

## 7 tips for successful online learning

→ Online learning, has had a chequered history since it was first implemented in the PLATO system over 40 years ago. A lot of hype and many dollars have been expended on its virtues yet finally we are starting to see tangible returns. Still many individuals and organisations wade into online learning with both eyes shut. Thinking “this stuff can’t be that hard” they embark on a journey that not all of them finish and even fewer complete to their satisfaction. Why? Because online learning is more than playing with computers. Online learning is about a balanced mix of business, purpose, technology and people. Get the mix right and you will have a great program. Get one or more of these elements either too light or heavy and you will have an (often) expensive failure.

Since more organisations are choosing to develop their own material I have provided some tips and outlined some areas to keep an eye on when considering the development and implementation of online learning in your organisation.

### *Don't under design*

Information does not equate to learning. Working with an instructional designer experienced in online development, not just print, will vastly improve the uptake and success of your online learning program. More resources, activities and interactions and less text is the key to providing stimulating and engaging content and a program which achieves learning and business outcomes. Also consider a framework for your original material such as ‘learning objects’. These portable and re-usable containers of learning material and activities are revolutionising the industry by reducing costs and improving consistency and quality of the materials.

### *Don't over design*

Paying developers a small fortune to recreate the already rich human interface design of a web browser in Flash is a waste of everyone’s time and money. Keep the Flash for when you really need it. That is animation, interactions and formative assessment etc. Effective learning environments can be designed in just HTML or using any of the numerous

scripting language/database combinations to provide fast, responsive or even personalised interfaces and content. Choosing the appropriate technology/medium for the environment is a critical factor for success.

## *Use collaborative technology*

A little effort right at the outset of your development to set up an easy to use environment for your developers will pay many dividends. Redbean uses the WebDAV features of Mac OS X Server to allow contributors to work continuously and remotely on their material if necessary. Both Linux and Windows support this standard for sharing files and resources. Collaborative development ensures all material is synchronised, development times are vastly improved and maintenance simplified, keeping materials fresh and current. Also at this point spend time and effort separating the content, structure and format of your materials and use Web Services such as XML to 'future-proof' your work.

**“The consulting and design processes are not the time to be expanding the scope and the budget...”**

## *Expensive development does not mean better learning*

The ratio of development hours to learning hours can range from 10:1 for simple HTML interfaces right through to 100:1 for intensive media driven materials. Ironically the introduction of more sophisticated tools has increased this ratio, mainly due to developers doing far more sophisticated interactions. Whether these equate to better learning however is debatable. They certainly cost more though! Quite often the most effective learning design can be the simplest.

## *Work with a custom developer*

For many organisations, including universities, the skills required in an online learning development team are spread thin or non-existent and so little more than text online is often the result. If you need to go beyond 'text and talk' consider working with a Custom Developer to give an objective and refreshing view and who can provide all the skills under one roof. Reduced development time and costs and an innovative product are often the result.

Be sure however that you have your business objectives firmly in place before engaging a developer. The consulting and design processes are not the time to be expanding the scope and the budget. In fact the more you spend on analysis, design and specification before engaging the developer the greater will be your savings in development due to improved clarity of outcomes.

## *Beware the learning management system (LMS)*

The average LMS comes loaded with features, for managing students. It also comes loaded with constraints which you probably won't hit until half through your project. Your choice of LMS will unfortunately define and hence limit your learning design. Some corporate training departments and universities are now re-considering in-house application development as a means to provide a more flexible and innovative learning design. For instance you could develop the content management system and purchase the student management system. Continuing Standards improvement and compliance is allowing the use of more mix and match, plug and play systems. The LMS vendors are also offering more modular applications allowing customers

a greater fit to their needs.

## *Understand your learning environment*

Learning environments are defined by place, time, method (dominant technology) and purpose. Think of mobile versus deskbound and asynchronous versus real-time solutions.

Learning environments also consist of four different layers of increasing sophistication:

1. **Passive**
2. **Transaction**
3. **Interaction**
4. **Simulation**

Passive environments are either print-centric or simple online page-turning systems. This was the first phase of the web and still dominates.

Transaction environments are online and build on the above but now include exchange of data and information via email, file transfer and discussion boards etc. Internet banking is a classic transaction layer application.

The Interaction layer means that the user is now interacting in response to dynamic

variables in the learning environment. Tools include collaboration and real-time manipulation. It has three sub-layers of interaction defined as reactive, proactive and mutual adaptation. Most current games interfaces are interactive but only at the reactive to proactive levels.

Simulation means fully immersed and realistic environments. In behavioural and people centred learning the classroom is still the best place for this. In areas where destructive or dangerous outcomes are possible (warfare, pilot training, surgical procedures) computer and tactile simulation environments will be preferred.

The costs of implementing successive layers from 1- 4 rise exponentially. Full simulation is still very expensive to produce yet costs are coming down.

Further possibilities include the real-time matching of a learner's profile with a 'knowledge-pool' by an adaptive learning engine to provide context sensitive support. The irony is that increasing complexity at the back-end allows increasing simplicity at the front-end for the learner.

## *Pamper your people*

This one isn't a tip, it's a call for increased investment and diversity of skills in your development team. Online learning can be a rigid and turgid science if dominated by the technologists in your organisation, often leading to a functionally efficient but otherwise dull learning experience. Good online learning is a combination of solid technical capability, learning material of substance and a stellar performance to marry it all together. Working with a learning and development professional can ensure your staff are also getting what they need to write quality programs, design knowledgeable learning interactions and provide superior online teaching practices. ☒

→ **Summary**

Online learning is here to stay and getting more effective every day. However improved outcomes and improved cost efficiencies are being demanded. The above is just a sample of ways of providing a balanced mix of business, purpose, technology and people which will ensure the success of your online learning project from all perspectives while enhancing your reputation as a provider of quality online learning.

Some Development Standards bodies:

[www.imsproject.org](http://www.imsproject.org)

[www.adlnet.org](http://www.adlnet.org)

[www.webdav.org](http://www.webdav.org)

[www.w3c.org](http://www.w3c.org)

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Redbean Learning Solutions is an international learning and development organisation specialising in the design, development and implementation of online learning programs. Redbean can provide better business outcomes for your organisation through an independent and objective approach to helping improve your people, product and practices.