

Questions to Ask Before Embarking on a Distance Learning Project

The key decisions that have to be made for a distance learning project can be distilled down to two: (1) selecting the right media for the content and audience and (2) defining the learning experience that will be created. The answers, however, are derived only after sorting through a complex set of interwoven issues. Here are some of the major issues that should be clarified in order to determine the right media and the right learning experience.

Purpose

- What is the purpose of taking your content and fashioning it into technology-delivered instruction?
 - Reach a broader audience?
 - Reduce the cost of program delivery?
 - Create a new revenue stream?
 - Respond to market demands?
- Is there a desire to create a more dynamic or interactive product as a result of using distance learning? What new value are you looking to add by doing this?
- Start by being clear about what you want to achieve. If the purpose is not evident, the remaining questions will be harder to answer.

Audience

- What is the size and scope of the market you want to reach with this product?
- Can you clearly identify the target audience for this program by demographic as well as psychographic (*behavioral*) and technographic (*familiarity and reception to technology*) factors?
- Does the audience have high access and familiarity with any particular technology?
- Do you know for sure that your target audience wants the program delivered this way?
- When and where will your audience participate in this learning activity? Are there preferred conditions?
- Does the audience have any limitations (access to technology, time, cost) that will dictate what the final product needs to be?
- Does the audience have specific learning needs that have to be incorporated into the instructional design and technology choice?

Content

- Is this program part of a larger curriculum?
- What currently exists as instructional content?
- In what format are these materials and how current is this information?
- How old is the current content? How often is it updated? What is the shelf-life of the content?
- What is the source of the content?
- Who determines changes to the content?
- What instructional techniques are used in the program?
- Is it highly sensory? What senses will be engaged?



SMEs / Facilitator

- Is the person(s) developing the materials the same as who will deliver it?
- Is the content delivered by a single instructor or multiple? What options do you have for backups?
- Are the SMEs willing to use the technology? Is their style appropriate for the delivery platform?
- Do all the content experts who will be developing this courseware have access to, and can operate, the technology?
- Will you need to provide specialized training for content creation, delivery, and maintenance?
- Have you worked out a compensation plan for the developer/deliverer of distance learning products?

Platform

- Are there any technologies that would be prohibitive based on access, cost, and familiarity?
- Is a goal to be “cutting edge” with technology or only use proven tools?
- What is the production value you aspire to have?
- Do you have the means and access to the necessary technology?
- Does the technology require any special training or expertise to operate?
- Who will make decisions about the treatment of the content once in production?

Interactivity

- In what ways do students currently interaction with the content, instructor and peers of the existing program? What interactions are essential to keep? Where are you looking to add interactivity?
- Is the course currently for independent study or group learning?
- What types of interactions are you looking for from the cohort?
- Will students interact with the Instructor or Subject Matter Expert(s)? If so, how often and on what basis?
- Are students expected to interact with one another to facilitate learning?
- Are you looking to create a “community of learners”? What will that look like? How will success be measured?

Administration

- How often is this program delivered?
- Is there any seasonality to its administration?
- Are there any requirements for demonstration of learning?
- Are there credits or certification requirements associated with this program?
- Is there testing and if so, of what kind? How is the learning validated?
- Do you expect that offering this program will increase or alter how the program is administered? Is the organization prepared for that?
- How often does the program change?
- Who will be responsible for course changes?
- How important is it that students receive up-to-date information?