

# Focus on eLearning and Training

Read multiple articles focusing on different aspects of eLearning and training



# Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators  
Autumn 2020



Read about MadCap Flare 2020

Discover the latest developer documentation trends

Learn the benefits of HelpXplain from EC Software

Understand the importance of terminology management

# Transforming classroom materials

**Helen Hill** shares tips for transforming face-to-face materials into online or blended learning.

*A glossary of terms is available on page 32.*

*Basically eLearning can be defined as any learning which is delivered via electronic means, technology and online platforms*

Last issue I gave advice on moving your learning online — something that 2020 has forced upon many a business amidst the chaos that the global pandemic has brought. I have set quite a bit of time aside over the last 3 months to chat through ideas, problems and strategies with small business owners who are now faced with a new reality of having to turn their training digital. And to do it quickly.

This prompted me to reach out to business owners on social media to ask them what their fears and issues are in moving their training online. In the feedback there were some common themes that arose, and so I wanted to provide some guidance here for those of you who may be experiencing the same sense of foreboding.

## You are not alone

By far, the most common worries or issues were:

- I am worried about the content being diluted and losing my personality
- I have no idea how to build interaction into the content and do group activities online
- How do I transfer hours, or even days, worth of content into a course (and make sure that it is not boring)?
- How do I keep learning varied and engaging?
- I have no idea where to begin (especially with the technology)!

These are all understandable worries, and these businesses were certainly not alone in having them. Even a seasoned eLearning professional can still have these worries sometimes in their projects.

Something that is clear in all of these comments is that eLearning is still plagued with a bad reputation of being seen as boring lifeless content. Unfortunately this is not going to be helped by the panic of businesses having to quickly adapt to the current situation in a short timeframe, on a tiny budget, using restrictive technologies and systems, and without any specialised expertise.

But there are ways to start to combat these issues, and places to find help and advice, so that your content can be the best it can be.

## Before we begin

It is important to look at what we are defining as eLearning (also known as online training, virtual learning and many others).

Basically eLearning can be defined as any learning which is delivered via electronic means, technology and online platforms. It is also commonplace to develop blended learning —

where elements of virtual learning are used in conjunction with face-to-face or some form of real-time, physical interaction.

In the current rush to move online, we are increasingly seeing trainers deliver resources through a combination of modules and online quizzes/tests, plus live lectures, discussions or seminars on teleconferencing software. This would be a blended approach.

Before you start, some things you may need to consider are:

- Making the learning responsive so it works across numerous devices (if this is important for your users it will be a factor to check into with the software you decide to use).
- Whether there is an intranet or learning management system such as Moodle that the learning needs to be integrated with/hosted on?
- What licences already exist in your organisation or that you have access to?
- Any technical restrictions (if you haven't already, now is the time to make friends with the IT guys). The public sector in particular can be rife with technical restrictions and will require some consideration in the media you use.

## Top tips

So to answer those common issues above, and a few more besides, here are my 12 top tips.

### 1. Where to begin

Do not discount any face-to-face materials you have (or prior digital learning) — they are a great starting point. Use them as the basis to do a needs analysis (more on this below), check the relevance of the information and provide yourself with an overall structure to work from.

Other possibilities to help you get started are to:

- ask your learners what they need
- consult exam board/accreditation guidance if applicable
- check out the competition and what they have included (and how you can set yourself apart)
- consult textbooks or the websites and blogs of industry leaders
- plot out a plan or overview of what you know about the topic and highlight those points that must be included
- confirm the outcome required — and have this in front of you at all times in the process to check that you are still on track

If you do not have a clue where to start with the technology — ask someone who does. Join some Facebook business groups or reach out on LinkedIn and see what others use. Take a

look at your competition or networks and see what platforms they have used. Join eLearning communities to pick up on the software being used in industry and get up-to-date on the hot topics. There are so many options with the technology it really will come down to research according to your needs and preferences. If you would like a list of places to start — send me a message and I can send one over to you.

