



# Organizational DEVELOPMENTS

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## Transitioning Instructor Skills to the Virtual Classroom

by Sharon Levitch and William D. Milheim

In recent years, the traditional classroom model for instruction has been challenged by the advent of Web-based training (WBT) and distance education, which have significantly gained in popularity due to their technological advances and their potential as cost-effective training solutions. Galagan (2000) predicts that more than 70% of all corporate training programs in the United States will be delivered using Web-based technology by the end of this year. Based on these changes, instruction, feedback, and testing are taking place more frequently outside of the classroom, requiring traditional instructors to teach outside of their regular environment.

However, classroom instructors may not be truly ready to make this transition, as many instructors find the separation from the learner to be a challenging adjustment in the transition to the virtual classroom. This article focuses on various helpful strategies for classroom instructors transitioning into distance learning environments.

### Synchronous/Asynchronous Learning

Synchronous (or live e-learning) instruction occurs in “real time,” with the students and instructor interacting concurrently (Gartland, 2001; Hofmann; 2001). Participants, however, must be in front of their computers at a specific day and time, possibly detracting from the convenience of distance learning (Smith, Tyler, & Benscoter, 2000).

In comparison, asynchronous instruction allows the instructor and participants to interact online

and access course content at the times most convenient to each of their schedules.

Web-based instruction can utilize both of these formats to deliver a variety of educational materials over the Internet. In order to prepare and take part in this “revolution,” instructors need to transfer their skills to the virtual classroom (Mantyla & Gividen, 1997).

### Shifting Instructor Roles

Instructors moving from the traditional classroom to a virtual environment must become expert moderators of student interaction as the role of instructor shifts to encourage learners to direct their own learning. In addition, there is new technology to

assess, evaluate, and select; new instructional design and development tools to master; and more demands on their time for developing, preparing, and delivering training.

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Diane Hanson, President/CEO

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### Technology Issues

The selection of technology used to deliver online learning is important, because it helps to determine instructional features and, to some extent, the overall design of a course (Meyen & Lian, 1997). For example, the learning styles of the intended audience should be considered. Auditory learners, for instance, might prefer listening to a brief explanation of a concept rather than reading about it, and visual learners might prefer graphic-rich environments. In addition, Palloff and Pratt (2001)

suggest that the use of technology can help students connect with each other and form learning communities.

Instructors need adequate training in both synchronous and asynchronous technologies, as well as technical support with respect to hardware, software, and troubleshooting (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). A backup plan needs to be in place in case technology breaks down during a critical moment. Alternative e-mail addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, and convenient access to technical support all contribute to supporting the trainer in a successful instructional event, particularly if something unforeseen occurs.

### Development Considerations

Preparation for an online course often involves more design and

development time than that for traditional classroom instruction. According to the American Federation of Teachers, preparation time for online courses is from 66 % to 500% higher than for traditional courses.

One reason for this longer development cycle is that the course

syllabus needs to be much more specific and detailed in online environments, since this document becomes a critical communication tool through its descriptions of student expectations, deadlines, and grading criteria.

The syllabus must also provide answers to anticipated questions, replacing the common ad hoc questions and concerns raised in person within a traditional classroom setting (Kuchinke, Aragon, & Bartlett, 2001). Instructors also need to become proficient in specific distance-based strategies and technology.

### Platform Skills

One of the most important instructional challenges facing distance education professionals is the need to develop a rich level of personal interchange, not only between instructor and student, but also among the students themselves.

In a traditional face-to-face environment, classroom instructors generally engage in a high level of

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interaction with their students. These same instructors, who are used to quickly establishing rapport through face-to-face contact, may find it difficult to connect with students in an online environment because of the distance between instructors and their students. Introverted instructors, however, may actually perform better than their extroverted counterparts in online situations (Pratt, 1996), because it's more comfortable for an introvert to spend time thinking about information before responding to it.

**Communication**

Effective discussions among instructors and students increase the likelihood of an online course being completed—and knowledge being retained (Osberg, 2001). Building collaborative components of e-learning into an online instructional solution can foster interactions and feedback, and dropout rates often decrease when

students are engaged with others learning the same subject. There are also several advantages for online communication that do not generally exist in face-to-face instruction. Online students, for example, tend to be less self-conscious and therefore more likely

to ask questions that they might otherwise be afraid to ask (Collison et al., 2000; Wilson & Whitelock, 1997). Questions can also be asked and answered at any time of day or night in asynchronous forms of distance education, providing more time for reflection and often



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leading to more meaningful questions and answers. In addition, online communication is provided in a text-based format, providing a physical record that can be reviewed.

### **Participation**

A class with appropriate levels of participation is one of the hallmarks of effective education and training; such participation is also essential to online learning. In an online course, a single student's non-participation may significantly affect the quality of the learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Create an atmosphere that encourages questions and promotes a sense of community among the participants by designing opportunities for social interaction into the course (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). "Icebreakers" are even more important in an online environment, since all class members need to be introduced as well as made aware of all the other participants. Setting expectations for participation and using an

interactive activity at the beginning of a class can also increase the likelihood of higher levels of participation throughout the course.

### **Evaluation**

Monitoring the progress and achievement of the learning goals in an online environment can be more challenging than in a traditional classroom. In addition to the lack of visual cues, learners can become "lost" in an online environment. (Dereshiwsky & Moan, 2000). Instructors should provide students with the means to express their opinions about a course, the way it is proceeding, and how well it is meeting their learning objectives (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Finally, instructors should develop appropriate strategies for constructing assessment tools at a variety of intellectual levels and for a variety of instructional purposes.

### **Conclusion**

During the past several years, distance education has continued to gain in popularity. Successful instructors are adaptable, flexible,

and able to think on their feet when an unexpected situation occurs; they are also able to multitask and turn a potentially bad situation into a positive learning experience. These characteristics, and many others, are important for both traditional classrooms and online instructors and will continue to be critical in all instructional environments. However, with the increasing use of online training, instructors need to leave their comfort zones and take on new roles as moderators, mentors, and coaches. In taking on these new challenges, instructors can themselves become students in an e-learning world.

*(Excerpts from Educational Technology Journal, Volume 42, No. 2, 2003, Transitioning Instructor Skills to the Virtual Classroom, Sharon Levitch & William D. Milheim, pg. 42-46.)*

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