

Converting Classroom Training to eLearning

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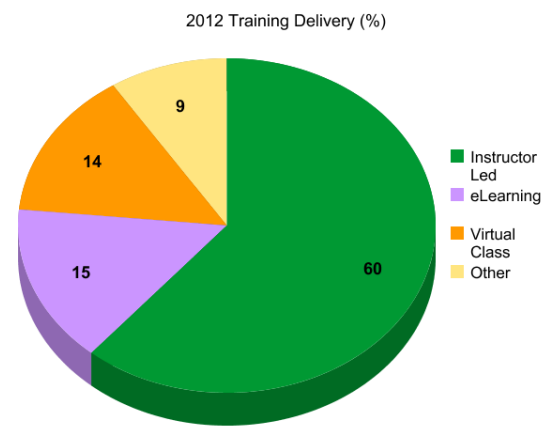
Despite the growth of the internet and a connected world, instructor-led classroom training can still be the most effective way to teach a given subject. However, due to our increased connectivity and vast gains in speed and reliability, the opportunity to supplement or fully transfer traditional instruction to web-based training (“eLearning”) has become a cost-effective and justified opportunity.

Are Conversions Effective?

A variety of studies have shown eLearning can show performance improvements over traditional instructor-led training (ILT). In 2005, “*Interactive Multimedia-Based E-Learning: A Study of Effectiveness*”⁽¹⁾ concluded,

“There are several plausible explanations as to why fully interactive e-learning groups significantly outperformed traditional classroom groups. In a traditional classroom setting, learning is instructor-centered and is a sequential process. The instructor controls content and learning pace. Most students do not question or ask for repetition in the class even if they do not understand instructors. In addition, they do not have an opportunity to listen repeatedly to what instructors explained. An interactive multimedia e-learning environment [such as LBA] enables learner-centered activities and provides necessary learner–content interaction.”

Assuredly, advances in instructional theory as well as overall improvements in design and development have served to enhance the advantages of web-based learning. Additionally, with travel budgets being continuously constrained, and increasingly seen as an unnecessary expense in a connected world, eLearning also serves to bring ILT courses directly to the learner, on-demand, ‘any time/any place’ - allowing employees to grow and develop outside the confines of a specific environment.



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Challenges to Consider

Despite all these advantages, there remain significant challenges – what is the primary driver pushing such a conversion (noting reasons will vary between organizations), and how to best migrate traditional classroom training to the web? Consider traditional training can generally be converted into three types of delivery for eLearning:

1. Synchronous learning: real-time instruction, such as live webinars or MOOCs (massive open online course).
2. Asynchronous learning: self-paced courseware, web forums, etc.
3. Hybrid, or blended, learning: mixing the strengths of 1 and 2 where relevant to the type of instruction.

Ultimately, moving ILT courses online is often not as much about transferring content as it could be about transforming the content to a more robust and interactive approach. Examination of the overall purpose of the lesson, related materials, and supporting components must be performed in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the web environment. In other words, it's not just about moving a Powerpoint deck and a recorded lecture online to increase accessibility (as noble as that may be), but an equal goal should be enhancing the educational experience through engagement, reflection, discussion, and even application where possible.



What works in an ILT environment does not always work well in an online setting. Typical classroom lectures often (or at least, can) involve a fair amount of interaction and communication between the presenter and the audience. Course objectives and requirements must be carefully analyzed to identify the best delivery strategies. Sure, you could convert an engaging lecture into a boring, click-through eLearning course with minimal effort...which will then likely also achieve minimal results.

So What's the Best Process?

The following outline describes the overall processes that should be considered when evaluating such a transition;

- Needs Analysis – what does the target population need to learn?
 - Qualify the demographic and overall prior knowledge.

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- Match the organizational goals with the learners' needs.
- Design & Development - what is the best way to present the content?
 - Use the strengths of the online medium while minimizing the negatives.
 - Adapt or replace classroom activities for the web environment.
 - Consider a hybrid (synchronous/asynchronous) approach.
 - Develop engagement and interaction between the students, content, and instructor.
- Deployment & Marketing – encourage participants and offer best-practice suggestions for a smooth transition and ideal performance.
- Evaluation– has the training met the goals and are there improvement opportunities.

