

A simple guide to preparing your course materials for online delivery



Many of us have been told to start delivering our courses, workshops and training programs online. Many of us are not prepared for that. Nor, for that matter are students or workshop participants. I am five years into my journey in online/e-learning, so for me this is no biggie. Here is what I have learned about preparing course materials for online/e-learning delivery. This is what I wish someone had explained to me five years ago. hope this helps and if you are further down this path than me, please share your insights.

Don't panic. People in the e-learning industry see the COVID-19 crisis as a huge opportunity and you are being flooded with marketing messages about their solutions in the form of platforms, software and consulting services. Ignore that for now because the biggest mistake I made starting out was starting diving into the technology.

Content before technology. The virtual learning environment is qualitatively different from the physical classroom. Your content remains the same, but for effective e-learning you will need to rearrange it.

Think in chunks. Engaging learners and workshop participants online is not easy. What the research tells us is that small chunks of content followed by a challenge followed by assessment

followed by feedback works well. The acronym is CCAF: Context, Challenge, Assessment, Feedback. Here is an example from my writing class. The CCA part might take 20 minutes.

- Context/Content: Read a short article on the inverted pyramid rhetorical pattern for organizing information. Reading time 10 minutes.
- Challenge: Does this news article use the inverted pyramid? Display 300-word news article; answer yes or no; no points; no more than 5 minutes.
- Assessment: Complete the quiz on the inverted pyramid pattern (8 questions, T/F, multiple choice; automated quiz returns results immediately; learners can do the quiz multiple times; about 5 minutes).
- Feedback: Online discussion forum for Q&A.

Again, content before technology. After looking at that chunk, you probably want to ask: What software do I use to do all this? How do I set up an online discussion forum? What does it cost? How do my learners connect? How do I make an automated quiz? How do I interact with them online? And a hundred more questions. Save those questions for later. Until you have all your content organized in chunks, the technology is a distraction. Trust me on this. I spent countless hours and more money than I could afford thrashing around before I figured this out.

Write in Plain English. Any content you present in any form must be written in the Plain English style of writing. If you decide to make a video, write your script in Plain English. Here is my favourite example:

If there exist any points on which you require explanation or further explication, we shall be glad to furnish such additional details as may be required via telephone.

In Plain English, that becomes: *If you have questions, please call.*

Now you can start thinking about the technology.

Here is where things get complicated.

If your employer started thinking about online/e-learning before this crisis upended everything, they will most likely have chosen the software and services you will be using. Take a deep breath and jump in. There is no substitute for learning by doing and most likely there are colleagues who can help you. Just remember, content before technology.

If your employer is only now starting to deal with this new reality, prepare for chaos. Chances are you will be told to use software and services that may not be suited to your situation, and systems not properly set up and don't work as advertised. If that is your reality, you will need to find workarounds.

Workarounds. One simple workaround is screen casting your lectures (in chunks) and using free services like Survey Monkey or Google Forms for quizzes (which are quite good actually) and

Excel or Google Sheets for tracking. Most of the software and services you need are available for free or very little cost and there are lots of tutorials out there to help you get started. It's a lot of work, but it works.

Your biggest allies in this transition are your students or workshop participants. Tell them you understand this transition will be confusing and frustrating for everyone, including you. Tell them that, together, you will find solutions to whatever problems arise. Ask them to share their solutions. Talk to them using Skype or Zoom or WhatsApp or whatever so no one feels abandoned.

In conclusion

Over the last five years, I have learned enough about online/e-learning to know this is the right path for me and I believe this is a big part of the future of education.

I also know a lot of people are going to have a very bad first experience with online learning in this mad rush of school closings, event cancellations and travel bans. My partner, Bernd Salewski and I want to do what we can to mitigate that. Bernd was the one who rescued me from my lost wanderings in technology and has been at this for well over a decade.

We are planning a webinar to offer advice and answer questions on preparing content, some of the basic principles people need to know for delivering content online, and yes, the technology.

And we are not selling anything.

If you are interested, please email me for further details.

Until then, remain calm and carry on chunking.

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