

Signature Press

FORECAST FOR EFFECTIVE E-TRAINING

Plan to Adjust Your Teaching Style for Sunny Success



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For more from Ely, visit his blog, [Once Upon a Customer Experience](#).

By John Ely

Welcome

Seven years ago I was sitting in my office in California and got a call that changed my life — literally. I was approached by the program chair at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio, and was asked if I'd be interested in teaching at the business school. My feelings were mixed because I loved teaching and I have a passion for business, especially marketing. However, winters in Columbus — while not as severe as say Minneapolis — are much worse than anything I had experienced in Sacramento! Plus, the exercise of moving was not a pleasant thought for me.

During the conversation with the program chair, I was asked what I thought of teaching online. I had never considered it, and in 2002 that practice was still in its infancy. We spoke about the new delivery methods and how Franklin University was pioneering some new technologies. I was told I would need to become certified through the school, and again I wasn't quite getting it because I asked, "How long would I need to be in Columbus to train?" I was told that all certification training was done online. Even if you lived next to campus, the university required you to train online to get a feel for what it was like to be an online learner.

I signed up that day and have been teaching at Franklin University ever since. Coincidentally, in 2004 my parents (still in Ohio) got very ill, and I moved back to Columbus to help them out. However, I have yet to set foot in a classroom to teach.

My initial concerns went far beyond just a move across the country. I kept worrying

about how I was going to teach someone via a computer. I had taught in the classroom and liked the "learning environment" it provides, so how could I create that feeling of community virtually? How would students interact with me and with each other? I found out quickly that e-teaching, very similar to e-training, is possible. It just takes some adjustments to your teaching style.

Clear Expectations

In the classroom, I can set expectations as I go because I'm more in control of the pace of the class. Online, the student sets the pace so all expectations for the training must be spelled out in advance and be crystal clear.

Clear Language

One of the benefits of online learning is that you can be anywhere in the world and still take the course — as long as you have a computer and connection. I learned very early that slang and colloquialisms are taboo online. I remember sending an early message to my students that said, "Please get started on this week's research ASAP." A student in Turkey replied that he had no idea what ASAP research was and could not find it in his textbook!

Frequent Touches

When training face-to-face, students are fine with seeing you once or twice a week. Students online need much more contact. I send messages daily! Why? Because students online often feel like they're on an island. They're taking the class from their living room, dorm commons, offices, etc. They could be anywhere and likely don't have the support that typically comes from others in

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a physical classroom. To make them feel less “cut-off,” I send many more communications that are brief in content. I also encourage chat rooms and message threads. This way, these same students can start bonding with their classmates and building that sense of “community.”

Skills and Learning Styles

Skills to be taught and personal learning styles are monumentally important when training online. There are in fact some students who can not, or will not, learn online. Every term I have students drop a class and it's often because they don't feel they fit into the world of online learning. It takes self-discipline to learn without a facilitator in the room. No matter how clear my instruction or how comprehensive the instructional design, some learners are better taught face-to-face.

In the same context, some courses are better taught face-to-face such as sales or customer service skills. Where there is a need for role-plays or picking up on the non-verbal nuances of a learner, face-to-face learning is still the best option. My classic example is that I can teach you how to tune a guitar online, but I need to sit with you to teach you how to play!

Academic Honesty

Finally, here is a caveat about cheating. It's true that it is easier to cheat online, but there are mechanisms for spotting plagiarism such as turnitin.com, a database that can spot flagrant copy infringements. However, I have yet to find a way to ensure with total accuracy that the student who signed up is actually the one taking the course, doing the assignments and/or taking the tests. Without a live facilitator, there's an element of faith involved.

I enjoy the online learning world. In fact, many of my students would not have education available to them any other way. There is still some fear amongst trainers moving from the traditional to the virtual classroom, but with some training (I

recommend it being online if possible) those fears are easily overcome. Now if I could just find a way to spend a virtual winter back in California!