If you work through those steps and match the results to the delivery options available in an eLearning solution – knowing that each has its strengths and weaknesses – you've set yourself up for a successful conversion from a more traditional, classroom-based training session to online courseware.

Let's follow the process and discuss some of the more complex details...

Needs Analysis

As a first step, take into account your organization's (or your customer organization's) overall eLearning strategy. Are they moving quickly into eLearning because...it's trendy? Or is it because of more substantial reasons – like offering student's 24/7/365 access to the materials, inadequate resources for the current methods, and/or recognizing cost-savings with reduced out-of-office time and travel? The more clear the organization's strategy, with identified cost/benefit opportunities, the more opportunity for a sustained commitment.

Further qualify the overall goals by closely examining the available materials. Will the currently-defined ILT classes transfer well to an online format? Will the audience gain just as much, if not more, from that format? Or are there considerations which may indicated a hybrid approach may be a better approach?

How are the existing materials, and how you can best capture less-defined assets (i.e. speaker notes and anecdotes)?

Finally, consider the audience; not only the classic components – gender, age, education, prior knowledge – but note that regardless of the demographic, few learners have patience to sit through a long class without being actively engaged. In a traditional classroom, the

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opportunity to discuss and verbally interact is available...but how does that transfer to a remote and dispersed audience? Should real-time chat features be used? Image or whiteboard sharing? Webcams? What is the best design in terms of length, interactivity, social components, and actual instruction?

Consider an expanded audience profile and determine what approach makes sense, and what the audience will reasonably respond to...as well as how you will address those that disrupt, or do not partake in, the web-based activities.

Design and Development

One of the easiest ways to convert ILT training to an eLearning format is to simply record video of the classroom session and throw that online. Of course, that approach will likely be ineffective with your audience...unless perhaps your speaker is extremely dynamic and your learners are inherently engaged by the subject and presentation. Otherwise a much more involved design must be performed.

Again consider the prior knowledge of your audience. If it is likely variable, use a 'flipped classroom' approach and present your initial content as an objective summary, including key terms and concepts, and in an overall design which builds questions and excitement in the audience for the following web-based learning opportunities.

For the meat of the presentation, refer back to the analysis and design for web delivery. Can the content be written with a storyline or short scenarios? How can the content be made most relevant to the users' general experiences and requirements?



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Look for the more conversational components of the original ILT; are there funny anecdotes that can be presented in an animated way? Any serious 'war stories' that may be reinforced with publically-available video clips?

On the other hand, are there moments where the instruction seems to drone on and on? Work with the SME to significantly shorten those moments and 'get to the point'. There are far too many potential distractions in eLearning environments to risk the user's wandering attention.

Where can you include interactive opportunities? Think beyond simple multiple-choice and drag-n-drop components. If you're walking the learners through a process, have them actually attempt the procedure as realistically as possible through a simulated environment. If conceptual, have learners work through a limited-path scenario to understand different responses and reactions.

Then there's often just material that simply does not lend itself well to any other type of presentation. In that case, work with audio and narration to lighten the visual load, keeping your text to summative bullet points, and tie in **relevant** imagery to both the text and narration wherever possible. You can also use such situations to offload detailed information to downloadable handouts (i.e. PDFs) for users to save and review at a later date.

Whether going through a traditional ADDIE approach or a more dynamic AGILE and SAM cycles, ideally you'll have all these strategies, interactions, multimedia assets, and overall designs so well identified up-front that the actual development is a less complex process. There are a multitude of authoring tools and approaches available and often more than one option to utilize in bringing the designs to life. Iteration and prototyping with the SME and sample audience members is key to ensuring your designs and implementation are in tune with the demographic and environmental components identified in your up-front analysis.

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Deployment and Marketing

One question that often comes up in the conversion of traditional, instructor-led training to an eLearning format is, "Is the seat time going to be the same?" or "eLearning is supposed to be more efficient, so how much shorter will the converted lesson be?"



The answer is, of course, "it depends." An online course can be anywhere from 20 to 80% the duration of the original, but so many factors must be considered.

For one, an oft-cited advantage of eLearning is 'self-paced'...and if a user is encouraged to go through a given course at their own pace then, at best, an average duration may be determined. Additionally, the inclusion of interactive components and iterative designs will also add to a variable duration.

Also consider whether your ILT is moving fully into an online environment or are there some aspects that really need to be in-person...in which case, you're likely designing a hybrid solution; part eLearning, part ILT.

