

9 Things to Consider before Offering Online Courses

Vocalmeet White Paper

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Introduction

Think your organization is ready to start offering online courses? No longer only available to universities and colleges, the rapid and varied growth of Learning Management Software (LMS) has made eLearning a viable option



for almost any organization. Whether it's for education, corporate training/certification, or simply general knowledge, online courses provide flexibility for both students and instructors. But it's not as simple as picking the first LMS you come across or choosing the cheapest option; there are a number of steps that should be followed before you take your courses online. Here is a list of 9 things to keep in mind when offering online courses and deciding which type of LMS will provide the best fit.

1

Determine What You Want to Get out of Online Courses (Know Your Own Strengths)

Knowing the desired outcomes of eLearning may seem obvious, but be sure that your organization is set up to deliver on these goals. While online education has firmly planted itself as a mainstay in the educational world, many online courses still report lacking support from unprepared administrators (Lehmann and Chamberlain 2009). Overcoming or even avoiding potential obstacles requires a thorough review of your organizational strengths and competencies before offering online courses. For example, the administrator should be, as a minimum, computer



fluent. The ability to use communication tools, such as Skype, email, and messaging services, is a must, whereas some LMS platforms may require anywhere from basic to advanced troubleshooting be per-

formed by the administrator as well.

Furthermore, communication, or lack thereof, is magnified in the online learning space. Facilitators that excel in a classroom setting may not in eLearning. Without the proper activity, transparency, and clarity, online classrooms can be quite challenging for participants. However, with a facilitator that can effectively and actively communicate the course expectancies upfront and keep the students engaged throughout, eLearning often encourages and promotes more honest and diverse contributions than a physical classroom setting (Lehmann and Chamberlain, 2009).

2

Understand the Learning Styles of Your Participants

While the traditional understanding of learning styles as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic may be largely inconclusive (Willingham, Hughes & Dobolyi, 2015), the technological component of online education will certainly be met with varying degrees of experience and skill. Expecting and accommodating a diverse collection of computer users will allow instructors and moderators to anticipate and solve potential issues more quickly and easily.

Knowing the makeup of your participants will also allow for a more personalized and customized course delivery. For example, if you expect to have students from multiple time zones, or location independent learning



modules will allow the students to complete the work during the appropriate hours of their respective time zones. Cultural diversity may also impact how or when a course is delivered as well. Acknowledging and respecting the differences between and freedoms of various ethnicities, religions, and political associations will create a more welcoming and participative online environment.

Know the Strengths and Weaknesses of eLearning

As eLearning becomes more prevalent, the differences between online and physical classrooms may soon be neutralized; until then, however, it is important to know what eLearning is and what challenges it might present to traditional learners. According to an online education study, the most significant difference between settings is that eLearning can often be more intensive than its physical counterpart, specifically more writing intensive (Garcia and Albert, 2011). Consequently, while the geographical and temporal flexibility promotes a more diverse student population, the literary and diverse nature of online classrooms requires a different approach to conflict identification and resolution. A simple awareness of this potential is the first step to avoiding it.

The availability of online classrooms has the potential to revolutionize learning, making it available to populations from around the globe. There is significant evidence that shows that students in online classes and those in physical classrooms achieve similar outcomes (Lehmann & Chamberlin, 2009; Means et al., 2009; Russell, 2001), yet there are differences that need to be accounted for. Participants of eLearning often benefit from greater preparation and time put into their responses, while physical classrooms allow instructors to better gauge the student bodies' understanding of the material being taught. Therefore, online classes that incorporate scenario-driven responses and/or periodic tests can overcome the possibility of student miscomprehension.

Choose the Right LMS Platform to Fit Your Needs

Once you know your strengths, your audience, and what eLearning does well and not so well, you can start to identify what LMS platforms might be a good fit for your organization. There are a wide range of functionalities on the LMS spectrum that can make seemingly similar platforms wildly different. Perhaps the most basic question is whether the LMS is installed on your own servers or is a Software as a Service (SaaS). On the one hand, many self-hosted platforms will require your administrators to perform both the implementation and troubleshooting, as well as some design in certain cases. SaaS platforms, on the other hand, are managed and maintained by the LMS developers, providing both the LMS and its upkeep as a service to the purchaser.



In terms of functionality, some platforms offer pre-designed templates for courses, while others allow for customization in the course design. For those interested in customization, the distinction between self-hosted and

SaaS platforms will again be an important one. Many self-hosted LMS platforms allow for customization, but the responsibility to perform them is on the client. Conversely, many SaaS platforms will provide customization as a service; whereas some offer completely open source possibilities, others have a more limited range. Make sure that the tools and functionalities your organization wants and needs properly align with the LMS platform's ability to deliver them.

