

Top ten secrets of effective e-learning

Jamie Barron

Jamie Barron is Faculty Chair at Capella University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Purpose – *The intent of the study was to identify the factors that are contributing to the success of learner experiences at Capella University.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A case study of Capella University was conducted to determine success factors. An appreciative inquiry approach was used involving learners and faculty at Capella University to identify and analyze what was going well. Interviews, focus groups, and daily practice within courserooms and existing learner evaluations were also analyzed.*

Findings – *Success factors tend to cluster around ten categories. These are: shared learning centered vision; comprehensive course design process; customized scoring guides; group work strategies; characteristics of effective facilitators; faculty training and support; great expectations; meaningful feedback; monitoring and evaluation; and continuous improvement.*

Research limitations/implications – *The study is limited to Capella University.*

Practical implications – *The ten success factors identified can be replicated at other institutions to positively impact their learners' experiences.*

Originality/value – *In the competitive e-learning environment, it is critical to continually assess the strengths and opportunities for improvement among each program offering. Engaging in a cycle of continuous improvement ensures that a program will flourish and continue to attract new enrollees. Capitalizing on best practices experienced at other online institutions can prove to be a valuable means by which to strengthen individual programs.*

Keywords *E-learning, Best practice, Distance learning, Learning methods*

Paper type *Case study*

“**T**his was the best online experience I’ve ever had”, shared a learner in one of our doctoral courses. He was caught off guard when I asked . . . “Why?” He couldn’t articulate all of the factors that had come together to create an educational experience that had changed his view of online education. But there had to be some secret recipe of ingredients that had combined to result in this perception of time and money well spent. And so began my quest to discover the secrets to e-learning success in our university. With 14,500 learners from 63 countries enrolled in 650 bachelors, master’s, and doctoral courses and a continuing growth in enrollment, I knew that we were doing something right. And I was determined to figure out what it was.

I didn’t need to go far to collect data. I began to ask learners to explain what was going well in their courses. Those who had matriculated from other online universities had particularly compelling stories to share. I poked my virtual head into online courses to see what facilitators who received the highest of ratings were doing, and I talked with them about best practices. I also critically reviewed evaluations that learners had completed at the end of each course. This foray into a case study with an appreciative inquiry approach of my own university left me enlightened, inspired, and excited to share.

“ Successful e-learning initiatives are no accident. They are the products of strategic planning, powerful content, and committed personnel who are passionate about what they are doing.”

Successful e-learning initiatives are no accident. They are the products of strategic planning, powerful content, and committed personnel who are passionate about what they are doing. They follow predictable patterns of behavior that can be captured and replicated. After some analysis, it was determined that our recipe for success includes ten ingredients.

Shared learning centered vision

I often ask conference attendees to make a list of all of the stakeholders in their organizations who in some way impact learners in their programs. The lists grow surprisingly long as we engage in discussion. Common stakeholders include administration, facilitators, enrollment counselors, advisors, support staff, and marketing teams. Course developers who work with the subject matter experts who create content also need to be included. And those in technology support seem to have a special role because they often deal with the learner who is frustrated over a technological problem. A relationship break here can quickly impact a learner's decision to persist with a program in the heat of a technological crisis.

It is critical that everyone who impacts the learners' experiences share a similar vision about learning. This network will provide a safety net of support for learners in a variety of situations. Learners need to see that these stakeholders are bound together by a common vision of facilitating learner success. Learners lose confidence in an organization when stakeholders seem pitted against each other each promoting their own agendas.

Comprehensive course design process

Nothing is more frustrating for a Subject Matter Expert (SME) than being asked to write a course for an e-learning initiative and being provided with no guidance as to structure, format, and expectations of content. SMEs need to see templates and examples of finished products to ensure that standards are being met. A few hours saved initially by sending SMEs off with nothing but a deadline and white space will be very costly in terms of time spent in revisions once learners begin complaining about lack of consistency among courses. Elements such as interactivity within courses, creating course deliverables that can be immediately applied to the workplace, and allowing learners to have such simple features as editing their own posts can greatly enhance engagement and reduce frustration. Quality courses are crafted individually, not manufactured on an assembly line.

Customized scoring guides

Learners quickly learn to ignore scoring guides that are mass produced like M&Ms, where the exterior may look unique but the content is all the same. Scoring guides need to be customized to address each graded deliverable in the course. They need to be clearly detailed. And although the quantitative data derived from a numerical score from a scoring guide is helpful, learners demand narrative feedback as well. They want their work to be thoughtfully critiqued. They want to know how they could improve their deliverables for use in a competitive market.

Group work strategies

There is little that precipitates the collective, virtual group sigh of discontent among online learners more than poorly designed assignments for groups. A successful strategy often cited by learners when asked about their most positive group experiences is to allow them to self-select group members. This gives them much appreciated input as to group

composition. Even though only a small number seem to take advantage of this, they appreciate being asked. It sends the message that the facilitator is committed to making the group experience a positive one.

One tool that has proven extremely valuable in the design of virtual group projects is the Team Charter. The charter is a template provided to learners to complete as a group before initiating work on their first collaborative project. The charter includes fields for such information as:

- contact information for each group member that includes out of course contact should a member lose access to the course;
- rotating responsibilities among members (leader, editor, etc.);
- communication and contribution expectations;
- reasonable progressive deadlines leading to a final product;
- product expectations; and
- consequences for nonparticipation.

With the charter completed, groups can police themselves and take ownership of the group experience. They can buy-into the expectations because they created them.

