CONVERTING TO A DISTANCE LEARNING FORMAT

SCENARIO

We are asked to consider the following scenario: A training manager wants to improve the quality of communication among trainees. He now has face to face training and believes by changing to a blended learning format that the quality of communication will improve. In addition, the training manger is considering putting all of his training material on a server so that the trainees have access to resources and assignments at all times. This sounds good in theory. What I found odd about this week's assignment was not that the manager wanted to convert to some type of online training, but what was his the logic behind the idea? Online training will automatically improve the quality of communication among trainees.

In my opinion, it takes a lot of planning to create an online distance learning course. Whereas the main focus is communication between instructors, students, and their peers. There are numerous web sites on the Internet that will tell you how to covert classes to online, but should you. Why? Has the training manager given any thought to "pre-planning"? There is a lot of pre-planning that goes into online or blended online training, an example would be gathering the class syllabus, lecture notes, assignment list, quizzes, class project, and any other pertinent information. This is just the starting point.

COMMUNICATION

Next, you will have to determine what method of communication do you plan to have with the students in this class. And you can’t forget about the teaching platform. Oh, and what about the teachers skill . Oh wait there is more. What about creating the platform that will be used to

guide the class. This might be a platform provided by the school, university or administration for the course online where the instructor must upload all the information into a pre-designed standardized format. This could also mean that an instructor needs to create a simple webpage.

Okay, let say that we are ready to do this transfer, what do we need? I believe there are seven major items to think about.

FACE TO FACE VS DISTANCE LEARNING

First of all you can't take all face to face training session and make them online training sessions. Online learning is unique. When moving resources online, an instructor must factor in the uniqueness of the distance learning. The old content needs to be reviewed, and the organization will need to address the following questions:

- What does our business want our employees to learn?
- What is the best way to present the content?
- How can I use the strengths of online learning, while minimizing any unfavorable results?
- How can I create interaction between the following;
  - Student and content
  - Student and other student
  - Student and the instructor or facilitator?
  - How will I assess the learning?

What process will I use to evaluate the effectiveness of the presentation and the learning so that future courses can be improved?

BLENDED/HYBRID

One way to do this is to create a blended/hybrid class. You can make the ones that can not fit into an online style face to face. Let us look at what some of the strategies the trainer needs to consider. Our text stresses a number of components and they are as follows:

Training – Training is all about the range and application of instructional methods. Teaching methods should be chosen based on the characteristics of the instructor, students, content, and delivery system. One of the many problems with technology is finding a variety of techniques that will create an interesting environment. (Simonson et al., p. 188-189)

Faculty developing e-learning courses, as well as those involved in on-going instruction, are provided with technology training in the specific methodology appropriate for the medium of delivery and with systems delivery support. To this end, the Teaching/Learning Institute (TLI), in cooperation with the E-Learning and Computer Services departments, provides continuous assistance for web-based and other forms of e-learning instruction.

Technology - Computer, telecommunication, and information technology offer many solutions but are still plagued with sometime severe limitations, especially, in terms of man-machine interface. Hardware improvements always lead the race; software struggles to make effective use of smaller, faster, and more intricate hardware; and people are lagging far behind in understanding, utilizing and exploiting the marvels of technology.

Organization – Organization deals with format and structure that helps the student become involved in the learning.

Syllabus - The syllabus is the most important document that is prepared by the instructor. This allows the student to understand structure, expectations, assignments and their assessment process. Every student/employee needs a clear understanding of what the course is about and how to find it.

Research - An experienced e-learning instructional designer should analyze a representative course or two for the following issues. Choose wisely when deciding whether to convert the courses in-house or to outsource the work. Weigh the training time and costs for your staff--or the time and costs of recruiting new people with the needed skills--against the expense of paying someone else. You can also take a hybrid approach. In one model, you do the instructional design and SME work in-house and then outsource the course assembly and media development work.

Resources - Instructional Materials ensures quality learning experiences and enhance the learning opportunities for the student. The material has to be appropriate media for the selection/course.

Community - Learning Community involves both instructor and the student. Everyone must take an active role. Sometime instructors can use icebreakers to build trust between students and the instructor.

Participation - Active Participation helps the student think more about the topic presented.

Addressing Assessment relates to how the student takes responsibility for their actions. Students must accept consequences for participation in discussion/activities. If they choose not to participate their grade will reflect that decision.

Evaluation - Evaluation is for the improvement of the teaching and learning processes. The purpose of conducting specific course/student evaluations for e-learning classes is to enable the faculty, the E-Learning Committee, and the entire college to improve the classes and services offered to e-learning students. The E-Learning Committee recommends the courses offered through e-learning be evaluated every term.

"In the classroom setting, there is the opportunity for students to ask questions and interact during the class meeting time. Online, this took place via discussion for and to a lesser extent via

email. The students online clearly spent more time with the material, particularly reading the textbook, than do students in the traditional on campus class, but the online students tend to procrastinate and save all of the work for the day of the deadline (which limited the opportunities for asking questions.) Overall, the performance of the online students on tests and labs is comparable to that of students in the traditional classroom-based course."

- will it be effective?
- will it save you money?
- will it save people's time?

SUCCESS

Successful traditional instruction does not always translate to successful online instruction. If facilitators are not properly trained in online delivery and methodologies, the success of the online program will be compromised. An instructor must be able to communicate well in writing and in the language in which the course is offered. An online program will be weakened if its facilitators are not adequately prepared to function in the Virtual Classroom.

An online instructor must be able to compensate for lack of physical presence by creating a supportive environment in the Virtual Classroom where all students feel comfortable participating and especially where students know that their instructor is accessible. Failure to do this can alienate students in the class both from each other and from the instructor. However, even if a virtual professor is competent enough to create a comfortable virtual environment in which the class can operate, the lack of physical presence at an institution can be a limitation for an online program. For the faculty as well as the participants, such things as inability to attend on campus meetings and other events that require on-site interaction could present a limiting factor in an online program.

REFERENCE

SIMONSON, M., SMALDINO, S., ALBRIGHT, M. & ZVACEK, S. (2009). TEACHING AND LEARNING AT A DISTANCE: FOUNDATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION (4TH ED.) BOSTON, MA: PEARSON