All that considered, for the most part, an average of 50% reduction in course 'length' is a feasible target. That in itself may be a singular piece of marketing for the budget and management folks!

But what about the learners themselves? Have you considered how to present your new eLearning initiative with respect to the promised benefits? Are your learners aware of those benefits? No matter how well-designed your eLearning courseware may be, if your learners do not take and complete your courses (to say nothing of improve their performance), someone will come calling for accountability.

Whether this a pure online training initiative or a hybrid approach (i.e. core classroom sessions and preliminary, supportive, social, and just-in-time review components moved to the web), ensure your learners are aware of the benefits to them and make all related information easily accessible. Make use of whatever channels are available to you as an

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independent producer or an organization – from company intranets, newsletters, and internal email lists – to newer social media avenues like Twitter, Facebook, and your company website and blog for opportunities provided to a wider, public audience.

Evaluation

Unfortunately, once developed and deployed, eLearning courses are often forgotten. The last and crucial step of evaluating the efficacy of the courseware is a step easily overlooked, which means missed opportunities to evaluate everything from learner satisfaction and performance to how well the courseware is meeting the stated objectives. Ideally, you should define the attributes you want to see improved and measure those attributes before and after implementing the eLearning course.

One fairly simple way to ensure some sort of exit-data is captured is to include a classic “Level 1” survey, or a ‘SMILE Sheet’, before the lesson concludes, or as a required follow-up survey before full course credit is awarded. Whether the survey is a simple online poll presented at the end of a (live or pre-recorded) webinar, or a more in-depth survey integrated into the web-based lesson itself – such surveys provide a fairly simple method of capturing at least simple user feedback.

More complex follow-ups may be more logistically difficult to implement, but “Level 2 and 3” assessments can provide valuable feedback, especially when it comes to refining your courseware. If your learning content was presented via an LMS where interaction and quiz data is gathered and flexible reporting tools are provided, you should be able to assess not only how well the user’s performed, gaining insight to what they learned, but also evaluate what specific concepts and questions may need to be improved. From there, consider what actual performance metrics and/or supervisory assessments may need to be carried out to evaluate the user’s job-related improvements, as necessary.

Overall, now that your course has made the jump from ILT to eLearning, did that conversion meet your expectations? Were the reasons for the conversion well met? Some aspects to consider:

- Are course objectives met and assessed?
- Is the courseware engaging?
- Is the user interface clean and easy to navigate?

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- Has proper localization considered (i.e. images and scenes appropriate for a global audience)?
- Is delivery successful across mediums (desktop, mobile) and to all audiences (i.e. ADA/508, AODA)?
- Can you qualify a return-on-investment? Are you seeing fewer accidents or higher output?

Conclusion

As noted in a 2009 study, “Students’ Satisfaction from Blended Learning Instruction”^[2], “...it is important for instructional designers and distance educators to offer more flexible delivery options and providing more controls to students and to carefully design distance courses to provide students with meaningful opportunities.”

Your eLearning courseware doesn’t have to be award-winning, just be sure you meet the objectives of the course in an engaging and efficient approach. Where possible, be social and offer learners the ability to interact with the instructor and other participants...but also keep in mind technical limitations of your infrastructure and audience. Webcams can really bring an online class to life, or can completely kill the experience.

Consider offering a carrot at the end of the instruction – perhaps a web-based scavenger hunt to prepare for the next session, a participant guide with additional resources and information, or a summative job-aid.

In addition, nice side-effects of moving ILT to an eLearning format is the possibility of a more streamlined method of course updates, with the courses in a centralized location, and the opportunity to final capture the expert’s knowledge.

Remember, if your course is a simple data-dump with no engaging components, no clear objectives or structure, and offers no incentives to your learners, the eLearning conversion will surely be seen as ineffective. Overall, if your target audience understands the content and improves their performance for whatever the subject-matter, consider your conversion efforts a success!

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--End Notes

(1) Zhang, D. (2005). Interactive Multimedia Based E-Learning: A Study of Effectiveness. The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Mahwah, NJ. 19(3), 149-162.

(2) Giannousi, M (2009), Students' Satisfaction from Blended Learning Instruction, <http://etec.hawaii.edu/proceedings/2009/Giannousi.pdf>, Democritus University of Thrace, University Campus, Komotini, Greece