### 2. Do a needs analysis<sup>1</sup>

Especially if you are starting with pre-existing content that was created some time ago, check that the content still aligns with the current desired outcomes:

- Is it still relevant to both the organisation and the learner?
- Have there been any legislation changes to anything referenced in the course?
- Are the learner's needs different in an online environment to face-to-face?
- What do you need the learners to be able to do and how will they demonstrate this (this may have to change from its previous outcome due to not being physically 'present' to demonstrate it, and whatever you are limited to technically)?

A key point here is not to be swayed by assumptions or the stakeholders' needs and preferences. Keep the focus on the learners — ask them what their needs are if you can!

### 3. Replicating 'you'

Online learning should never just be a case of copying and pasting a PowerPoint presentation into a virtual environment, and when this is attempted a lot is lost in translation.

One of the biggest challenges you need to consider is how to ensure that all the extras you would normally give with a physical presence can now be accounted for or replicated in another way. By this I mean the extra context that is provided around PowerPoint slides such as activity instructions, guiding discussions, underpinning knowledge, your personal skills and experience, anecdotes, and any other prompts that you naturally give in a face-to-face situation.

Make sure you still provide these instructions and context, as they are what make the learning flow. Your learners should not have to work out what to do next — make it clear!

If you really want to keep the real you in purely digital aspects you could also consider using an avatar or character representation of yourself to provide some personality and an element of human connection.

Using video is a great way to still get your personality, warmth, humour, engagement and many other aspects across, so don't be afraid to use it. Your videos don't have to be professionally filmed and will be a great way to put a face to the often impersonal nature of learning online. If you don't want to be on camera, try recording some audio or creating a mini podcast to include. Even with broad Lancashire tones like mine, it can be much appreciated by learners.

### 4. Write as you speak

Linked to the point above — training does not have to be formal and stuffy, in fact it is better for the learner if it isn't. Do not be afraid to write as you speak and give glimpses of your personality. It will help you to create an informal, supportive environment where learners are not afraid to ask questions or to test out their new knowledge and skills. You don't have to become a robot just because the bulk of the learning may now be across cyberspace.

A lot of this comes down to writing in plain language — something I am a huge advocate of! Your learners are likely to be learning around many other responsibilities and roles in life and so will want information that is engaging and easy to digest. And jargon filled content is not that.

The Readability Guidelines project by Content Design London is a fabulous resource for helping you to create really useable products in plain language, and which appeal to a wide audience.

### 5. Using workbooks and handouts

This is a tough one that will take some consideration and understanding of your learners to know how to get around this, but it is achievable.

Not everyone will have a printer, and if your workbook is mammoth, the learners will certainly not want to be printing off a novel sized document in all likelihood. Plus it can interrupt the flow of learning if they have to start fixing connection issues, putting in new ink cartridges, etc so it is definitely worth looking at how you can change things around.

Can you provide them with an editable file — either PDF and/or Word — that they can type straight into and save? Or provide them with a downloadable handout that gives them the prompts but instructs the learners to make notes/ answer prompts in a notebook (though again, it is worth telling them up front they will need paper and pen so they are not scrabbling around whilst 'in the zone').

If you are going to run your course over numerous sessions or modules — provide the learners with the sections they need for that specific part rather than the full thing, to avoid overwhelm and looking too far ahead, as this can affect focus.

*Using video is a great way to get your personality, warmth, humour and engagement across to your audience.*

*Do not be afraid to write as you speak and give glimpses of your personality.*

*Can you provide them with an editable file that learners can type straight into and save?*

*Can you provide learners with a downloadable handout that instructs them to make notes/ answer prompts in a notebook?*

<sup>1</sup> Needs Analysis is a formal, systematic process of identifying and evaluating training that should be done, or specific needs of an individual or group of employees, customers, suppliers, etc. Needs are often referred to as 'gaps', or the difference between what is currently done and what should be performed.

*It takes extra reserves of energy to concentrate on conference software, thanks to its freezing imagery, broken crackling sounds and the lack of ability to read the room and facial expressions.*

Most course building software will allow you to provide downloadable resources, but make sure you check whether the link is available throughout, or just in specific places as you may need to instruct them to download it at the start, and that they will not be able to access it later.

#### 6. Running paired/group activities

Just because there are virtual miles between you and your learners, it doesn't mean that all opportunity for collaboration is lost.

