

What Makes For Quality Online Learning?

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A constant theme that permeates most discussions of online learning is that of *quality*. As with any form of training, one aspect of quality is that it supports specific learning and organizational objectives. After all, any course that doesn't deliver this shouldn't be offered. For technology-based learning, an important aspect of quality is its instructional soundness and versatility. How do you maintain high-quality learning effectiveness in a medium where no instructor is present to answer questions or adjust the content based on expressed learner interests? The short answer is through well-designed instruction based on analyses that draw out, in advance, learner and organizational needs.

Poorly designed online learning hurts quality. Even when the technology works well, the screens are beautiful and exciting, and a large amount of multimedia is available, if no meaningful learning results from all of this, everyone's efforts – yours, the learners and their managers – have been wasted. The careful, systematic crafting of online instruction, complete with tryout and revision cycles using real learners, is an essential characteristic of quality online learning design.

E-learning, or, for that matter, any technology-based instruction, can be disappointing in many ways. Think of the last time you interacted with an online course. In the list below, check off any item that matches one of your experiences:

1. The content was incomplete, incomprehensible, boring or just plain wrong.
2. There was no alignment between what was taught and what was really needed on the job and no alignment between the course and the organization's goals.
3. The online course was primarily a lecture on the computer, or a seemingly endless run of slides, with little for the learner to do except read pages of text, watch long-winded "talking heads," and press "next" to continue.
4. There was more form than substance. Lots of "clicky-clicky bling-bling" (a term coined by Cammy Bean at the e-learning design firm, Kino), referring to too many animations, extraneous sounds and superfluous graphics that overwhelm the instructional message.
5. Interactive exercises within the course were not challenging and the feedback following the exercises was not comprehensive enough to let

learners know where they required more study or practice. Overall, learners received little guidance on how they were doing.

6. The course focused more on entertaining learners than on educating them. While the course may have been fun, very little applicable learning was produced
7. The course was of low value after it was completed. Information in the course proved too hard to retrieve back on the job, so there was no way to “refresh” without enrolling in the online course all over again – something most learners are loath to do.
8. The learners perceived the online tests as being afterthoughts that failed to measure the most important skills and knowledge acquired from the course.
9. The course was complicated from a navigational perspective. Learners got lost and could not locate required content. If they stopped before they completed a lesson, they had to start over. There was no mechanism within the course to track and record where a learner had left off.
10. Little to no reinforcement or support followed the online instruction. While this is important for all types of training, it is particularly critical with online learning. Since learning online is frequently an individual experience, often learners need to talk with others about what transpired in order to confirm that they had learned correctly and had focused on what was essential.

The preponderance of online courses is not designed perfectly, hence many will show some of the weaknesses listed above. Fairly good ones, with the guidance of competent and experienced training professionals, can be much improved. However, too many online learning experiences are riddled with so many weaknesses that learning is significantly hindered and improvement is simply not practical. In these cases, the wisest choice is to start over – a sadly expensive course of action to undertake.

To avoid the necessity of having to begin again, do it correctly the first time. Here are 10 ways to increase the probability of developing your online learning so that it produces desired results right from the start:

- **Right content.** First and foremost, make sure you are training on the right content. This means that the information you include should be accurate, relevant, complete and interesting for the target audience. You achieve this by conducting a proper front-end analysis or needs

assessment and gaining access to one or more truly qualified subject-matter experts. Testing the content with actual learners can go a long way toward eliminating problems before they become embedded in the course and, thus, much more expensive to fix.

- **Strong alignment.** Assuring strong alignment between the course and business goals is essential if the learner is to gain the value that was intended from the course. Vetting the course with key stakeholders will help here.
- **True interactivity.** Making the course truly interactive is a hallmark of excellent online learning. From simple, well-thought-out knowledge quizzes to complex simulations, taking the time to create a highly interactive experience that requires the learner to exercise the brain in addition to the mouse button-finger provides large payoffs in learning gain. Remember, in a simulated, e-learning environment, the learner can try out techniques and ideas that might not be practical in the real world. This “safe failure” capability can be a powerful interactive approach, helping people learn from their mistakes without risk to others. Our best advice here is to provide as much opportunity for practice as you can. Then, find ways to provide even more. Just remember: Telling ain’t training.
- **Valued experience.** Making a course fun is not necessarily bad. However, focusing on “edutainment” at the expense of learning is a growing problem. Learners appreciate value – online courses that give them what they need, in the shortest period of time. If they get that, whether or not they had fun will not be an issue.
- **Few distractions.** Moderation and purpose are key when considering what “special features” of your authoring tool to use and how often to use them. Bear in mind that just because you can use exciting animations, doesn’t mean you should. The test question is always, “Will it contribute to the learning process?”
- **Useful on the job.** Design the course so that the learner can easily refer back to specific, application-oriented parts of it once back on the job. If the course has job aids and other tools embedded in it, create simple and easy ways to access those tools once the instruction has ended.
- **Powerful feedback.** Always keep in mind that the online learner usually has no one at hand to assist in case of a problem or a lack of understanding. That is why your feedback and model answers for every activity should be as comprehensive as possible. If the learner can understand where a problem lies and remediate it quickly, learning and retention skyrocket. The probability of transferring back to the job what was learned also increases significantly.

- **Valid assessments.** At the end of an online experience, most learners want to know how they've done. If an end-of-course assessment is going to be used, make sure it's designed well and measures what's truly important. Tie test items closely to the objectives of the course.
- **Good human factors.** Create a great user experience. If learners become frustrated with the interface or navigation within the course, they may leave and never come back.
- **Integrated follow-up.** When learners have had a good learning experience and feel both competent and confident that they can apply what they acquired, support at their worksites is essential to ensure they try out what they have gained. Therefore, when you launch your online learning programs, make certain support resources in the form of immediate supervisors or knowledgeable colleagues, who are familiar with the content, and who are able to serve as post-training coaches, are available to help learners integrate new skills and knowledge into the job.

This article is an excerpt from Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keep's bestselling book, *Telling Ain't Training – Updated, Expanded and Enhanced*. For more information, click [here](#).