

**Learning Format →**  
**Converting to a Distance**

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## Introduction

Converting existing training courses to a distance learning format is an opportunity to revitalize the course material, the course format, and the learner interactions with each other and with the trainer. A successful conversion requires extensive planning and careful selection of distance learning tools as well as adopting new instructional techniques and methods. The conversion from the face-to-face learning environment to the distance learning environment changes the role of the trainer, including the need for the trainer to learn best practices for encouraging learner online interaction.

## Planning

Planning for distance learning courses should follow standard instructional design processes including using the ADDIE process and should examine learner characteristics, instructional content, delivery methods, technology considerations, and evaluation. Planning is one of the most important aspects for converting to an online format because it provides a foundation upon which to build the entire course.

**Analyze the characteristics of the learners; distance learning may include a wider variety of learner types than face-to-face instruction (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).**

- What are the learners' ages, education, social and cultural backgrounds?
  - Do the learners have particular educational expectations?
  - Do the learners have the required prerequisite knowledge or skills?
  - Are the learners familiar with the instructional methods and necessary technology?
  - What are the class sizes and/or size of the classes at each location?
  - What is the location of each of the learners?
  - Can all the learners meet together synchronously at a distance?
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**Review the goals and objectives for the instruction – the conversion process offers an opportunity to revitalize the material. This is also an opportunity to involve subject matter experts by asking them for instructional advice on activities (Piskurich & Chauser, 2010a).**

- What do the learners need to learn?
- What are the instructional goals and objectives?
- How will the instructional goals and objectives be evaluated to determine if learning has occurred?

**Distance learning delivery methods can be considered early in the planning process (Piskurich & Chauser, 2010b).**

- Establish a prioritized list of delivery methods that can be considered for a course.
- Compare project, technical and facility constraints and specifications with the delivery method to determine if it is a realistic first choice delivery method.
- Consider total development time vs. the date the instruction must be ready for delivery, self-paced and asynchronous instruction generally takes longer to develop than synchronous instruction.
- Use a reiterative process to examine subsequent delivery preferences until one is found that works within the project, technical and facility constraints and specifications.
- Course management system and Web 2.0 applications selection should consider features, availability of support materials for both trainer and learners, and the cost of purchase, installation and maintenance (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

**The selection of synchronous learning methods and tools should balance operation of equipment with effectiveness of learning. Specific synchronous learning tool considerations include (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009):**

- Ease of use of the equipment for the trainer and the learner (Internet and televised settings).
  - Classroom environment variables and conditions (televised settings).
  - The need for a facilitator at remote locations (televised settings).
  - What the learners view during each lesson.
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**Content selection for distance learning should match media choices with the instructional goals and objectives while considering the impact of the delivery method (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).**

- Distance learning content may need to be modified or reworked to include more visual presentation (tables, figures, videos).
- Graphic design must be appropriate for the delivery medium – synchronous televised, synchronous internet and web-based delivery each have different best practices for design.
- Include only essential content and remove all extraneous content from any material used in distance learning environments.
- Provide a variety of content to address diversity in learning styles.

**Choose appropriate activities for the delivery method that encourage interaction and engagement. Learners should interact with each other, the trainer and the content (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).**

- Synchronous activities can include small group discussions, hands-on activities prior to course meeting time, and learner presentations.
- Asynchronous activities can include case study analysis, structured discussions, web 2.0 applications for presentation, and group activities using blogs and wikis.

**Develop a storyboard and a site map that details the design of the course by breaking the course into discrete chunks of information. An existing course may be organized by units of time such as daily or weekly face-to-face meetings. Distance learning course design can be further organized into a standard Unit-Module-Topic course design (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) (Laureate Education, 2010).**

- Develop a storyboard for Unit-Module-Topic organization.
    - Identify Units – major subdivision of course content.
    - Identify Modules – major subdivision of a unit.
    - Identify Topics – lessons or assignments that explain or support a module.
  - Develop a site map for the online course structure and navigation.
  - Develop a plan for each face-to-face or synchronous meeting.
  - Plan what the trainer will say and show and plan each class activity.
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**Collect or create course content assets for inclusion in the course management system or for use in the synchronous learning environment.**

