

Consider Instructor Roles When Blending eLearning

By Rick Darby of SEDATA

When converting from the instructor-led classroom format to eLearning courseware you should consider all of the roles a stand-up instructor performs. These roles have virtual counterparts, though not all are usually found in a single product. Use this discussion and summary chart to identify the roles your eLearning solution may be missing.

Successful conversion of an instructor led course to an eLearning counterpart requires a skillful choice of the tools available to the courseware designer. The blend of these tools should be influenced by the roles the instructor plays in the successful stand up version. An instructor plays many roles in organizational training. Let's consider some of them.

Course Designer. The instructor chooses the content, the concepts covered, the detail level of each concept, and the sequence of presentation.

Content Deliverer. The instructor's presentation is the delivery method. The instructor controls the pace of delivery, the monitoring of learners' feedback cues, and the reaction to the feedback. Also, the instructor determines more mundane delivery details such as the volume of the presentation, the distance from the screen, and clarity of the images.

Subject Matter Expert (SME). The role of corporate trainer often requires that the trainer become something of a *subject matter expert* on the course topic. This often breaks down beyond the novice level. From the learner's point of view, the more knowledgeable the instructor is about the subject, the more acceptable the learning experience. If the instructor demonstrates a lack of understanding of the fundamentals of the topic, credibility of the entire course will be suspect.

Facilitator. When the learning activities are more self-directed, the instructor becomes a facilitator. These tasks include assisting the group's progress, enforcing the rules of the simulation or game, making sure the clues are uncovered, tracking the time elapsed, and making sure the resources are available.

Tutor. Once the presentation is interrupted by a question from the class, the role of instructor now turns to tutor. The instructor must be able to understand the question and respond to it appropriately. Often this requires understanding the point of view of the learner, assessing the concepts (or misconceptions) the learner is struggling with, and then presenting additional information about the topic that brings the learner across the chasm. Classroom dynamics and economics dictate that this must be limited by some measure. Hopefully, the question and answer interchange is useful to the entire class.

Mentor. Mentoring is similar in nature to tutoring. The main difference is that the personalized response is often a facilitation rather than course content. Helping the learner get back on track, eliminating sources of distraction, providing additional strategies for approaching a difficult topic are all examples of mentoring.

Assessor. The instructor is usually the test designer, test administrator, test grader, and test score reporter. It is a feedback mechanism for both the learner and the instructor.

Project Manager. Managing the class progress through the course material is also the responsibility of the instructor. Setting deadlines, determining when deliverables are due, handing out assignments, setting up teams, and dividing up work are all classic tasks performed by a project manager – and must be performed by instructors as well. This role manages the incentives for progress and completion of the course.

Administrator. Some corporate trainers have the luxury of administrative assistance, but in general, most have the responsibility for registration, attendance tracking, and corporate reporting of scores. This role also includes producing the handouts, ordering the manuals and textbooks, and stocking the supplies.

Facilities Manager. Tracking and managing the availability of the meeting room(s), labs, and other spaces used by the class is a distinct administrative role. It is often left to the instructor to ensure their readiness, usability, and cleanliness.

A/V Expert. The instructor who knows how to use and maintain audio/visual equipment has control over his/her own destiny. Video projectors, overhead projectors, VCRs, and DVDs all have their own quirks and challenges. Having a spare projector bulb, video cable, or Phillips head screwdriver has saved many a classroom presentation. In the digital domain this translates to being an expert on computer hardware and software issues.

Curriculum Planner. The corporate instructor is often given the task of deciding an entire course of instruction. In a general sense, this is an extension of course design. In fact, it is a prerequisite of course design. However, from the learner's point-of-view the curriculum should be personalized and take the learner's roles, objectives, and experience so that the optimum course of instruction is presented to the learner.

These are some of the key roles instructors are called upon to serve. Most instructors recognize these and probably could add a few more.

Blending eLearning Tools to Address Instructor Roles

eLearning offers many enticing benefits. Because it is fundamentally a self-paced form of delivery, it frees the instructor from being the method of content delivery. It frees the curriculum from the constraints of the instructors' availability. It creates dramatic savings in travel and lodging expense by delivering instruction to the learner's location rather than bringing the learners to the instructor's location. It opens up the training function to 24/7 accessibility. Its automated features eliminate the manual labor and expense of paper-based registration, tracking, and reporting.

