Planning to Learn

Developing Curricula for Rapid E-Learning

by Barry B. O'Brien

Introduction:

Many corporations are turning to e-Learning (the development of training over the internet) as a means of improving employee's knowledge and efficiency on the job. Some of these courses are "stand-alone," allowing employees the flexibility to work training into their busy schedules. Other approaches combine on-line information, classroom interactions and on-the-job mentoring into a blended methodology for learning.

There is a flood of new authoring software available, allowing most anyone to quickly and easily develop rapid e-Learning programs. Too often, our clients are fixated on what technology to use, rather than a thoughtful approach to learning itself. The appearance of easy-to-use software does not insure that a course will be successful. Reaching the business goals that inspired the creation of the course require well-developed and executed curricula.

Training is a form of communication. As in any effective communication process, there is a proven method:

- establish clear goals,
- set expectations,
- define how performance will be measured,
- describe what success will look like.

These objectives are described in what is commonly called a ***Syllabus.***

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That's depends a good deal on where you want to get to."...
*(*Alice in Wonderland, *Chapter VI, P 64; Carroll, 1960)*

Elements of a Syllabus

A good map is one of the best tools to have before setting off on a journey. A Syllabus is the roadmap for a course. Writing a syllabus is the professional standard used throughout the business of education.

A syllabus should be written before embarking on the development of any courseware, whether classroom, on-line or blended.

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A syllabus contains three major elements. A syllabus need not be long but each element must be clear and complete:

1.) Basic Course Information:

Every educational endeavor needs a **structure**, including:

- a course number,
- title,
- listing of credit hours or compliance requirements.

Employees may also need to know who needs to take the course and why. They might need to know if there are prerequisites, time requirements, the location of the classroom (if it is classroom based,) and length and meeting times for the course. You may also want to include the instructor's name, credentials, availability, and contact information.

2.) Course Objectives and Description:

Knowledge is useful only if it can be applied. The course objectives should be presented in terms of behavior, not in terms of knowledge. A student should be able to ***do*** an activity with better results or greater efficiency, not just ***know*** how to do it better.

When writing course objectives, work to develop language that describes what actions you will be able to take as the result of the course -- what will you be able to ***do***? What degree of competency will you enjoy if you complete the requirements? Why will your course be valuable?

A course description describes how the course objectives will be reached. The very act of writing a course description is quite valuable. It tends to reveal the elements necessary to achieve your goals. For instance, if the goal is that the student will be able to operate a certain piece of equipment, it might suggest that the course design will require an on-line component to orientate the student to the machine prior to actual hands-on time operating the machine. This may be particularly important if maximum machine time is critical to the manufacturing process and excessive hands-on training time would disrupt the manufacturing schedule.

3.) Set Clear Expectations for the Students:

Face it: Humans do things when there is a personal benefit. Since we are all human, be practical. Often, these are very busy employees, whose daily activities are already filled to capacity by the expectations of their managers and their families. Setting expectations is as much a process of

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selling and motivating your prospective students as it is efficiently constructing the course. What do you expect from your students?

Expectations go both ways. Your student will expect that you are taking care to develop a course that is engaging and makes efficient use of *their* time. They hope for an experience that will be thought provoking, entertaining (yes, entertaining!) and worth their effort.

In return, it will be your expectation that the student will take the course seriously and actively engage in the learning process.

The first step is to present your expectations in a well-written document. The course description should clearly and succinctly state:

- the course policies,
- the rules of attendance,
- participation requirements,
- exams and the requirements of grading,
- reading or other required extra-curricular activities

The Syllabus should also explain:

- What the student will receive from participating fully
- How participation will benefit his or her career path
- How the course might make their job easier
- The company's view regarding the importance of this course
- Whether the course compliance is a required by law
- How important the grading will be

It is well worth the time to bring together all the stakeholders: managers, a sample of potential students, course developers and content experts to gain insight and agreement on the goals, to uncover hidden issues and to create a consensus ***prior*** to designing the program. Too often there are ungrounded assumptions that undermine effective course planning. Always test your assumptions with the stakeholders.

Conclusion

As word processing did little to directly improve the quality of writing, e-Learning alone will do little to improve the quality of training. Effective teaching, using the latest e-Learning tools, still requires sound planning, enthusiasm in delivery and true concern for the success of the student. Mastering the skill of to develop a solid syllabus that incorporates these accepted elements will create a strong mutual understanding between you and the student and greatly improve your chances for a positive outcome.

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