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By Lori Mortimer

The Devil is in the Details: Converting Classroom Courses to E-Learning

Your latest pitch to management goes something like this: Let's convert our classroom training to e-learning. We can leverage our investment and re-purpose the content for Web delivery. Conversion will be quick and cheap, and we'll generate a larger audience in the process. Management loves the plan. Who wouldn't? It's ROI nirvana.

But don't cash that bonus check yet. Classroom-to-e-learning conversions are more complex than they seem. They can actually take longer than developing the initial classroom materials did--small issues can get magnified and wreak havoc on your schedule and budget. Take a page from the Boy Scout's handbook and be prepared to consider the following conversion details. Early planning can help you anticipate and avoid scheduling delays and cost overruns.

Links
• Answer Geek: Converting CBT to WBT
• Converting to Web-Based Training: Choices and Trade-Offs
• Five Web-Based Training Perils--and How to Avoid Them

Content is king

The content drives the project: Without your classroom content, you wouldn't be thinking about e-learning right now. That can be good or bad, depending on your preparedness for these content issues.

Electronic rights. Who owns the electronic rights to your classroom content assets? If you licensed them or outsourced their development--especially before 1995--you may not have licensed or purchased the electronic rights to them. Verifying your rights costs time and money, but you must do it. If you're lucky, you won't kill your budget by having to pay for content that you thought you already owned. Check with your lawyer.

Asset storage. Where are your ILT assets stored today? (These include source content and instructor and learner classroom materials.) Are they stored on a network, in a storage room, or both? Are they stored on site or are they archived elsewhere? Who can access them? How quickly can you get them? Start looking for and inventorying your content months before your anticipated project start date.

Asset version control. How do you keep track of the most recent version of each asset? How many people work(ed) on the same course and assets within a course? Do you keep all asset versions as they change through the development process, or do you keep just the final published version? How organized is your process to track

those assets? Do you have a software application that tracks electronic files, such as documents and graphics, used to build your courses? Whether you use electronic files or hard copies, can you be sure you have the most recent version of each and every asset? If not, how long will it take to sort the wheat from the chaff?

Asset format. What format(s) are the assets in? Are they current or outdated, electronic or hard copy? What formats are audio, video, and other media assets in? How easily can they be converted to Web formats--like HTML, XML, .gif, .jpg, .mpg, and others? The older the format, the more difficult, time-consuming, and costly the conversion.

Asset management. Who's going to collect and organize the content? How and where will you store your converted e-learning assets? If you have an efficient asset management system now, you won't lose much time managing new assets. But if your system is disorganized--or nonexistent--you've got your work cut out for you. Someone will need to manage the old and new assets before, during, and after the conversion.

If you convert it, will they learn?

No matter how instructionally sound your classroom materials are, they'll need instructional redesign for the e-learning format(s) you've chosen. An experienced e-learning instructional designer should analyze a representative course or two for the following issues.

Amount and type of new content. How much new content will you need for each e-learning course? How media-rich will it be? Self-paced e-learning is the most common conversion format, and it needs the most new content. Are your source materials detailed and complete? Good classroom instructors compensate for inferior materials by adding their own content. For learner-paced e-learning, the designer must create this content. Even with superior source materials, you still must generate new practice and discovery exercises, animations, questions and feedback, and other items to replace in-class activities and instructor-provided content. (And to ensure robust and engaging e-learning.) The more media-rich the content, the higher the cost willbe and the longer it will be to develop.

Course restructuring. Classroom courses have a document-based structure: Instructional designers organize classroom content in fairly large chunks, such as lessons or chapters. E-learning typically has an object-based structure made up of smaller chunks, nuggets based on a single learning objective. Called reusable learning or information objects ([RLOs](#) or [RIOs](#)), these nuggets get stored in a database. They then can be reused and modified independent of their delivery media.

Learners don't usually see the learning object structure; it's an underlying construction that affects primarily the way designers store and deliver content. For your courses, you'll need to devise a guideline for what constitutes a learning object. In other words, define what the smallest individually deliverable chunk of learning should be. A good rule of thumb: Chunk together all content needed to learn a skill or satisfy a learning objective, including all practices and assessment items.

Blended e-learning. Are you converting classroom courses into blended e-learning that combines self-directed, facilitated, live, and asynchronous events? If so, each course will need instructional redesign and re-sequencing. Blended e-learning optimizes learning opportunities by matching instructional goals to e-learning formats. For example, you might group content fit for self-paced learning together in an introductory module, even if that content appears in non-sequential chapters in the classroom course. To save time, set guidelines for which type of content belongs in each e-learning format. Then apply it across your curriculum.

Course development is course development…sort of

A conversion project introduces new development processes and concepts. You'll

also find some familiar faces along the way. Be prepared for the following old and new development issues.

