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ISD for Live E-Learning

By Christine L. Duckworth

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Links

- [The Role of Instructional Design in Multimedia Development](#)
- [Designing for a Synchronous Learning Session](#)
- [Matching Content to Delivery](#)

learning wave? Before you make the move to the virtual classroom, consider your instructional design strategy.

Live e-learning uses Internet technology to provide synchronous lessons between an instructor and a group of learners. Although separated by geography, instructors and learners share an interactive experience, including active discussions, simultaneous document viewing and application sharing, and the ability to break into virtual rooms for team meetings.

Before moving courses from the traditional classroom to the virtual classroom, instructional designers should evaluate the current curriculum's requirements.

Consider setting. Do learners need to be onsite or face-to-face for the exercise? For example, CPR certification requires hands-on training with practice exercises, but prework can be delivered via e-learning sessions. A business writing course can work equally well whether learners are online or onsite. If the course is online, learners have more schedule flexibility and can participate from their existing and disparate locations, saving travel costs and lost time on the job.

Evaluate and set objectives. Objectives are the foundation of both traditional training and live e-learning. What or how are learners expected to perform after participating in the current classroom course? As you evaluate each course, consider how expected outcomes will be met in a virtual synchronous classroom. Remember to match technical tools to the learning objective, such as

- **Attitudinal learning** requires the participant to evaluate his or her values, identify alternative values, and consider different perspectives. Use live e-learning forums to discuss conflict sources, demonstrate company-wide positions on issues, and present models for understanding and managing shifts in attitudes. Quizzing and polling features provide venues for voicing personal views or anonymous feedback. Chat lets participants share perspectives person-to-person or with the entire group.
- **Cognitive skills** include problem solving and evaluating, memorizing, and applying learned information. Language acquisition, software training, and new hire orientation are examples of potential live e-learning courses for this type of learning. Collaboration tools such as electronic whiteboards and application sharing allow trainers to dynamically present ideas using multiple resources interchangeably. In addition, participants can jointly explore Web pages to enhance comprehension of a current topic.
- **Psychomotor skills**, such as the earlier example of CPR, requires physical demonstration and application. Participants can learn the basic principles online, then reconvene for actual practice. Slide and video presentations, quizzing tools, and interactive Q&A sessions offer

opportunities to obtain knowledge that will prepare learners for a productive classroom session.

Establish sequence. The objectives will create a roadmap for learning. Follow the objectives in an ordered sequence to create a coherent learning system. Keep in mind that if learners are lost in the curriculum, trainers will not be able to see their confused expressions. Therefore, instructional designers need to avoid ambiguity by providing clear, concise direction to participants. If it isn't possible to follow objectives sequentially, create a separate roadmap to let participants know at the outset where you plan to take them and how you plan to get them there. Giving adult learners control over their learning experience will create a productive, satisfying environment.

Plan intervals. The virtual classroom is an intense learning environment where knowledge is gained during short intervals of instruction. Chunk content to maintain continuous learning, and keep it highly interactive. Unlike in the traditional classroom, learners must disengage from their physical surroundings to remain involved with the e-learning lesson. The recommended interval time for live e-learning is five to seven minutes per concept. After that timeframe, a trainer should switch to a new concept or shift presentation styles. After seventeen minutes of uninterrupted instruction on the same concept or in the same presentation style, participants will tune out.

Limit class time. While the time commitment will depend on the content that needs to be covered, deadlines for learning, and participants' schedules, try to limit live sessions to no more than 90 minutes (and preferably less). Recognize that trainers in a virtual classroom will not be able to gauge participants' stamina by reading expressions or body language. Plan breaks just as you would in a traditional classroom. Take advantage of flexibility in a virtual classroom and spread sessions over several days to maintain peak levels of learning.

Develop a collaborative environment. Instructional designers can offer instructors or facilitators built-in strategies for team development. Avoid linear, presentation-style training with Q&A sessions. Instead, draw on participants' experience through open-ended questions, group discussions, and team-based activities. Many e-learning products provide virtual breakout rooms for team-processing and allow instructors to grant

participants the floor for student-led instruction.

Provide practice opportunities. Although it's not anticipated, live e-learning can be the ideal arena for hands-on learning for such topics as various software applications. Participants have any array of classroom tools at their fingertips, including Web-surfing abilities, the opportunity to share documents and applications on-the-fly, and access to experts across the country and around the world who can join a class while it's in session.

Link multimedia. Audio, video, and Web-based components, as well as application-sharing abilities, are unrivaled resources for highly effective learning. As you incorporate those features into your evolving curriculum, be sure to link audio instruction to a slide or video presentation. Prepare blueprints or storyboards that illustrate the audio, visual, and content links within your design strategy.

Detail follow-up strategies. Many organizations draw a blank here. Often, when the classroom session is over, so is the learning. Individuals can lose 30 to 60 percent of learned content within three days of attending training. With live e-learning, trainers have the option of conducting follow-up sessions at pre-scheduled times without having all participants return to the training site. In addition, participants can refresh their skills with individual exercises or by reviewing discussion transcripts and using record and playback features.

Limit class size. Theoretically, live e-learning environments can scale up to thousands of learners per session. Realistically, participants expect a certain amount of attention from the instructor and benefit from smaller class sizes. Limiting the class size to 12 to 15 participants enhances interaction, encourages group collaboration, and creates a forum for shared experiences.

Confirm technical expertise. Before designing a live e-learning event, check the participants' technical expertise. Are trainees comfortable using a mouse, communicating via headset, and accessing Websites? If not, you may need to plan introductory sessions that focus on technology skills. Even if individuals have fundamental technical skills, they may still be working on varying comfort levels.

Live e-learning creates a new dimension for knowledge, with incredible instructional versatility. Although instructional design for live e-learning can be more complex than traditional ISD, designers will discover powerful, multimedia resources to meet the increasing demands of professionals racing for knowledge acquisition. But remember: Keep learning objectives in focus and match multimedia and collaboration tools to content.

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