There are a few options here depending on your level of confidence with technology, how much you know your learners (and they know each other) and the time you have available. You could:

- Use Zoom (paid version only) and make use of the break out rooms where you can divide your learners into separate spaces to discuss a topic, and you can nip in and out, then pull them all back to summarise
- Get your learners to collaborate on a Wiki or discussion/forum page with information they have sourced after a previous session
- Prompt a discussion in conferencing software
- Create a WhatsApp channel for Q&A or group interactions
- Get learners to comment in the chat functions, some also have dedicated Q&A functions to stop questions getting lost amid comments
- Set a task for learners to complete in pairs, via whatever medium they choose, in between sessions
- Use features such as polls to gauge feeling/opinions in the group. You can also withhold answers until all have answers in some platforms
- Make use of social media and create a Slack channel or Facebook group where they can provide peer-to-peer support and pick each other's brains, instead of just yours!

And this is just a few suggestions — there are many pieces of software out there now to help collaboration and learning.

#### 7. Converting hours/days of content

So what 'should' we do when we have hours and hours of content to move online? For everyone's sanity, I really do not recommend creating seven hours of click though content, or conference calls.

The key here is variety. Plus, if you run the course as hours and hours of conference calls, you will have to do it over and over again each time the course needs to run, whereas if you create resources to do a lot of the knowledge delivery for you, and bring learners together for smaller scheduled calls, it will save you a lot of time and energy. So you can focus your time where it may have more power — in providing small group or individual support and providing feedback.

Break the content down by:

- Using a range of media — modules, infographics, animations, videos, podcasts, webinars, lectures, seminars, etc.
- A mixture of activity types — some individual activities, some group/paired where possible. Some tutor led, some student led.
- Duration — intersperse hour long modules, with shorter 5-10 min topics and recaps.

You will need to make sure your content is very focused and cut out anything extraneous that is just supporting information or 'nice to know'.

Encourage learners to deepen the learning independently if they wish to go further, and provide them some links where they can start. But do not fall into the trap of telling EVERYONE EVERYTHING. They will soon switch off and just start half listening, or scanning for the key bits of info. Be concise.

By using a range of media, you also provide the learners with resources to take away, and have a bank of resources to use time and again on different platforms or in the publicity of your course.

#### 8. Avoid conferencing fatigue

As mentioned above, just because we have the software to deliver a seven hour training session online, doesn't mean we should. What has become known as 'Zoom fatigue' is a very real thing as anyone who has batted from video call to video call for six hours will tell you.

It takes extra reserves of energy to concentrate on conference software, thanks to its freezing imagery, broken crackling sounds and the lack of ability to read the room and facial expressions. And it is not good for anyone's eyes looking at a screen for so long.

You may have to change the structure of how you normally run things, but believe me it will be worth it, to have your learners get a chance to absorb content between sessions, and come back refreshed rather than be robotically led through a day's worth of content and absorb such a tiny percentage of it.

Break the content down into different types of media to work through, into smaller sections and varying lengths of topic, and ensure lots of breaks in between.

#### 9. Add interaction

When you are a face-to-face trainer it can be difficult to understand how you can replicate interaction which comes so easily in a classroom, when there is a virtual shaped wedge between you and your learners. Continual knowledge checks, using a range of media and activities, and prompts which refocus attention will help to add interaction, as will any 'human' elements of blended learning. But you should also take a more considered approach to adding interaction.

Think of it this way — how you are getting the users to interact with the content or each other, rather than mindlessly clicking through? How can you make sure they are active in their learning, rather than passive?

eLearning interaction comes from more than learners just clicking about a page — that is engagement at its lowest form and is very passive. You want the learners to be pro-active in their learning, and use higher order (preferably critical) thinking skills. Rather than asking endless multiple choice questions where they can guess and often still progress, could you, for example:

- Create a game like scenario such as a world (or even just a room) to explore for information to then answer questions about?
- Make them pull various bits of information together and order them logically to answer a scenario?
- Get them to interact with characters within the course or have to make decisions in a multi-pathway question scenario, where they can practice the effect a bad decision may have (think of those ‘choose your adventure’ books we had as kids).
- Provide reflective activities in which they need to link the learning to their job role and responsibilities and then provide their responses in a discussion post?