SME time. Even though you're working with source materials, you'll still need subject matter experts during the conversion process. An SME can fill in holes by providing content that isn't in the classroom materials--what instructors would add while delivering the courses. For example, some ILT instructor guides are simply outlines; each instructor must construct the rest. An SME can fill this role when converting the content for e-learning. SMEs can also add transitions between topics and additional examples, as well as review all of the new content for accuracy and effectiveness. The required amount of SME time may exceed your expectations, depending on how much new content you're adding.

Media development time and costs. If you're going to include such rich media in your online courses as audio, video, or animations, you must plan for additional time and higher costs in the development schedule. Even if you can reuse existing files, you'll need time to convert file formats. You may even have to recreate files if the originals aren't available, are of poor quality, or are too dated.

Editing and formatting. You may be surprised by the effort it'll take to ensure that your content has made it through the conversion process successfully, even if it's essentially unchanged. An editor or proofreader should check any reused text or graphics for layout and editorial consistency. Even well-written text needs to be revised for easier reading online. Web writing is usually more concise, uses more bulleted lists, and relies more on headings than print. See "[Write Right: Polishing Your E-Learning Prose](#)."

Localization/internationalization. Once your courses are online, a larger audience may be able to access them. Will some learners need courses in their native language? Different alphabets and character sets take up different amounts of physical space, so text that is translated on HTML pages, within graphics and interactive elements may need more storage space than the English versions. One popular guideline stipulates that you should allot 30 percent more space for translated text. Another standard says to forgo text within your graphics and put callouts only in the HTML text. Then you can translate the HTML, which you would be doing anyway, rather than edit all the graphics. Even if you opt not to translate, your audience might include English-speaking international learners. If so, cultural issues will arise. Hire a localization specialist to help you sort through the specifics.

Instructional design standards. Theoretically, you'll replace classroom exercises and activities with such self-paced interactive elements as discovery exercises or multiple choice questions. You'll need instructional standards for how and when to use those elements, as well as how you want them to work. For example, how many chances should you give a learner to answer a question correctly? For incorrect answers, how detailed and customized should your feedback be? Establish guidelines so you have consistent use and functionality across courses. See "[Bringing Classroom Curriculum Up to E-Speed](#)."

Ancillary materials. You'll have to convert your print editorial and style guides to reflect Web standards, and you'll classroom instructor's guides should be updated for online instructors. The guides should include references to the user interface and explain how to use it for group activities such as whiteboard sessions.

Live e-learning preparation. Don't assume that a skilled classroom instructor will be equally adept at delivering a live e-learning course. Instructors new to virtual classroom technology will need practice time, as will students. It's a good idea to plan a practice run for each new instructor, and schedule orientations to familiarize learners with the interface before their first class session. See "[An Instructor's Guide to Live E-Learning](#)."

Can we do this?

Yes you can! Almost no content survives the conversion process unchanged. That may make for a lot of work and (too many) details, but not for an impossible task.

How can you plan a successful conversion project?

Choose wisely when deciding whether to convert the courses in-house or to outsource the work. Weigh the training time and costs for your staff--or the time and costs of recruiting new people with the needed skills--against the expense of paying someone else. One benefit of keeping the work in-house is your familiarity with the content and your learners. Benefits of outsourcing typically include the partner's core competencies and scalability of experienced resources. You can also take a hybrid approach. In one model, you do the instructional design and SME work in-house and then outsource the course assembly and media development work.

Select a development partner carefully. If you outsource development, some criteria for choosing a partner include

- robust development environment with state of the art technologies
- strong process and project management discipline
- instructional design expertise
- breadth of development resources (graphic artists, writers, programmers, and so forth)
- financial stability
- price/experience/size trade-offs.

Staff up for the work you'll do in-house. Make sure you have the internal resources to manage content asset issues as well as content conversions. And search out experienced e-learning and/or Web professionals. Now is not the time to let your print graphic artist try her hand at designing Web graphics. Select people with significant Web experience who can speak authoritatively.

Prepare a solid project plan. You'll need a project plan covering all of the conversion steps for each e-learning format. Best practices include

- Plan your large-scale conversions on a small-scale prototype for each e-learning format you've chosen. You won't catch all the conversion issues if you don't convert at least a small portion of a course to each format before setting a schedule.
- Track all time and development issues carefully, including system downtime, troubleshooting time, and learning curve for your prototype conversion team.
- Offer management at least two conversion plans with differing levels of sophistication, and therefore time and cost. Include pros and cons for each plan, and give an example showing the level of detail.
- Let the decision-making team do what they do best: make an informed decision on which plan(s) to implement.

Although converting classroom courses to e-learning may seem like a complicated process, by anticipating these common conversion details, you can prepare a realistic project plan and launch your project with confidence!

Lori Mortimer *is a freelance writer and instructional designer in Massachusetts. She can be reached at* *lori@lorimortimer.com.*

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