and progressing to the use of live online voice and picture, web conferencing and the space age video conferencing technology called 'telepresence'.

In these two complementary modes, collaborative online learning is beginning to enjoy rapid growth. Trainers and presenters with scant experience of working online have begun to move from their lecterns and set up their stalls in the virtual world. For some it has been an epiphany; some jumped, some fell, and some were pushed.

We can understand this growth. And yet technologies as well-established and versatile as web conferencing (a synchronous technology used by organisations for meetings, training sessions and presentations) seems to be a well-kept secret in learning and development, at least as far as the UK is concerned. By contrast, in the USA, at least 10% of all formal training is delivered this way. Web conferencing (often referred to as a 'virtual classroom' when it's used for education and training) makes it possible to run live group sessions online, incorporating voice, slides and text chat, as well as - depending on the software used and the available bandwidth - to share desktops and applications, electronic whiteboards, break-out rooms and communication through webcam video. It's quite a package, and capable of being used to run any sort of event from one-to-one sessions to small group workshops to seminars involving tens, if not hundreds of users (what are often called 'webinars').

We'll share with you our own thoughts, drawing upon our experience of designing for and implementing both modes of online learning. This won't be a review of published standards. The reality is that, as a nation and even as a continent, we have so far fallen short of creating a clear picture of the knowledge, skills and processes that are necessary to succeed with collaborative online learning not only in academic environments, but also in the workplace. We make our own modest suggestions against this landscape of an urgent need for a standardised and proven model that organisations can use for recruiting, selecting, managing, training and developing skilled people who can really make online learning win.

It's the skill and techniques of tutors that mark the difference between the inspirational, the interactive and the just-plain-dull! With only a little support and encouragement, most trainers can easily acquire these skills and apply the techniques. We intend to lift the cover to see what a trainer has to do to succeed in an online environment.

We'll show you how the effectiveness of online tutors is in their helping, not only with cognition, but with social dynamics too. We'll show you how they facilitate the process of learning, design the methodology, bring learners together, keep them on task, keep them together and help them to measure and record their achievements.

Online learning – what drives it?

Macro-economic, political and social trends have conspired to stimulate interest and adoption of online learning. With economies in Europe under pressure, high fuel costs, and the heightened fear of terrorism since 2001, many global organisations have adopted web-based conferencing as a primary tool for meetings, briefings and for training. In some organisations we've visited, it is simply no longer permitted to move people around the globe for training. In the corporate world there is a groundswell of interest in the crossover between formal and informal learning, the use of serious games for learning, web conferencing and social networking tools.

The Internet has revolutionised how we shop, share, play, and find information. Although the UK already has reasonably high broadband capability, in June 2009 the Carter Report on Digital Britain committed government to boosting digital participation through universal access to broadband by 2012.

In this 21st century workplace, learning at work is less a matter of internalising large bodies of knowledge, and more about the acquisition of core competences, supported by ready access to sources of expertise, both human and digital. In building the higher order skills of problem-solving and decision-making that so many employees now require, it's not enough to strew a few words of wisdom in the path of the learner and hope they will pick up something useful.

A learning intervention (call it a course or what you will) must have activity, interaction, discussion, coaching, valid, reliable assessment and feedback. Increasingly these activities will be carried out online as well as face-to-face, supported by tutors who are able to set up engaging and challenging environments in which learners are as likely to contribute content as to consume it.

Defunct since 1994, The Online Chronicle of Distance Education and Communication left us with a neat summary of the evolution of distance education. Its masthead carried this legend:

"In the Industrial Age, we went to school. In the Communication Age, schools can come to us."

What makes for good online learning?

In a moment we'll move on to discuss some specific skills and behaviours that tutors display to ensure learners derive the maximum benefit from their online learning. But first let's think about what that benefit might look like - how would you recognise that you'd created or taken part in an excellent online learning intervention? No doubt you'll have your own thoughts on this, but here are the top eight ideas that have emerged from our own discussions on the topic:

1. You would be so immersed in the activity of learning that the fact that it was online would be quite incidental.
2. The environment and climate would be supportive and safe, but challenging too.
3. Learners would be successful when working on their own or in groups, with or without the support of a tutor.
4. You'd be able to give rein to your independence and so construct your own understanding of the subject matter.
5. A learning specialist would say it was built upon sound principles of pedagogy (the science of teaching, instruction and training).
6. Groups taking part would report an effective and engaging learning environment.
7. Managers would recognise learning experiences to be meaningful and relevant.
8. As an adult learner you would be highly satisfied; you'd have high levels of control over your own learning.

What beliefs and values will make online learning work?

Some online learning is carried out by learners with common interests who gather in groups (cohorts) to work together to share knowledge, and to build understanding and skills under the guidance of an online tutor or facilitator. These interventions emulate college campuses using virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard or Moodle. Some are augmented by social networking sites, wikis and blogs that are set up to allow groups of learners to exchange resources, thoughts and ideas.

