

Converting to a Distance Learning Format

Best Practices Guide

What you should know to convert your instructor-led training (ILT) class to a blended learning format

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Introduction

Congratulations on your decision to update your instructor-led training (ILT) class to a blended (or hybrid) learning format that augments face-to-face instruction with online learning activities. A 2009 study by the Department of Education found that students learn better in a blended environment than they do in either an ILT or online course alone (McLester, 2011). If well designed, your students will enjoy a rich learning experience. However, you have lots of work to do and this guide will help you get started.

Develop a Plan

Don't assume that converting to distance learning is just a matter of dumping ILT materials online and calling it a day (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). In fact, the analysis phase of a blended learning program is more difficult than a traditional classroom course (Laureate Education, 2012). Furthermore, you can expect to spend 10-80 hours designing and developing one hour of online training (Huggett, 2012, January 12). Fortunately, the familiar ADDIE instructional design process will serve you as well for your blended project as it did for the ILT class you are now converting (Laureate Education, 2012).

Analyze

Start by writing course objectives that are linked to the learning outcomes you wish to achieve. This is a good time to bring in your subject matter expert (SME) so that he or she feels an early sense of commitment to the project (Laureate Education, 2012).

Design

For each objective, select the format—ILT or online technology— that is most appropriate (Huggett, 2012, July 11). Again, consult your SME for suggestions. When selecting technology, ask whether it is available to your participants and whether they will know how to use it (Laureate Education, 2012).

Break the online content into smaller chunks. Online sessions should not exceed 60 minutes (Jeavons, 2012). This is the advantage of a blended

course: you can mix and match face-to-face sessions with discussion boards, self-paced activities, readings, and collaboration (Jeavons, 2012). Be creative!

Design engaging activities. For online modules, activities are the priority (Laureate Education, 2012), but they should not come across as busy work (Huggett, 2012, July 11). For some ideas, refer to Cindy Huggett's [Activity Selection Grid](#) (Huggett, 2012).

Develop

During the development phase, follow these steps:

1. Create a site map to guide your design.
2. Develop a storyboard.
3. Collect the assets, like documents, images, graphs, videos, and other multimedia elements.
4. Create a course shell.
5. Select a course management system (CMS), learning management system (LMS), wiki, or other portal from which to deploy your course.
6. Populate the course.

Implement

In the implementation phase, you must ensure that all course facilitators are prepared. Train them on all the technology tools used in the course and carefully review the lesson plan (Laureate Education, 2012). If there will be a large number of facilitators, consider bringing them all together for a train-the-trainer session. If you will be conducting a Webinar or synchronous activity for a large group, you will also need a producer and other support staff to assist the facilitator (Huggett, 2012, July 11). Prepare guides for each of these roles.

Evaluate

Devise a plan to evaluate the success of your blended program and revise your course as needed.

Transform Old Course Activities

When transforming portions of your ILT class to online, remember that you must compensate for the absence of an instructor and maintain participants’ attention over whatever distractions may exist in their environment (Jeavons, 2012). Table 1 provides some ideas for converting ILT activities to comparable online interactions.

Table 1: Transforming ILT to Online Activities

ILT Activity	Online Activity
Around-the-room introductions	Chat window introductions (Huggett, 2012, January 12)
Open discussion	Ask a question and then ask for a volunteer. Open the phone line to the volunteer while everyone else chats. Next, either let the volunteer pick the next person or choose someone who made an interesting chat comment (Jeavons, 2012).
Competition with questions	Competition with polls (Huggett, 2012, January 12)
Whiteboard or flipchart activity	Virtual whiteboard/slide with drawing tools (Huggett, 2012, January 12) Let a participant have mouse control for a short time and then pass it to another person (Jeavons, 2012).
Live demonstration	Live demonstration using Webcam (Huggett, 2012, January 12)

Rethink Your Role

A traditional ILT course focuses on the instructor, but in a distance course, participants are the center of attention (Simonson et al., 2012). Think of yourself as an “educational orchestra conductor” (Levine, 2011, p. 208). Also, technology will be a more significant part of your class now, so be sure you have thoroughly learned all the tools. Practice using them to ensure that your class goes smoothly, and create a backup plan for when technology fails (Huggett, 2012, July 11).

Encourage Communication

To continue the previous metaphor, if you are the conductor and the class is your orchestra, then the communication that occurs between you and the participants is the music. How do ensure that everyone is on cue and playing their part? As the facilitator, it is your responsibility

to participate in all synchronous or asynchronous discussions (Laureate Education, 2012). To get everyone talking, you can use an icebreaker, not unlike a regular classroom. The icebreaker might ask participants to introduce themselves, respond to a poll, or react to a quotation (Huggett, 2012, July 11).

In asynchronous discussions, you must ensure that everyone maintains the proper courtesy and adherence to Netiquette (Simonson et al., 2012). Respond immediately and privately to anyone who breaches proper Netiquette. You can also encourage participation by awarding points for discussion posts (Hylton, 2007).

For synchronous discussions, consider these ideas:

- ▶ Call on participants by name (Huggett, 2012, July 18).
- ▶ Prevent domination of the conversation by one or two people, as often happens in a regular classroom. You might first invite everyone to respond in the chat session, and then select people to talk on the phone line based on the best responses (Jeavons, 2012).
- ▶ Pair up two people to discuss a topic on the open phone line while everyone else responds in chat. For the next pair, choose a pairing based on the chat responses (Jeavons, 2012).
- ▶ Continue the online discussion with face-to-face meetings (Jeavons, 2012).
- ▶ Include Twitter posts as part of the online discussion (Jeavons, 2012).

Conclusion

When converting a portion of your ILT course to an online format, remember that you must redesign it to compensate for the instructor's absent physical presence and to take advantage of technology. The focus of the course will now be on the participants, with you taking on a supportive role. Although an effective blended course requires a significant effort during the various stages of ADDIE, the result should be an engaging course delivers learning outcomes and satisfies the participant's expectations.

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