5

Select the Right Services to Maximize Outcomes

In conjunction with the ever-widening pool of LMS platforms, the amount of services also increases as software companies attempt to separate themselves from their competition. When selecting services, there are some considerations that should be taken into account. A category of its own below, but worth mentioning here nonetheless is report creation. What information are you looking for, and does your LMS provide that information in their reports? Additionally, it is necessary to ensure that both the technologies and delivery formats you plan to use are available as services. For instance, some LMS platforms provide the option to stream live videos, while others allow only text-based lessons. Likewise, with the growing propensity for handheld devices, upwards of 25% of global web traffic in 2014 was from mobile devices (*Internet Trends 2014*), the ability of LMS platforms to accommodate this technology is quickly becoming a necessity.

Another significant consideration is how your LMS will work with other 3rd party tools. For example, if you plan on incorporating or using different forms of multimedia or external resources, be sure that the LMS of your choice will allow their use. Every day, new elements are created to meet the growing demands of an increasingly web-savvy population such as e-commerce and/or gamification. Since new and more effective eLearning strategies are always being discovered for an ever-changing student body, many organizations will benefit from the ability to add in new elements or change already-implemented features. But more on that below.

Pick the Right Course Delivery Format



As discussed above, with flexibility of studies available in an online format comes a vital decision in course delivery. While the benefits of each delivery method may be contested, it is still important to know

what options you may have. Likely the chief concern will center around the temporal delivery. Will you offer a synchronous, asynchronous or blended course? And, though it may be an obvious question, does the LMS of your choice offer the method you want? This is usually answered by when and where your students are accessing the course content, and when it needs to be completed by.

The other primary decision necessary in the delivery format discussion is in the literal method of delivery. The options are many, but they are usually some variation of the following: video/recorded lectures, modular, standard ebooks, specially prepared documents like PowerPoint presentations, a flashcard-type delivery, or some combination of these. Again, the most suitable selection here will depend on your instructors, your audience, and, most importantly, the ability of your LMS to deliver your desired formats.

Have the Proper Support in Place

Support services are more than simply design and functionality support. Sure, for many installed LMS platforms, the implementation and troubleshooting will often be your own responsibility, but, SaaS LMS support services will typically range from none, like the installed platforms, to in-depth support with phone, email-based, and screenshare support, to full-service support that manages nearly everything. The choice here will rely on a number of things, including, but not limited to, how technologically capable or comfortable your instructing staff is with the LMS, how large and complex the platform is or appears to be, and/or how involved you wish to be in the maintenance and management of the LMS.



Track Your Progress

Perhaps the most important tool available from some LMS platforms is report creation and progress tracking. But, in order to see what you want to see, it is crucial to know what is available. The types of reporting services available vary greatly, some are manual and require your administrators to track all progress, while others are customizable and focus on areas of your choice (e.g. completion rates, time spent, registration numbers). In a results-driven environment, it is important to know both your strengths and weaknesses, so ensure that your reporting service meets your needs.

At best, LMS reporting services can offer information on everything from click rates to page views. Some offer daily, weekly, and monthly reports, allowing the administrators to see precisely the amount of detail they feel is necessary. Many platforms create avenues for teacher and course feedback from the students, which can provide your organization with a closer look at the what works and what does not. Knowing which metrics are necessary are often only discovered when their absence is felt, so it may be worthwhile to research what it would take or if it is even possible to add on features post-implementation.

Account for customization/adaptability

As with any new venture, feedback is absolutely essential to maximizing course potential with an LMS. This feedback will often inspire change in the way things are done. Changing and evolving technology, changing audiences, and new and adaptive course delivery methods can all impact what is delivered and how it is delivered. Knowing the level of adaptability required by your



course and your student body can be difficult, if not impossible, to predict; however, for those who wish to respond and react to feedback and especially those who

plan to stay on the bleeding edge of eLearning, ensuring that your LMS can provide the ability to customize or build onto your existing platform will be absolutely essential.

As the reach of eLearning expands, so too will the pool of LMS platforms, the tools and services available, as well as the amount of considerations needed to be accounted for. Online education is a wonderfully inclusive educational opportunity for any organization, and the wide-range of LMS available is sure to meet any need, but the formats, the features, and the style of your online courses should be specific to your individual organizational needs and wants. While this list is by no means comprehensive, it should, at the very least, serve as a starting guide for those organizations who are considering taking that first step into eLearning.

Appendix

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