



Taking complex programmes online



By Lisa Minogue-White, Director of Learning Solutions at WillowDNA

The expectation of learners is changing. People are increasingly comfortable and indeed, expecting, to learn collaboratively in their time and using a range of learning techniques to suit their preference. This is partly a change in the average age of employees but this can be something of a red herring. The whole Gen Y discussion that has raged over the last couple of years can detract from the fact that people of all ages have much higher expectations of their online experience. More ubiquitous access to technology in people's everyday lives is clear and engagement with online learning reaches across demographics.

It is probable that learning providers that fail to provide high quality online learning experiences will be seen as failing. Not a great prospect! This fear of failure is a real problem. Learning and education professionals may be intrigued by the exciting possibilities online holds, but usually the default stance is to commission some basic compliance-based learning, just to see how it goes. This is unlikely to set learners' pulses racing. In fact, rather than mitigate risk, it might well switch people off altogether. It is also at odds with the today's expectations of online distance learning.

As a snapshot, a demographic study published in January 2013 found that of the 2350 students who had enrolled on a programme delivered via cousera.org,

entitled ‘Computational Investing, Part 1’, the average age of MOOC students is 35 years old, the youngest is 17 and the oldest is 74. Looking more broadly at distance learners, Education Today published a [great infographic](#) entitled ‘Who are the distance learners?’ They found that the average age was 34 and over a third of all online students were over 30, with gender distribution relatively even and impressively high student satisfaction rates (98% felt they achieved their learning goals and 92% would recommend to others). It highlights that today, online distance learning is often the vehicle of choice for substantive study.

So the question is not whether you should take your substantive programmes online, but how should you do it to achieve the types of satisfaction rates that the best providers achieve?

Your starting point

Organisations seem to fall into three main categories – those who are largely virgin and have yet to try out the online revolution in learning, those who have made tremendous strides forward and are perhaps looking to structure their approach and those who were bitten by the first phase of e-learning and have suffered as a result. Particularly for those in the last camp, it can often seem impossible that online learning could be a suitable mechanism for complex subjects.

However, the traditional face-to-face model of delivery often adopted for leadership programmes, intensive certification programmes or highly specialist technical skills has always faced serious learning limitations. When developing substantive skills, the learning journey takes place over time and changes as the learner practices what they learnt in context, formulates new insights and develops new learning needs. These intensive classroom experiences are often very popular and highly motivating but as most learning professionals know, the energy levels and engagement in the subject soon drops after these interventions. Even if pre and post workshop materials are provided, it is difficult to sustain the learning and even more challenging to be highly adaptive and flexible to changing environments.

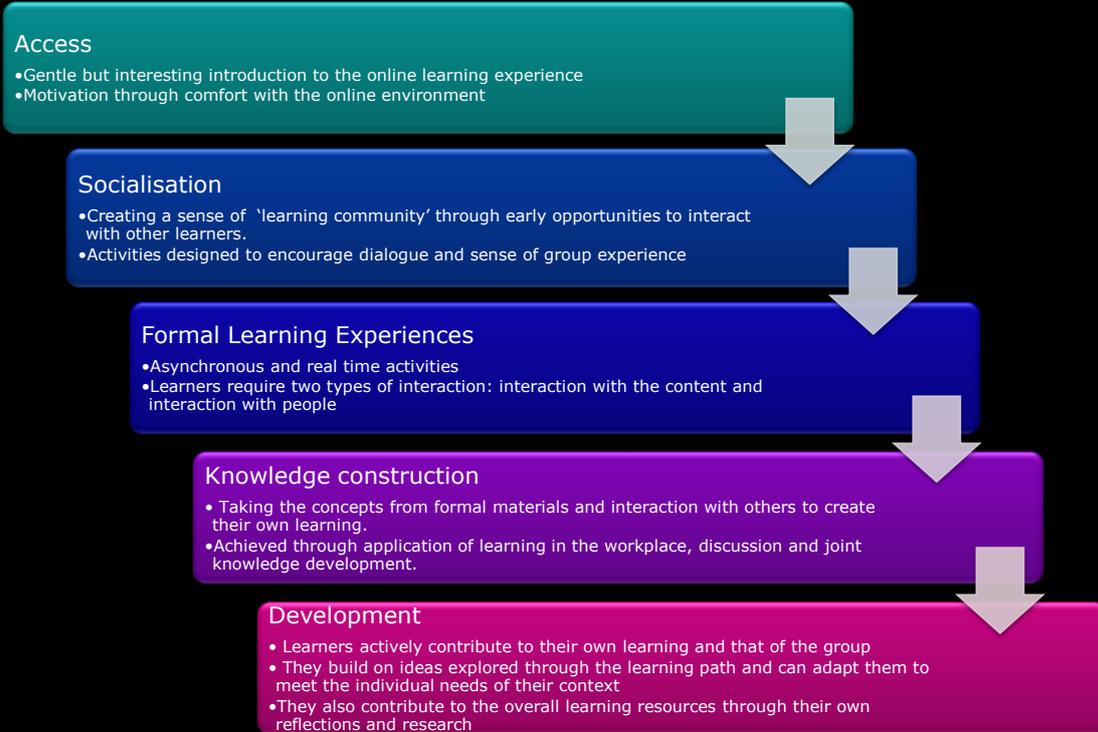
Online now enables learning providers and subject matter experts to breakdown the experience to match the real timescales in which deep understanding, application and insight occur. It also enables learners to be much more involved in the curriculum and adapt it to their learning needs. However on this point, there is another common point of debate – why provide anything at all? If learners are

