

Successful online learning – the five Ps

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Key learning points

- An important aspect of design for online learning is visual ergonomics.
- Learning theories offer poor predictive power in terms of how learners work and learn.
- Success at learning is closely related to emotional engagement—and learning designers tend to ignore this aspect.
- Online learning poses a challenging experience for learners—and they need support to cope with it.
- A key goal to achieve Praxis – being able to put learning into practice.

Many of you will be familiar with the three (or more) Ps of marketing and even if not, as trainers or teachers you are likely to have used mnemonics as an aid to retention and recall. Mnemonics are especially useful when you need to get the key points to 'stick' in the minds of your audience. With this in mind I offer you the 5 Ps of online learning: Presentation, Pedagogy, Promotion, Preparation and Props. What I offer is not new; in fact much of it results from the eleven years of online teaching and learning at The Open University, the £22 million it has spent on research and evaluation 1, and the worldwide community that have been sharing experience in recent years. You can therefore consider these 5 Ps to be a convenient re-packing of the information and experience that can be found in abundance on the Internet.

Presentation

Good graphic design appeals to the subtle process by which the brain processes information and, as a result, we decide if we like the 'look and feel' of a visual environment. Part of liking this 'look and feel' is the way the text and pictorial layout can appear inviting and encouraging—a vital aspect of any online learning environment. Another aspect of presentation is how the text reads in terms of engaging the learner and introducing the story to be told—as well as being written in clear and concise English

When browsing through books we tend to feel that we have a right to roam around and to dip in to whatever catches our interest. Online courses need to offer this same facility through intuitive navigation and iconic signalling—and even more so if the course is to be retained as a source of reference. When multi-media designers stop feeding the frenzy of the people who market online learning, we might begin to see some appropriate use of it.

Sadly the visual ergonomics of a learning environment are poorly understood and rarely viewed as important by learning designers—and results in a weakness in many online environments in which the visual mode of learning is dominant.

Pedagogy

I look forward to the day when there is a collective realisation of how extremely limited (and contradictory) most of the current educational theories really are. For example, my own view is that 'Learning Styles' as a predictive model for how people learn is about as effective as using astrological charts to make decisions about the future. We can be certain of very little when it comes to an understanding of how people learn. What is emerging from experience and research is that effective learning is much more a function of the

emotional response to a learning environment than the techniques and structures that it is based on. For learning to be effective the learner needs to feel Included, Individual, Interested and Inspired. How much online learning have you seen that manages to achieve these 4 Is?

Promotion

Long ago in the early dawn of online learning (about 1997), there was a widely held belief that this new form of computer-mediated learning was so wonderful that people could not wait to take part. Those of you old enough to remember will recall that it was described as a 'killer application' 2 –which, given the number of learners 'killed off' by online learning (about 70% who take part 3), turned out to be a highly prescient descriptor. Many organisations who are now re-launching online learning realise the importance of 'marketing' it to their potential consumers. This includes the planning of rewards and incentives as well as managing the expectations that might prove to be too high, too low or ill informed.

Preparation

The study skills and mind-set required for online learning are very different from the conventional learning environments that most people have experience of. The shift from being an unselfconscious learner, dependent on the directions and approbation of a teacher, to that of a self-conscious independent learner having to take on responsibilities, is a considerable one. These responsibilities include the development of intrinsic in place of extrinsic motivation, and for nurturing a self-learning ability. Add in to this what, for many, is an alien screen-based environment, preparation then becomes essential to achieve the exhilarating transition to empowered self-managed learning. Successful Open University students have all discovered that learning to learn is a key skill for ensuring progression. In the euphoria of seeing online learning as the ultimate solution to training and development, many learners have been, metaphorically, 'dropped in at the deep end' with the consequential results of this type of approach. Nearly all learners react with trepidation to any new learning landscape and need an induction phase that reduces anxieties and builds confidence. With online learning being such an unfamiliar learning landscape, the need for an effective induction is much greater. Perhaps just as important is a transition phase in which the online part of the learning is a relatively small part of a blended approach.

Props

Online learners need props (props as in supports). Rather than identifying people who will offer support, say in the role of mentor, tutor or e-moderator, think about what is required in terms of the total support system that fragile learners (and all new learners are fragile) will need. For example we know that learners who experience hardware or software problems when trying to access their learning materials, tend to blame themselves for the errors - and consequently suffer a blow to their self-esteem. They rarely return to the scene of their humiliation and could account for a significant part of the 70% who gets 'killed off'. So technical support, especially in the early stages is essential.

Also essential is the support of colleagues—both those taking part and those who are providing 'cover' while the learning takes place. This is particularly critical in work-based learning situations in which learners tend to feel that they are 'letting colleagues down' by not contributing to the ongoing work. "I'm too busy to do it" is the most common reason for non-completion of online courses – for which read; "I can't be seen not being busy". An important prop for learners is the manner in which the culture of an organisation is both overtly and institutionally supportive.

Any discussion environment whether real or virtual needs to be one in which the learner can have trust and confidence—and this is where skilled facilitation can help. Effective facilitation of an online discussion in which the only medium of communication is text is

not impossible—but it does require additional competencies that are not within the skill set of most trainers and teachers. Skilled facilitation does enable people to learn from each other and becoming effective members of a learning community. This type of interaction also gives access to the tacit knowledge that is often more valuable than the explicit content in the learning materials.

So think about 'props' in terms of the 3 Ts: Technical, Trust and Teamwork.

Summary

The five Ps outlined above are closely interdependent and require an integrated approach to the design of a learning architecture in which online learners are more likely to flourish than to perish. Designing and implementing an appropriate blend of these Ps should enable learners, and their host organisation to achieve the elusive sixth P of online learning – Praxis– the practical application of learning.

1 <http://iet.open.ac.uk/>

2 John Chambers, President and CEO of Cisco Systems, quoted in The New York Times in 1998: "The next big killer application for the Internet is going to be education. Education over the Internet is going to be so big, it is going to make e-mail usage look like a rounding error."

3 http://www.brandonhall.com/public/execsums/execsum_adkins1.pdf

Biodata of Author:

For the last eight years Jim has been involved in developing and delivering online courses and in particular exploring what is appropriate and effective use of new media technologies to facilitate learning. This has included appointing and training tutors to support learners studying in an online environment. Before joining COROUS (a department of the Open University), he was a Sub-Dean in the Faculty of Technology at the Open University. Most of Jim's career has centred on teaching engineering and promoting an interest and excitement about science and technology. His involvement has included:

- teaching in schools
- writing programmes for schools television series
- running staff development sessions for teachers
- advising government committees on the school curriculum
- teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels
- giving lectures to young people on maths, science and technology.

Two markers of Jim's success in this field were the award of an international prize for a television series on science education and the award of an Institute of Director's prize for a course he developed at Loughborough University.

Jim has recently been invited to speak on e-learning at conferences in London, Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam. He also contributes articles to specialist journals in the field of training and e-learning. Home page: <http://www.corous.com>

To engage in a dialogue on this topic, email Jim Flood at jimflood@btinternet.com