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## Be an Active and Participative Instructor

By Jennifer Hofmann

*The final critical success factor to creating effective e-learning environments is to include a participative and active online instructor. The instructor is the glue that holds together the other four factors (student motivation, useable technology, opportunities to collaborate and interact, and the program blend).*

The online instructor plays a vital role in ensuring that learners are successful. Whether delivering a traditional, synchronous, asynchronous or blended approach, participants need to feel as though they have developed a personal rapport with the instructor.

This need is even more important in an online environment than the traditional approach because the instructor acts as an anchor, reassuring participants that support, reinforcement, and assessment is readily available. But take note: active and participative doesn't mean excessively communicating with email messages and synchronous lectures. Instead, it means that instructors must create a learner-centered environment. More important, they need to move the focus away from themselves and the technology to the content and the learners.

So, how does the online instructor weave together the critical success factors in order to create the most effective e-learning environment?

### Learner motivation

One of the dangers of online learning is that participants feel isolated. The online instructor needs to become the central human contact point, reducing the impression that people are learning from a computer. With a more participative instructor, there are more opportunities for the instructor to maintain a high level of motivation among learners.

The instructor can be visibly involved in many ways. He or she can offer recognition, conduct assessments, and facilitate relationships between remote learners. Because assessments are often a key motivator for online learners (people learn what they're being tested on), the online instructor needs to offer continuous feedback and encourage people to complete assignments in a timely manner. An effective online instructor continually reinforces performance by providing rewards and recognition of achievements.

### Usable technology

Just because the technology is user-friendly, success isn't guaranteed. Introducing new learning technologies, different ways of communicating, and 24/7 access to information can be overwhelming for even technologically competent learners.

The online instructor needs to manage the learner's adoption and mastery of such

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### About the Author

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new skills without having it interfere with how they learn the content. To do this, the instructor needs to begin communicating with learners several weeks before classes begin, addressing technology issues before participants need to focus on new skills and knowledge. Instructors should develop a communication plan that time-releases information on how to set up the technology, offering support whenever needed (after hours, differing time zones, and so forth) and providing tech-checks and orientation to the new environment.

In order for the online instructor to do this, he or she must have full mastery of the technology being used. The instructor will know that they have reached mastery level when they're able to provide detailed learner support and technical assistance remotely—with enough detail that the learner can follow along easily. For example, a master/instructor can easily relate the following instructions: "If you would like to put text on the whiteboard, locate the text tool, identified by the letter A on your toolbar. Click on that tool once, then click once on the whiteboard. Finally, type your message. When you've completed typing, click anywhere outside the box so the rest of the class can read your comments."

## **Opportunities to collaborate and interact**

Earlier in this series, we discussed the importance of designing interaction that maximized collaboration between learners. The skilled instructor encourages collaboration even when it's already designed into the course. They should encourage participants to "speak" as often as possible and offer feedback to peers. They also need to minimize lecture and maximize interaction by providing feedback to learners on the results of their collaboration.

Using language appropriately also can encourage collaboration online. For example, reduce the use of techno-jargon in order to emphasize the learning and diminish the focus on technology. For example, instead of saying, "Please wait while I launch application sharing," ask learners to participate in a chat activity while you launch the application. Another tip is to use people's names frequently and to circle-back to comments made earlier in the program in order to facilitate interest amongst the learners.

## **Merge events**

There's a tendency to treat the individual learning portions (synchronous events, discussions, tutorials) as independent of one another. The active and participative instructor constantly reinforces the connections and finds ways to communicate to learners that the asynchronous components are critical to the overall success of the program. They should ensure that self-directed work is completed in a timely manner by incorporating the knowledge gained in the self-directed portion of the course with the live-portion of the course. Instructors also need to continually communicate with learners—not just during the live events. By doing so, learning becomes a continual process rather than a compartmentalized event.

## **Divide and conquer**

How can an instructor successfully accomplish all of these tasks when they're managing multiple sessions or courses simultaneously? The answer is a team teaching approach. Using a producer, or what is sometimes referred to as an assistant instructor, the instructor can focus on content and maximizing interaction. Meanwhile, the producer can focus on such issues as technical support, distribution of materials and email, and validation that deadlines have been met. During the live sessions, the producer can assist by managing chat or preparing application sharing and breakout room exercises. In essence, the course has two equally important people ensuring its success and supporting one another. To

alleviate confusion, make sure that learners are aware of the dual roles, the responsibilities of each person, and to whom they should direct their questions. For example, instructional or assignment questions go to the instructor; questions of a technical nature go to the producer.

Some organizations are resistant to the team teaching approach primarily because it's perceived as an additional overhead expense. The producer role doesn't need to be an expensive resource, though. Organizations have successfully used college interns, administrative assistants, and training coordinators. In addition, an instructor can serve as a producer when an SME is delivering the content. In addition, the role of producer can fill your trainer "pipeline" by developing in-house expertise in the e-learning arena.

## Success

Although organizations are investing money in technology and programs, they're not investing in creating effective learning environments that ensure the success of learners. When designing and delivering online learning, strive to implement the following critical success factors:

- adequate student motivation
- opportunity for students to collaborate and interact
- a blend of delivery methods
- useable technology
- an active and participative instructor.

Mastering these key factors will maximize your organization's time, quality, energy, and return on investment.

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