

## eLearning: Designing For Success

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by Alyce W. Eisler

The internet is driving new learning solutions, delivering the knowledge you need when you need it and where you want it. The internet powers training programs that, if well designed, meet organizational goals as well as individual learning preferences through innovative training technologies, flexible delivery methods, and engaging multimedia. Is eLearning the total the solution for all training and academic requirements? Of course not. There is no single solution, but a blended solution depending on your organization's culture, needs and goals. However, internet based training and teaching solutions play a key part in the future of learning, providing:

- ◆ Collaborative learning and knowledge development opportunities, drawing together different people and organizations across geographic locations
- ◆ Customized solutions with the flexibility to meet personal schedules, preferences and learning styles
- ◆ Up to date content
- ◆ Real time interactions with instructors and course participants
- ◆ Visually engaging, dynamic interactive learning experiences
- ◆ Hands on simulations
- ◆ Reduced training time and expenses

### **eLearning: Successful Learning Requires Careful Design Ten Principles of Good Course Design for Internet Based Learning**

Depending on your goals and learning outcomes, properly designed eLearning can offer the best of instructor led training (ILT) along with the dynamic presentations of computer based training (CBT), while providing individual participants with personal flexibility in their schedules and learning styles. On the other hand, poorly designed eLearning can be costly, resulting in high drop out rates, learner confusion and dissatisfaction, and a failure of participants to learn course material through no fault of their own. What are the critical elements of success?

## **1. Understand Your Medium: Design For How People Learn on the Internet**

The classroom instructor controls the sequence of information, the pace at which it is presented, and the focus of the participant's attention. On the internet, the student controls the sequence of information, the pace of learning and decides what to pursue and what to ignore. Adjust your design accordingly and let your participants know the expected pace and sequence. Point students to critical information using visual cues, graphics, audio, etc. The web facilitates active learning through exploration and collaboration, so design for it!

## **2. Know Your Audience**

Are they technologically savvy? How much "hand holding" will they require to successfully complete the course? Ensure you have a back up plan for technical support. Do you need to design for universal access? If you have participants with a disability, check universal access guidelines. For instance, the text readers for blind users cannot read text across table cells or frames or text presented as a graphic. Thoroughly analyze your audience and design accordingly.

## **3. Set Expectations Up Front**

We all want to know, and need to know, up front the goals of the course and the benefits to us. And...we all want to know what is expected of us, particularly in new situations. Increase your participant's comfort level and ability to learn by setting clear goals and expectations early in the course. Include expected behaviors for collaborative activities, online discussions, technology difficulties, content problems, synchronous sessions, etc.

## **4. Clear Navigation**

Make sure your navigation and directions are consistent, standard and intuitive. Minimize the need for participants to think about how an interface operates when they are trying to learn a new task. Poor navigation and direction splits their attention and detracts from the mental effort directed toward learning the course material. If navigation is not clear, the participant may decide the course is simply not worth the effort.

## **5. Challenge Your Participants: Design An Active Learning Environment**

Avoid the "content dump" of training materials, course syllabi, lecture notes, etc. Take the most successful aspects of your current stand up classroom instruction, and re-purpose it for the internet. While people tend to scan the internet, they become engaged in the learning process and learn by acting and reflecting on those actions. Include a variety of active learning activities and presentations that allow for simulations, scenarios, role plays, case based teaching, problem solving, critical and creative thinking, exploration and reflection.

## **6. Vary Your Forms of Learning**

Every course needs a variety of forms of learning. The internet is a medium that allows you to present material in a variety of ways, reaching a variety of learning styles. Course activities should include writing, discussion, collaborative

teams/groups, audio, visually engaging content presentation, opportunities for verbal and written feedback.

### **7. Provide Frequent and Immediate Feedback**

Learners need reinforcement and encouragement! Many people worry, “Am I getting this right?” Your design needs to include ways to let participants know how they’re doing. Use pop up boxes to congratulate them, offer a self-assessment question for reflection, or direct them to more in depth content on something they may have missed. Provide a forum for discussion, email, questions and feedback.

### **8. Internet Readability: White Space is Good! Keep a Conversational Tone! Teach Verbs!**

People tend to scan the web and avoid reading lengthy paragraphs. Try these techniques to engage the reader:

- ◆ Limit text to short paragraphs and use bulleted text when feasible.
- ◆ Use bold headings to break up text.
- ◆ Keep a conversational tone, using informal language
- ◆ Ask questions enabling the participants to think about what they are reading
- ◆ Avoid didactically telling your audience what you want them to learn, i.e.: Avoid writing, “An automobile engine is composed of an engine block, four to twelve cylinders, etc.” Instead,
- ◆ Teach verbs. Present the process: “What happens when I turn the key in the ignition and the engine roars to life?”

If text must be lengthy, present it as an article and suggest participants print it out for review.

### **9. Become a Coach. Facilitate Learning!**

Classroom instructors, professors and teachers generally control the sequence of pace of events in the classroom. They have a “captive” audience and can auditorially direct what goes on in the classroom. On the internet, the stand up instruction control is lost. However, you can hinder or help your participants learn by how you facilitate the course. Design your course to include communication among participants and with facilitators. Learners often feel isolated working alone on the web. Creating and developing a sense of community and shared learning is critical. As the coach, you set the tone for course participation and collaborative discussions. Lay the groundrules, ensuring all students participate and learn from each other. Provide immediate feedback and encouragement. Ask questions and get participants to pause and reflect on their learning

activities. Throw off your “teacher” hat and become a coach: your new job is to facilitate learning on the internet.

### **10. Fair Assessment and Evaluation: A Continuous Process**

Design a fair system for assessing, and when applicable, grading students. As students, even when we are learning, we are not happy if we don't feel we've been fairly assessed or graded. The assessment should be objective, flexible and based on learning. In addition, be sure to provide the opportunity for students to evaluate the course, giving you the information you need to continually improve the course, meeting the goals and requirements of the participants and the organization.

#### **About the author**

Alyce Eisler is an eLearning consultant and teaches Online Learning Design at Temple University Center for Advanced Technology. She has an education and instructional design background with over 15 years experience in managing and developing training curriculum; documentation; interactive CBT and Web based training design and delivery; technology applications; collaborative and independent learning; assessment and evaluation design. Alyce works with organizations to develop strategic plans for online learning initiatives, select learning technologies and assist in the design and development of online learning courses. Her projects include PNC Bank, Mercedes-Benz USA, Lotus Development Corporation, LaSalle University and Temple University.