Effective facilitators

It can be a grave mistake to assume that all teachers who are effective in the traditional classroom can successfully make the leap into online education without experience and training. Learners do not appreciate being “practiced upon” by facilitators who do not know their way around the platform. They expect facilitators to be able to deliver effectively from the first day of class. So online facilitators need to be computer savvy, and they also need to understand the nuances of the delivery platform so they can guide learners effectively. They need to demonstrate every day and in every way that they are focused on learner success and are willing to go the extra mile. They also need to possess an engaging delivery style and be present on a regular basis in the course communicating with learners. Learners expect facilitators to be flexible and to care enough to inquire when a learner is absent and to provide meaningful feedback.

They appreciate opportunities for iterations of their assignments to be reviewed before the issuing of a final grade. They also expect consistent quality among facilitators. Facilitators need to add to the existing content by sharing experiences, resources, and suggestions in the course. Effective facilitators foster a strong sense of community by creating places into the course where learners can build relationships and chat about issues outside of the discussion questions (cyber cafes).

Faculty training and support

It is incredibly risky to place instructors into a course who have never demonstrated competence in a particular online environment. Targeted faculty orientation and training can reveal critical elements of skill and need. Requiring facilitators to participate in an orientation or initial training can reveal their aptitude and positions on such critical elements as:

- *Mastery of the platform*: do they know how to navigate and manipulate the courseroom environment successfully?

“If there is one thing that learners agree upon vehemently, it is the desire for timely, detailed, meaningful feedback. They want their work to be critiqued, not rubber stamped.”

“Learners demand high quality in a virtual world where opportunities abound. And that has raised the bar for all of us.”

- *Personal philosophy:* does the candidate's philosophy of teaching mesh with that of the institution?
- *Participation and engagement:* does the faculty candidate participate in a meaningful way in the training? If not, the assumption could be made that this would not happen in a course filled with learners either.
- *Feedback:* does the faculty candidate provide feedback and insight in relation to the work submitted by other candidates?
- *Content mastery:* Is the faculty candidate capable of relaying mastery of content to others.

Great expectations

Learners need to understand the logistics and parameters of the course. Providing them with a document outlining the expectations at the start of a course can provide an appreciated framework for the work that is to be completed. Elements of expectations documents can include:

- Facilitator's contact information both in and out of the course in the event that a learner loses access to the course.
- Deadlines and consequences for late submissions.
- Structure and format of submissions.
- Etiquette in the courseroom.
- Expected levels of participation and engagement. Expectations around required interaction and consistent posting send the message that the facilitator is concerned about the relationships as well as the work being built during the course.
- Protocols and procedures.
- Definition of and consequences of plagiarism. Many online learners do not realize that they must cite any information that is taken from the internet.
- “Encouragers” from previous learners. There is nothing that a facilitator of a statistics course can say to alleviate the concern of learners who fear the subject that can compare with the words of another learner who has just successfully completed the course. A simple quote from a previous learner such as the following can greatly alleviate frustrations. “I was very nervous about this course. I had a great fear of statistics. But the facilitator and other learners really helped me understand the concepts. Soon I was able to apply them and use them on my job. I'm so glad I remained in the course. It's totally changed how I look at statistics. I'm not afraid any more. The facilitator is always available for questions. Everyone is here to support one another. Don't let your fear hold you back.”

Meaningful feedback

If there is one thing that learners agree upon vehemently, it is the desire for timely, detailed, meaningful feedback. They want their work to be critiqued, not rubber stamped. They want to know that the time and money they are spending on the course is resulting in making them more marketable. This takes considerable time and effort from faculty. Learners report that they need public as well as private feedback. In addition to discussion about their work in the

public forum with all learners, they want an opportunity to confer one-on-one with the facilitator throughout the course. Some handle this via e-mail. Other facilitators build in private discussion spaces for each learner that are only accessible to an individual learner. In addition to expecting facilitators to respond to their online discussion posts and assignments, learners appreciate regular summaries where the instructor pulls ideas together to illustrate strategic points in the course as the discussions progress.

Monitoring and evaluation

The beauty of online learning is that there is always a complete record of every word that transpired in a course. There is no hearsay when something is questioned. One simply needs to read what happened. Data needs to be regularly collected to diagnose strengths and opportunities. Administration often has access to course reports, learner evaluations, and the actual courses themselves to glean valuable information. Faculty provides valuable input as far as suggested revisions for courses and action planning for continuous improvement. Learners relay feedback through evaluations and reflective discussion questions in the course. All of this data needs to be compiled regularly to evaluate success and determine the next course of action.

Continuous improvement

One never finishes building an online program. In an age where information collected last year is considered “dated”, effective e-learning institutions find themselves in a constant state of continuous improvement. Input needs to be sought from all stakeholders. Regular schedules should be established to update and upgrade courses with the latest information and technology. An infrastructure needs to be designed that can handle sudden spikes in enrollment. Consideration should be given to forming partnerships with others who are well respected in the field and who will lend credibility to the e-learning program.

Success in e-learning hinges on the building of relationships with learners, with faculty, and with all stakeholders in the process and providing meaningful learning experiences. Rather than a single champion for the initiative, e-learning requires a network of champions who are committed to offering the highest quality learning possible. There is no room for mediocrity in online education. The competition is only one click away. Learners demand high quality in a virtual world where opportunities abound. And that has raised the bar for all of us.

About the author

Jamie Barron is the Faculty Chair of the Training & Performance Improvement specialization at Capella University, which is a fully accredited online university offering undergraduate and graduate degrees. She has spent the past 20 years working in training, workforce development, and education. She can be contacted at: Jamie.Barron@capella.edu

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints