Best Practices Guide

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1. Introduction

This best practice guide has been put together for trainers of instructors who are looking at converting their face-to-face program to a distance-learning format. The guide will provide recommendations, which will ensure that the transition is smooth and student-centered but will not cover all the resources needed to migrate to a distance-learning environment.

This guide was constructed based on the scenario below:-

A training manager has been frustrated with the quality of communication among trainees in his face-to-face training sessions and wants to try something new. With his supervisor's permission, the trainer plans to convert all current training modules to a blended learning format, which would provide trainees and trainers the opportunity to interact with each other and learn the material in both a face-to-face and online environment. In addition, he is considering putting all of his training materials on a server so that the trainees have access to resources and assignments at all times.

2. Pre-planning Strategies for converting your program

The ubiquitous nature of the Internet and Information and Communication technologies has made it essential for institutions to look "for more effective learning approached that focus on the students' learning and less on the delivery of content" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2012, p. 194). This calls for more than creating a course based on "related materials based on what has worked… in the traditional classroom" (Moller, Foshay and Huett, 2008, p. 66) notwithstanding the submission by Dr. George Piskurich that the same methods are used to facilitate both online and face-to-face environment (Laureate Education).

The following are useful considerations to make at the pre-planning stage for converting the program:-

- [ ] Does the facilitator know the technology to be used or can it be easily learnt? According to Dr. Piskurich, the technology must be "transparent" enough for use.

- [ ] Will the choice of technology to be used be easily adaptive for the learners?

- [ ] Can the choice of technology inhibit learning?

- [ ] Has a lesson plan been created?

- [ ] Does the lesson plan include activities to facilitate learning

- [ ] Do the activities cater for different learner pacing

3. Choosing what can be enhanced in a distance learning format

According to Simonson et al. (2012, p. 197), "the design of instruction captures those elements that create a learning environment and facilitates student learning". Particularly in a distance-learning environment, planned activities and applications are at the heart of the course. The trainer must make the following considerations in determining what should be enhanced:-

- If it is focuses on delivering content which learners already have access to then there is no point in creating an enhancement.
- If it focuses on activities that will help students learn the content then it is worth enhancing. This can include but should not be limited to discussion boards to discuss content in context and blogs to encourage social learning.

4. Playing a different role in distance-learning

In distance learning, there is a change from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to learning where "students become more engaged in the learning process" (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 195). The role of the trainer will therefore change drastically from being a repository of knowledge to that of one who guides the students to acquire knowledge by asking questions and providing the needed scaffolding for students to engage with the content at a more cognitive level. The trainer now becomes:-

- A coach
- A partner in the learner process
- A Guide

5. Steps to encourage the trainees to communicate online

According to Piskurich (Laureate Education) The instructor's role is to help students learning and not teach new content and this means that all students must be encouraged to "take an active role in the development of a collegial learning situation: (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 200). It is therefore essential that the instructor play the role of facilitator well enough by: -
- Employing the use of ice-breakers since the class would consist of a diverse group of learners who may now have to get used to each other
- Employing group based activities which require learners to work with other students in the virtual classroom
- Actively participating in group discussions
- Showing students that they care about their success

6. Conclusion

These best practices outlined here are just a guide and may be used in conjunction with others for an effective transition.

References:

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