#### 10. Be flexible and take it steady

One of the main benefits of online learning is that it provides flexibility. Learners can fit their development around their lifestyle, responsibilities, home life and other commitments. By tying them to five days of full day conference calls, it removes this benefit. So make the most of the flexibility for yourself too. By providing more self-led activities, it takes the emphasis off you as the trainer and gives you time and energy back.

Additionally, the ability to drip feed content into many systems means that you do not have to have all the content ready to go at the start of the course. Many hosting providers will let you set up a schedule of the content being released. Make the most of this feature and give yourself time to breathe, and adapt materials to learners as you get to know more about them and respond to their feedback in the initial stages.

#### 11. Build a community

Many people have more confidence to give input online, and as they can give more time and thought to doing so, and can hide behind the keyboard somewhat. So make the most of this.

By encouraging learners to share stories, comment on each other’s work/posts, and providing a safe place to experiment or push

themselves, you can actually increase the feeling of belonging without inhabiting the same physical space.

Encourage community interaction — get the learners to introduce themselves in a thread or a quick icebreaker, provide a range of ways for them to give feedback — some speaking up, some written, some named, some anonymous — they will all have different levels of confidence and preferences for providing input. Encourage them to ask each other questions and compare experiences. Build the camaraderie and a safe place to air their thoughts and opinions.

#### 12. Use knowledge checks throughout

Just as you would continually gauge prior understanding in a classroom, it is important to do so online. There are various theories about how often you should add checks in, but I tend to go by the rule of checking each main learning item.

When an objective has been covered, check their understanding. Don’t just add quizzes in for the sake of it. And mix them up (don’t just rely on multiple choice questions — they are easy to do but do not encourage higher level thinking and can easily be guessed).

Also make clear whether scores are formative or also contributing to summative end scores. Nobody wants to be duped and realise that their random guess-click counted towards a final graded assessment when they weren’t expecting it.

#### Finally...

If you are really not sure where to begin — reach out to people within the eLearning industry and ask their advice. Many Instructional Designers or Learning Consultants will be happy to share their knowledge, and point you in the right direction, or explain some of the terminology to you. Try reaching out in business network groups to see if you can pick the brain of someone who has been there, done that.

(And if you want to pick my brain, reach out and send me a message. Details below.) 



**Helen Hill** is Self-employed Learning, Content & Graphic Designer at Unlikely Genius Ltd. She has been working in content and learning design for five years, combining the skills gained during nine years working as a Further Education lecturer, a graphic designer and developing literacy and eLearning in schools.

E: [helen@unlikelygenius.com](mailto:helen@unlikelygenius.com)

W: [www.unlikelygenius.com](http://www.unlikelygenius.com)

T: @unlikelygenius

Medium: <https://medium.com/@helen.hill1>

#### References

Hill H (2020) ‘Move your learning online’ *Communicator*, Summer 2020: 20-23.

Readability Guidelines. Content Design London. <https://readabilityguidelines.co.uk> (accessed 13 July 2020).

# Learning and training glossary

A breakdown of the meaning of terms used in this issue plus relevant terms associated with learning and training.