savvy online, they could find everything they need through developing their search skills on Google! This can also be quite a concern to learning providers, who believe their online programmes are going 'head to head' with the wealth of free resources available online. However, in our experience, few learners are totally satisfied with a free for all.

The concept of totally informal learning with no learning framework or validation of content quality is highly questionable. The satisfaction rates quoted early in this paper concerned formal distance learning programmes – compare these to the MOOCs (massive open online courses) and you find a different picture. Even though there some level of quality control given the institutions that are providing them, the lack of structure is one of the primary reasons drop-out rates are so high. Learners appreciate a scaffold from which they can develop their own approaches, a foundation on which other types of dialogue, collaboration and research can be built.

The learning design methodology adopted by WillowDNA draws upon the work of Gilly Salmon and is the principle upon which the award winning IPA Foundation Certificate was developed.

Learning path design methodology



It enables the creation of the learning journey and the breaking down of complex subjects into digestible pieces that allow time for reflection, experimentation and application. It is a design methodology that enables high levels of flexibility and adaptability to changing environments. Delivered online and broken down into short discreet learning experiences, new data, research, breaking news and insights can be integrated immediately, with no downtime and huge rework burden.

What this looks like in practice involves a review of source content and the design team asking questions such as:

Deconstructing the learning objective	Potential learning resource
What is the core knowledge you need to provide?	e-Lessons, Key Readers/e-Books, walkthroughs, infographics, case studies
What activities would help demonstrate the objective in action?	Online assignments, workplace assignments, interactive scenarios, simulations, quick quizzes
What types of conversation would the learner have with peers, colleagues or contacts about this subject?	Discussion boards, blogs, online chat
If you could speak to an expert about this, what would you ask them?	Webinars, videos, online chat
What examples from the learner's working life could they bring to the learning experience and apply the new knowledge and skills you've explored?	Online assignments, discussion boards, portfolios, uploading resources, workplace assignments, virtual classrooms
Are there any templates or guides you could develop that would help the learner try this out in their workplace?	Quick Guides, mobile content, templates

What your learning team need to do

Many organisations, accrediting bodies and business schools are recognising that a new set of skills needs to be brought to bear to make learning happen. Those that will prosper in this new world of learning are those that understand the principles of online learning pedagogy and recognise providers that can provide the right types of learning interventions based on the tenets of great learning design. Skills also in demand are those of online facilitation and tutoring, ensuring that learners are well supported throughout their learning experience, collaboration and dialogue is nurtured and content curated.

The future

One of the most exciting possibilities here is for the delivery of high quality subject matter expertise and certification to a worldwide audience. There are many organisations that are essentially the custodians of highly valuable content and insight, with a reputation for being the leaders in their field when it comes to educational content. Taking their programmes online enables the internationalisation of their brand and the opportunity to maximise their content value.

Taking the UK as an example, the international standing in high tech research and development, creative and media, medical research and aerospace, as well as the regard for our law, business and finance schools reveals a huge opportunities for the provision of world class learning in these areas. Even for courses delivered within organisations, the ability to connect a dispersed workforce provides huge opportunities for knowledge creation, innovation as well as cost savings in programme delivery.

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