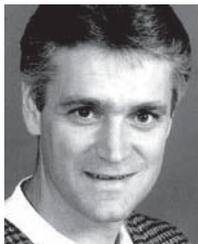


More Death by Slide Deck?

Making the most of the virtual classroom • BY BOB MOSHER



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In my last column, I discussed the emerging potential of mobile learning. Due to the economic times we live in, more and more of these alternative modalities are taking center stage as learning professionals are challenged with producing more with less. Not a small task.

Unfortunately, many learning modalities are too costly and not as effective as they could be. The reasons for this often are not the fault of the modality or technology itself, but rather the design and implementation strategy we wrap around them.

At a recent conference, the virtual classroom was all the rage. This is not a new technology or a new approach. Most organizations already own some type of tool to deliver these courses but struggle to make them work instructionally. Often the continued failure of these efforts to gain traction lies in poor design and delivery. With the pressure building to re-examine this approach, let's look at ways to make it more effective before we subject our learners to more versions of "death by slide deck."

Let's start with the obvious. Learners will not sit through six- to eight-hour classes in one continuous online session. In fact, research suggests a maximum of two hours at a time is ideal, depending on the topic being taught. This leads us to one of the most misunderstood aspects of virtual instruction.

The design should be divided into two experiences: the learning done online during the virtual session and the learning done off-line. One of the strongest aspects of the virtual classroom is that it builds time back into the learning process. This allows content to be spread out over time with scheduled gatherings between. If we take advantage of both environments, a learner actually may end up experiencing a far better learning outcome than the classroom itself.

When gathering for virtual sessions, there are a few key design considerations to keep in mind:

- **Created scripted interactions.** Although we outline the activities that occur in class, we often leave the facilitation of student interactions up to the discretion of the instructor. Since we can't see the learners in most virtual settings, the instructor should intentionally script interaction activities throughout the session to keep students engaged. These scripted activities can include polls, chats, virtual tours, whiteboarding and even breakout rooms, and they

should occur on average every five minutes. This does not mean designing interactions for the sake of interactions. Each should have an instructional objective supporting the content being taught.

- **Include a class workbook.** As classrooms have moved online, printed workbooks seemed to have disappeared. These tools are a critical part of virtual instruction. They often are the glue that brings the entire experience together. Note-taking, review, prework and exercises done after or between the online sessions should be found here, as well.
- **Don't teach everything.** This is one of the hardest things for instructors and designers to do. Because there will be time between gatherings, not all instruction has to occur during these sessions. In fact, some of the best learning will occur when the student is back at work between online gatherings. Design the experience to enable this, and be selective of what's taught when meeting virtually.

This brings us to recommendations for the time between the virtual sessions:

- **Extend the learning.** Assign extension activities that will allow a learner to take his or her learning to the next level. When outlining the course, examine what's best taught with an instructor, and assign other materials such as e-learning, work groups and the workbook between sessions.
- **Script application activities.** Practice exercises and job-specific activities to help the learner internalize and transfer knowledge to job applications. These activities do not teach new skills. But this often can be the most powerful part of this model and an area in which traditional classroom instruction has struggled.
- **Provide ongoing feedback.** Learners should be given specific review and assessment activities to allow the instructor to monitor how each is doing and provide feedback or remediation. With the content extended over time in smaller chunks, instructors can provide ongoing one-on-one support and evaluations.

The virtual classroom, if designed well, can be one of the most powerful blended learning experiences ever offered. It can combine the best of different modalities that often stand alone, but it will only be effective if we look beyond the specific synchronous technology and see the entire learning experience. **CLO**