Online campuses and virtual classrooms, no matter which technology delivers them, each have their own distinctive personality and style. What works for one group or one occasion may not work for another. Tutor and learner alike have to be willing to adopt a new (and more adult) way of working together. Tutors must be very much clearer about their goals and methods and must express and explain these clearly to others.

Students must behave with greater self-reliance, organising their own time and taking far more responsibility for the content and management of their learning.

These changes are systemic; they rely upon a number of 'ducks being in line' and so they take time to realise.

One crucial change is in the breadth of situations in which a learner is likely to be placed. It is common for online learning to stimulate and support lots of discussion and collaboration amongst cohorts of learners. This may be quite a culture shock for dependent learners and for tutors and subject matter experts who see themselves as the rightful keepers of knowledge and information. Instead of releasing knowledge to learners at a time and speed that suits themselves, tutors have to be alert to the intercourse amongst learners and must be ready to intervene in a timely manner and often with the lightest of touches.

So we might expect some level of discomfort amongst tutors and learners too. That's why a key aim in both the design and implementation of interventions is to build learners' confidence and create the conditions in which learning can thrive for all concerned.

It's definitely not the technology that makes online learning great; it's the quality of the learning design, the facilitation and the support. We don't want to portray online activities as discrete, unconnected events in which tutors lecture and groups of learners listen, although it may be perfectly appropriate to use this learning strategy as part of the mix. An effectively blended learning environment will make it easy for tutors and coaches to skilfully ask the right questions, rather than simply give the right answers and then test for memory afterwards. The part the technology plays is in allowing groups of learners to work out their answers together while the tutor keeps a respectful but watchful distance.

What skills do you need to make online learning a success?

Talk to trainers and their managers about collaborative online learning and you will hear expressions of enthusiasm and excitement interspersed with the fear of drowning in a sea of forum posts and e-mail, fuelled by unrealistic expectations. Talk to them about live online learning through chat, web-conferencing and the like, and they will become agitated by a fear of unaccountable technical problems, or will express doubts about their organisational, technical or communication skills.

The reality is that if you're a classroom trainer, you won't find it difficult to transfer your skills to working online, although you'll probably benefit from a little training or coaching. You'll find the experience of learning online a little strange at first, but you should be able to adapt many of your existing classroom methods to the online medium.

Let's take synchronous online sessions as an example. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but we can tell you that the best web conferencing sessions we've seen (and heard) were built upon:

- a well-designed outline which defined the overall flow of the session;
- learner participation and control;
- effective preparation including the effective use of notes and prompts;
- richly expressive language matching language to the audience in mood, tone, dialect and register;
- lots of learner participation;
- sometimes subtle, sometimes extravagant tricks to capture and sustain attention;
- careful and creative use of suitable images;
- the very active participation of learners;
- a controlled voice with clear diction, excellent articulation and a wide range of modulation;
- more learner participation;
- good breath control and microphone technique;
- including suitable amounts of interactivity of the right sort;
- making good use of questions and other forms of interaction;
- maintaining control and keeping time;
- and did we mention, the active participation of learners?

When it comes to facilitation in an asynchronous environment, it was clear that the best tutors were those who knew:

- how to get people started;
- how to generate a community spirit online;
- how to inspire learners and build their confidence;
- how to explain tasks in clear, unambiguous English;
- how to stimulate the construction of shared knowledge;
- how to respond to changing circumstances;
- how to reply to student queries and comments;
- how to respond to learners' individual needs;
- how to enable interaction with and amongst students;
- how to sustain learner motivation and commitment;
- how to provide timely, clear and supportive feedback;
- how to deal with under-performance, conflict or unacceptable behaviour;
- how to keep calm under pressure;
- how to deal with technical problems during a live session.

These may seem like formidable lists, but many of these skills will be all too familiar to the face-to-face facilitator. However, when you consider the full range of specialist skills that might be needed, it will come as no surprise that the design, development and delivery of online courses is often best accomplished as a team effort.

The online world requires a different map

In the articles that follow in this series, we will attempt to provide the map all learning and development professionals will need to navigate the new world of online learning. So where did we obtain this map? Well, a Professor of Education had one favourite piece of advice he gave to his undergraduate students.

"Remember," he would caution, "that to copy from one source is plagiarism; to copy from more than one source is research." Well, maybe we will be calling on the latest relevant research from learning psychology, neuroscience and other, related fields; but most of all we will be calling upon a wealth of practical experience of working with hundreds of learners from diverse backgrounds, and of managing teams of online support tutors. Some of our learners have been 'all-at once' students whom we've tutored, instructed and coached in classrooms, both real and virtual. Some have been 'in-your-own-time' students whose needs we've met through the whole gamut of online tools - email, chat rooms, forums - as well as by phone, instant messaging, blogs, learning materials and published texts. We respect, value and thank them all. We certainly learn as much from them as they do from us.

Phil Green and Clive Shepherd are directors of Onlignment Ltd., whose mission is to help organisations to manage the transition, build capability and take full advantage of the possibilities of real-time online communication. We'd be grateful if you would take part in our '2 minute' survey at www.onlignment.com.

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