

## Updating Learning Programmes V: 7 Recommendations

This is the fifth and last in a series of articles aimed at organisations and educational institutions who wish to overhaul existing learning programmes. I bring together keypoints from the earlier earlier articles along with new ones.

### 7 Recommendations

#### 1. Planning

Before rushing ahead to 'blend' a programme or implement any major changes, it is important to start with first principles:

- Review the purpose, aims and objectives of the programme, and assessment processes to make sure these still hold up, especially in light of the possibilities e-learning opens up.
- Review the organisation, environments and modes of delivery already in place, and consider why the programme is structured the way it is, what the specific benefits and drawbacks are, and how changes might affect the outcomes.
- Consider what you hope the programme will gain by changing it to include e-learning, especially in terms of increasing learner numbers and decreasing dropout rates. E-Learning offers an additional set of tools for building your programme, and it is important to use the right ones in the right place for the right reason.
- Anticipate issues that may arise from change for learners, tutors, support staff, and anyone else involved in the programme. Manage those changes carefully.
- Recognise that the changes you desire may involve resourcing issues, especially in terms of additional staff or additional payment for current staff. This is not a consideration that can be ignored without endangering your goals.

#### 2. Increase interactivity and group learning opportunities

Distance learning particularly suffers from the danger of isolation and tedium, which can be alleviated with structured online group learning.

Possibilities include:

- Online discussions: these should be fully mediated by a tutor-facilitator, who is both skilled in online facilitation and is also a subject expert. However, this can be split between a facilitator, who actively helps the discussion to evolve, and a tutor, who will read regularly and intervene periodically when a question is asked that the facilitator cannot answer or if a point needs to be corrected to avoid perpetuating incorrect information.
- Collaborative assignments: case studies and problem-based learning (PBL) provide good opportunities for group learning, in the form of targeted discussions, collaborative documents and reports, role-playing, project teams, joint knowledge-building and peer review.
- Other online activities that allow learners to share and build knowledge together and interactively.

#### 3. Modify and re-purpose content to fit the different environments

Often, the first thought a team has when considering an online presence for a programme is to turn all printed materials into PDF files or static web pages. This has the

benefit of increasing access to those who do not already have print copies but it has the drawback of extending online time and shifting the burden of printing to the learner without offering a real change in the programme and possibilities for learning.

There are more effective ways that programmes can be blended to include online elements, including:

- Increasing the opportunity for interactivity and collaboration (no 2 above)
- Creating ease of access to information and resources, assessment tools and assignments, contact and support
- Providing variety in order to maintain interest and appeal to a range of learning styles and preferences
- In some cases, you will want to shape the materials to fit the means of delivery; in others, you will want to choose the means of delivery to fit the material. In either case, the learning objectives should remain the foremost factor.

#### **4. Increase/improve tutor contact and involvement**

Quality tutor contact and involvement can help to stimulate and encourage learners to remain on a programme. However this can be a fraught issue when expectations change abruptly, particularly when there is little or no remuneration for the work. The key here is quality of contact, rather than simply quantity, but quality does require commitment and time. The online environment provides an opportunity for tutors to speak one-to-many, which could conceivably reduce the time commitments that individual emails or phone calls might require.

Some of the ways tutors could participate online effectively:

- Facilitate structured online discussions (no 2 and no 6)
- Offer online question & answer "hotseats"
- Lightly participate in informal discussions, just to show presence and involvement
- Send out group messages periodically to alert learners to upcoming events or opportunities
- Check often and respond to private messages in a timely manner

#### **5. Formalise learner networks**

Learners can create the same kinds of support networks for each other that should exist with programme staff. By creating a space ready for learners to create this network, some of the pressure can be taken off staff. However, just stating that learners can do this and leaving them to their own devices will not work. Telephone and email are not the right methods for many-to-many communication, and face-to-face is clearly out of the question in a distance learning programme unless a couple of learners just happen to live in close proximity. One online network is ideal for this.

Suggestions to help build successful online learner networks:

- Appoint a facilitator to build and support the online network. This person must be an experienced online facilitator but he/she does not need any background in the programme subject.
- In all welcome materials, learner handbooks and other programme information, publicise the learner network as an expected element of the programme. Not everyone will use it, but most will at least give it a try and many will depend on it throughout the programme.
- The facilitator will need to build the community and populate it with discussions

and initial information before the learners are enrolled. The community needs to look appealing and useful from the beginning. There should be a significant social component.

- The discussions and information need to be kept up-to-date and mirror events in the programme calendar.
- Ideally, the more active members will begin to feel a sense of ownership over the community and should be given rights to create discussions and other items and upload documents.
- Learners should never feel they are being spied on by programme staff. Decisions need to be made about who will be able to access the community and what ground rules apply.

## 6. Promote formative assessment

Formative assessment in distance learning study is a key way to ensure that learners stay on track with the programme and get regular progress checks, tutor contact and general feedback. This constitutes a level of support that can help reduce dropout rates.

Ways to add/improve formative assessment:

- Make sure assessment tasks and feedback are designed to elicit maximum performance
- Make sure assessment tasks and feedback truly reflect the core aims of the programme
- Include discursive comments on all assignments
- Use online discussions with significant tutor participation to provide informal feedback
- Create collaborative assignments (case studies, PBL) that are assessed or contain an assessed component

## 7. “Future-proof” the programme.

Keep with other available tools on the internet that freely enable collaboration, sharing of information and use of latest technologies. Develop the habit of thinking about the programme when you discover new tools and considering whether they might be useful to certain aspects. Make sure the programme has room to grow with new discoveries.

Some of the popular online spaces and tools currently being used in education include:

- Dedicated learning management systems (e.g., [Moodle](#))
- Online networking (e.g., [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#))
- Shared private or public document spaces (e.g., [Google Docs](#), [Wikipedia](#))
- File sharing (e.g., [Dropbox](#))
- Photo sharing (e.g., [Flickr](#))
- Video sharing (e.g., [YouTube](#))
- Blogging (e.g., [Blogger](#), [WordPress](#))
- Virtual worlds (e.g., [Second Life](#))

In addition, a shift in emphasis away from independence and towards collaboration paves the way for the development of communities of practice — spaces to share good professional practice, ideas, resources and support. These are easily created and sustained through online environments, and they can provide informal continuing

professional development for those who have successfully completed the programmes.



These are my key recommendations. Please visit my [blog](#) to add your own suggestions for updating learning programmes.