However, it's easy to see that just replacing an instructor led classroom course with a web course is insufficient. Just listing a set of web course links on a web page is not eLearning. But more importantly, it is not likely to be a successful replacement for an instructor led course. In fact, some instructor roles are not easy to replace with eLearning tools. This certainly gives credence to the notion of a blended approach to eLearning. In other words, the best approach uses a blend of tools. Let's consider some of the ingredients for the blend.

Ingredients for Blended eLearning

Here is a list of common eLearning tools and suggestions for the instructor roles that they play in a virtual eLearning environment.

Web courses' strength is content delivery with all its forms of rich, multimedia delivery. It is a natural, self-paced delivery method. The individual has full control of delivery details and content repetition. It is so strong that often web course delivery is the only component of an organization's eLearning strategy. Web courses can also help with assessment. Most web course authoring tools provide assessment building capability and some rudimentary tracking mechanism. The Instructional Systems Design process, built into many of the authoring tools templates and procedures, helps ensure quality and consistency - which is more difficult to achieve with individual instructors.

Virtual classroom. Virtual classroom tools free the instructor and the learners from geographic constraints. Learners can attend a virtual session wherever there is Internet access. Most tools have feedback mechanisms like simulated hand raising, text chat, and even assessment delivery, grading, and compilation.

Virtual classroom tools provide support for the widest array of instructor roles. Instructors and SME's can deliver content with them. Mentoring and tutoring activities can take place during a virtual classroom session and even some facilitation can be accomplished. It is possible to provide technical assistance on equipment issues using the virtual classroom tool as the Equipment Expert role.

Video-Based SME Authoring. This could be classified as a special case of web based courses. However, the production and use of SME Authored courseware are so radically different from traditional web based training they deserve separate consideration. Products like Digital Lava, Docent's gForce, Real Producer, and Microsoft Producer have simplified the capture of PowerPoint presentations with synchronized business video. They can serve as rapid content production tools. Subject Matter Experts can be placed in front of a camera, give their presentation, and have their expertise captured digitally at the touch of a button. Publishing means placing the new object in an LMS curriculum for its intended audience. Rapid time to market for short shelf life content is now possible.

Content delivery is the SME Authoring tool's strength. Skilled course designers can produce templates to guide SMEs. They can also produce assessments. Yet the actual content comes straight from the expert. This leverages the skills of both the Subject Matter Expert and the courseware designer for maximum speed to market.

SME authored courses are excellent devices for providing operating tips on eLearning equipment.

Email and Threaded Discussion Groups. Email and threaded discussion groups are considered together since most popular email systems like Microsoft Outlook/Exchange and Lotus Notes have discussion group support built into the products. These basic eLearning tools provide feedback functions and help support nearly all the instructor roles in the digital domain.

Chat. This basic Internet communications tool has a place in the eLearning strategy. It can be used for mentoring, tutoring, solving last minute registration problems, or providing assistance to a learner encountering problems with course access.

Learning Management System (LMS). Much has been written about the learning management systems and their contribution to the foundation of the eLearning infrastructure. It is important to note that the LMS 's greatest assistance is in the roles of administrator, project manager, facilities manager, and curriculum planner. These functions are usually considered "overhead" to instructors and their automation is greatly appreciated. LMS vendors point out that the administrative reporting capability provides management with the data to judge training progress and effectiveness.

Below is a summary chart of the instructor roles discussed and the eLearning tools' appropriateness for each role. Use this chart to identify the roles your eLearning solution may be missing.

SEDATA eLearning Matrix	Appropriate eLearning Tool					
	Web Course	SME Authoring Tool	Virtual Classroom Tool	Email	Chat	Learning Mgmt System
Instructor Led Role						
Content Deliverer - elocution, accent, pace, volume, distance	X	X	X	X		
Subject Matter Expert		X	X	X		
Mentor			X	X	X	/
Tutor			X	X	X	
Facilitator			/	/	/	
Assessor (testing, pre-testing, quizzing)	/	/	/	/		X
Project Manager			X	X		X
Administrator (registration, tracking, reporting)			/	/	/	X
Facilities Manager (room availability, resource availability, cleanliness, etc)				X	X	X
Curriculum Planner				/		X
Course Content Designer	X	X	X			
A/V expert (video projectors, overhead projectors, slide projectors, etc)	X	X	X	X	X	X
KEY: X = provides support / = partial support or assistance						

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