Glossary term	Definition
ADDIE	ADDIE is an acronym for the five stages of a development process: Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation. The ADDIE model relies on each stage being done in the given order but with a focus on reflection and iteration. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.learnupon.com/blog/addie-5-steps">www.learnupon.com/blog/addie-5-steps</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Asynchronous learning	Asynchronous learning can be carried out even while the student is offline. <i>Source: <a href="https://mindflash.com/elearning-glossary/asynchronous-synchronous">https://mindflash.com/elearning-glossary/asynchronous-synchronous</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Blended learning	Blended learning (also known as hybrid learning) is a method of teaching that integrates technology and digital media with traditional instructor-led classroom activities, giving students more flexibility to customise their learning experiences. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.panopto.com/blog/what-is-blended-learning">www.panopto.com/blog/what-is-blended-learning</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Classroom learning	Classroom learning encompasses the merits of the setting of one traditional classroom. Classroom learning needs a certain number of participants or students to be active listeners & participate in that learning environment. The students and teachers need to be physically present in the classroom. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.eztalks.com/elearning/difference-between-elearning-and-classroom-learning.html">www.eztalks.com/elearning/difference-between-elearning-and-classroom-learning.html</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Content testing	Content testing (also known as usability Testing) is defined as a practise of testing whether the written content is appropriate and suitable for the audience in question, and whether or not they are able to understand and comprehend it. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.professionalqa.com/content-testing">www.professionalqa.com/content-testing</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
eLearning	eLearning (also known as online learning or electronic learning) is the acquisition of knowledge which takes place through electronic technologies and media. In simple language, eLearning is defined as 'learning that is enabled electronically'. Typically, eLearning is conducted on the internet, where students can access their learning materials online at any place and time. eLearning most often takes place in the form of online courses, online degrees, or online programs. <i>Source: <a href="https://e-student.org/what-is-e-learning">https://e-student.org/what-is-e-learning</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Flipped Classroom	In flipped classrooms (also known as inverted classrooms), students review lecture materials before class as homework. In-class time is dedicated to discussions, interactive exercises, and independent work that would have previously been completed at home — all under the guidance of the teacher, who is present and available to respond to any questions that may arise. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.panopto.com/blog/what-is-a-flipped-classroom">www.panopto.com/blog/what-is-a-flipped-classroom</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Learning objectives	Learning objectives (also known as learning outcomes) should be brief, clear, specific statements of what learners will be able to do at the end of a lesson as a result of the activities, teaching and learning that has taken place. <i>Source: <a href="http://batchwood.herts.sch.uk/files/Learning-Objectives.pdf">http://batchwood.herts.sch.uk/files/Learning-Objectives.pdf</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
LMS	A learning management system (LMS) is a software-based platform that facilitates the management, delivery, and measurement of an organisation's corporate eLearning programs. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.docebo.com/blog/what-is-learning-management-system">www.docebo.com/blog/what-is-learning-management-system</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Needs Analysis	Needs analysis (also known as gap analysis, or needs assessment) is a formal, systematic process of identifying and evaluating training that should be done, or specific needs of an individual or group of employees, customers, suppliers, etc. <i>Source: <a href="https://trainingindustry.com/glossary/needs-analysis">https://trainingindustry.com/glossary/needs-analysis</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Online learning	Online learning always involves an internet connection and can include virtual face-to-face interactions (webinar, online lecture, virtual meeting). <i>Source: <a href="http://www.conexed.com/are-online-learning-virtual-learning-e-learning-distance-learning-and-blended-learning-the-same">www.conexed.com/are-online-learning-virtual-learning-e-learning-distance-learning-and-blended-learning-the-same</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Plain language	Plain English (also known as plain language) is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily. <i>Source: <a href="https://plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/short-definition">https://plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/short-definition</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
SCORM	Shareable Content Object Reference Model is a collection of standards and specifications for web-based electronic educational technology. It defines communications between client-side content and a host system, which is commonly supported by a learning management system (LMS). <i>Source: <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharable_Content_Object_Reference_Model">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharable_Content_Object_Reference_Model</a> (accessed 14 July 2020).</i>
SME	A subject matter expert (SME) is an individual with a deep understanding of a particular job, process, department, function, technology, machine, material or type of equipment. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.thebalancecareers.com/subject-matter-expert-2275099">www.thebalancecareers.com/subject-matter-expert-2275099</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Synchronous learning	Synchronous eLearning involves online studies through chat and video conferencing. <i>Source: <a href="https://mindflash.com/elearning-glossary/asynchronous-synchronous">https://mindflash.com/elearning-glossary/asynchronous-synchronous</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>
Virtual learning	Virtual learning is instruction delivered through the internet, software, or both. <i>Source: <a href="http://www.conexed.com/are-online-learning-virtual-learning-e-learning-distance-learning-and-blended-learning-the-same">www.conexed.com/are-online-learning-virtual-learning-e-learning-distance-learning-and-blended-learning-the-same</a> (accessed 23 July 2020).</i>