

INSIDE BUSINESS

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The Experts: Training and development-How to evaluate e-learning opportunities in 8 easy steps

Carolyn Pyrek

With the uncertain economic environment, many organizations are challenged by having to align shrinking budgets with their training and development needs. While professional development remains an essential part of organizational health, it can be costly, too. Despite the economic crisis, or perhaps because of it, chief learning officers are looking for a better cost-savings approach to learning. The virtual classroom and other e-learning opportunities provide just the solution.

For five consecutive years, we have seen a significant upswing in online classroom enrollment as companies shift from in-person to online instruction. According to current research, virtual learning, whether in real-time or at the learner's own pace, differs little from live classroom training.

Given the range of e-learning vendors available, it can be confusing at best to select the right online training program. What should a savvy CLO look for when evaluating Web-based training? How can he or she be sure that the program will be effective? These are legitimate questions, which this article seeks to answer.

There are eight principles to which an effective virtual learning program should adhere. When evaluating various vendors, CLOs would do well to consider the following points: learning contexts, practice and testing, level of feedback, repetition, learning over time, diversified material presentation, exclusively relevant information, and focus.

Here are questions you should ask as you go about the selection process.

1. Aligning learning and performance contexts

- Does the program contain integrated case studies that bring elements of the job into the online classroom?
- Does it contain a realistic scenario that provides context for each lesson?
- Does the lesson evaluate understanding by posing a problem or challenge similar to one the learner may encounter on the job?
- Is there an opportunity to discuss, with an instructor/subject matter expert and with other students, how concepts apply to actual situations on the job?

2. Providing retrieval practice and testing

- Does the program offer a pre-course assessment to establish the learner's knowledge baseline?
- Does each lesson contain a problem that tests the learner's understanding and ability to apply the lesson concepts?
- Are assignments, with feedback, a requirement?
- Is there a final exam at the end of the course? Note: Research shows that the very act of taking a test increases retention, even if the learner didn't study at all!

3. Providing feedback on practice and testing

- Is there a feedback system in place in the event the student answers a lesson problem or final exam question incorrectly?
- Do all practice exercises within the online courses also provide the correct answer and a complete explanation?
- Do the students receive personalized feedback from an expert instructor/subject matter expert within 24 hours

after submitting an assignment?

- Do the instructors participate actively, on a daily basis, in online discussions, providing personalized feedback to the users' postings?

4. Providing repetition of learning and practice

- Does every lesson reinforce the challenges the learner would experience on the job?
- Are the assignments hands-on? For instance, do they just learn about the work breakdown structure, estimating methods, network diagrams, and earned value – or do they actually build a WBS, estimate a project, construct a network diagram and calculate earned value?
- Do the exercises and instructional games, as well as the final exam, provide additional practice?

5. Spacing learning and practice over time

- Are the students given a timeframe within which they must complete the course?
- Is the content "chunked" into a series of lessons, making it easy for the learner to complete a lesson at a time?
- Is it a self-paced program that provides a guideline schedule to help them plan and budget their time nonetheless?

6. Presenting learning material in a variety of ways

- Is the course material diversified in terms of its delivery format, avoiding the dreaded "next, next, next" sequence of a slide show?
- Is the presentation of the content interactive and student-centered, allowing students to access content at will and to control at least some of the sequencing?
- Is the interactive content supported with additional online text in printable, PDF format?
- Does the course offer engaging and often interactive graphics to help learners visualize processes and relationships?
- Do the courses also offer practice exercises, problems, assignments, and online discussions – all with feedback – to reinforce the content?

7. Utilizing relevant information only

- Is all content relevant to the course content – or are there gratuitous animations and gimmicky flash?
- When there are comics and games, are they clearly instructional and tied to specific learning objectives?

8. Helping learners focus on the most important information

- Does the course supply a syllabus that summarizes the major topics covered in each unit and identifies the specific learning objectives for each unit?
- Do scenarios and problems emphasize the key focus of the lesson?
- Are there opportunities to complete exercises that strengthen the emphasis?
- Do the individual content resources incorporate sound design principles in order to clarify and emphasize important points, including screen layout, font size and type, and graphic design?
- Are all the questions on the final exam tied to a specific learning objective, ensuring that the test itself continues the focus on core content?

If you answer yes to every question, you can have confidence that the program is instructionally sound and that users will retain and be able to apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills.

But, if you see gaps in the program's offering, move on until you find the most appropriate online course to match

your needs. The selection process will be less arduous if you know what you are looking for. Evaluating the course offerings beforehand will improve your chances of success, strengthen your return on investment, and ensure a vibrant organization long term.

Carolyn Pyrek is director of curriculum development at ESI International. For more information, visit www.esi-intl.com.