- Text (including text describing how to complete instructional activities and a detailed syllabus)
- Graphics
- Photographs
- Video files
- Sound files
- Acrobat PDF document files
- Worksheet template files
- URL for web based resources
- Embed codes for video and sound files

**Distance learning delivery methods require special considerations for both the trainer and the learner. Failure of technology at any point will detract from the effectiveness of instruction and may impact learner motivation or success (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).**

- Define all technical requirements for participation in the course prior to the start of the course.
  - If possible provide alternative options for participation such as providing locations with the required equipment (open access computers reserved for course use).
  - Prepare specific alternate plans and contact information to account for all possible technical problems.
  - Provide technical support options including live technical support for synchronous sessions.
  - Plan to allow time to train the trainer or trainers on changes in content, delivery methods and use of technical equipment (Piskurich & Chauser, 2010c).
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## Programs Enhancements

Converting course material to a distance learning format provides potential enhancements including:

The creation of learning communities that have higher levels of motivation and higher amounts of participation compared to face-to-face classes. Online discussions may foster deeper and more sophisticated understanding of course materials (Moller, Huett, Holder, Young, Harvey, & Godshalk, 2005).

The ability to provide activities and instructional material that addresses diverse learning styles including greater amounts of visual and hands-on activities (as compared to face-to-face instruction) – as well as including streaming audio and video (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

The ability to incorporate a variety of interactive Web 2.0 technologies including blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, social software (facebook, twitter, social bookmarking) that promote interaction, active learning, rapid feedback and cooperation (Beldarrain, 2006).

Material is available 24 hours a day and the learners work can be self-paced and material can be provided on “just in time”. Learners can also avoid losing work time and save on travel costs (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

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## Trainer Roles

Converting a course from a face-to-face instructional environment to a distance learning environment changes the course from an trainer centered environment to a learner centered environment. The concept of trainer as facilitator of learning can include a variety of different styles and techniques

(Siemens, 2008):

Participants learn by observing the work of other learners and by receiving guidance and feedback from fellow learners – the trainer offers commentary (critiques) on the learners work, as well as offering information and various points of view based on best practices and emerging trends. This technique is often used with blogs and online discussions.

The trainer's role is to help each learner evaluate information sources, forming connections and relationships between information and key concepts for the purpose of creating a learning network that helps the learner meet the instructional objectives of the course.

The trainer shows a variety of learning possibilities and resources using a combination of traditional lecture, direct (but moderate) guidance and (learner) self-guided exploration of resources.

The trainer uses their expert knowledge to create a learning environment which provides opportunities and learning material necessary for the learner to explore and construct knowledge about and make connections between key concepts.

Regardless of which technique or style used (or combination thereof), the trainer needs to keep the learner engaged and involved in their own learning including collaboration and interaction with others. Additionally, the trainer and the learners need to be flexible with regard to time and the generally dynamic nature of learning at a distance (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

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## Encouraging Online Interaction

Trainers need to take several steps to ensure that learners engage in interaction online including:

- ❑ Trainers must participate in all discussions (both synchronous and asynchronous) and show that they are concerned about learner success (Piskurich & Chauser, 2010c).
- ❑ Discussions should be qualitatively assessed using a quality scale that spans minimal work to superior work (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).
  - ❑ The assessment should consider quality of initial postings and subsequent responses. Learner contributions toward increasing the overall quality of discussion should be considered and encouraged.
  - ❑ Expectations should be clearly communicated – a detailed syllabus can be used as well as providing a discussion scoring rubric.
  - ❑ Feedback or responses by the trainer to the learner discussion postings should generally be limited to about one in four responses in order to encourage learner to learner interaction.
- ❑ Trainers can use learner moderated discussions (synchronous and asynchronous) to encourage interaction. Learner moderated discussions are often divided into smaller groups to prevent moderator overload (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006).
- ❑ Trainers can provide a Frequently Asked Question discussion area for learners to post questions to the trainer and the trainer can provide both synchronous (chat) and asynchronous discussion areas for learner to interact with each other, especially when working on problem solving related to course work (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006).

## Conclusion

Careful and extensive planning lay the foundation for a successful conversion to distance learning that offers potential enhancements over face-to-face methods, a new rewarding role for the trainer and extensive possibilities for online interaction for the learners. All of these changes are designed to increase the success of all learners regardless of their learning style or background.

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