

FUNDAMENTALS

Moving Online

How to make your
Web dream a reality.

By Allison Rossett

I've always been enthusiastic about Web-based learning—except when it came to me and my classes. For years, I resisted taking my classes online.

Last spring, however, it came time for me to turn my chatter about the glory of distance learning and “cybergogy” into a Web-based learning experience for 23 participants around the world. The course was a graduate seminar that I teach at San Diego State University. It introduces practicing and aspiring workplace learning professionals to human performance improvement. The class encourages a com-

prehensive approach to problems and opportunities. So, my intent was for participants to become smarter about performance analysis, nontraining interventions, the role of technology, and the implementation of systems.

Insomnia

Such an undertaking caused some sleepless nights. In particular, I worried about my ability to master the technology and develop vivid Web-based assets. I was also stressed over the creation of an online community propelled by more than re-

quirements. Could I create online events worth attending? Would my archived sessions get attention?

I was equally concerned about my participants and their access to technology. Without my physical presence, would they do their homework? I was afraid that the course would not sufficiently compel them and that they might do what was required to pass the course, but not be inspired to actually alter their practices.

How to sleep again

I soon came to realize that the only way to deal with my anxiety was to move forward. Hopefully, what I did will motivate and help you to move your classes to the Web too.

Create a guidance system. While flopping into a seat every Thursday night for two hours doesn't take much commitment, online participants must allow the content, instructor, peers, and requirements to permeate their lives. To help students manage their time, provide a Web-based syllabus that details the class. I bolstered mine with weekly emails that reviewed what we covered and reminded participants about upcoming assignments, with links on how to do them.

Don't forget support. Always be there for your students, even when you can't be. My teaching assistant developed tutorials and job aids that provided crucial human contact when I wasn't available. She also created a forum on our discussion board that encouraged participants to ask and answer questions themselves.

Make distance matter less. Develop assets that fill the void. I created synchronous events where we got together at appointed times for presentations, practices, and feedback. We also cultivated an online library of content and structured resources and questions to encourage individual contributions to threaded conversations.

Challenge participants. Create relevant, thought-provoking requirements. I asked my participants to reflect and write about

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certification in performance technology; tour and write about nontraining interventions; plan an analysis for a global company concerned about elevating ethics; entertain the possibilities inherent in a performance-technology makeover; and collaborate to solve typical workplace learning challenges.

Take advantage of technology. Macromedia Breeze allowed me to conduct synchronous classes and meetings, and archive them. It also enabled me to add audio to PowerPoint slides, easily creating a library of materials on key topics. In addition, I used Blackboard to encourage surprisingly lively discussion board conversations that centered on real-world challenges. Blackboard also supported grading, grouping, and communications.

Get personal. How do you put voice and passion into technology-based materials? Start online classes and meetings with a dose of small talk. For example, I talked about where I'd been that week or what I'd been reading. I also did numerous "think-alouds" in the asynchronous assets, musing about how to handle a situation or tackle a reluctant client.

Be sure to solicit participants' tales and reactions, too. I shared and chronicled my own doubts and excitement about this Web-based adventure and included disclosures of feelings in my weekly messages. For example, as San Diego struggled to recover from horrific wild fires, I took time to write about it. When a student suffered a loss of a parent, I emailed. Your goal should be to ensure that participants know a person is teaching the class, not a computer.

Up the voltage. Exude energy. Always start Web sessions on time. Send weekly email messages and post assets on schedule. I returned assignments with feedback in less than a week, often within a few days. I also responded immediately to student concerns and contacts. (And I do mean *immediately*.) When I was out of town, my TA did the same. I labored to make my urgency contagious. You should too.

Question the effort. The satisfaction of my online participants matched or exceeded reactions from offline peers. Ninety-four percent of the 16 responding participants reported that the class was "equally" or "more engaging" than their other courses. When asked what mattered most to them, they pointed at asynchronous assets and synchronous classes and conversations. Not far behind in approval were readings and weekly messages. Most interesting to me was the power of the synchronous events. I'd sniff at them prior, but will not again.

While we initially lost two participants and two others switched to audit status, we maintained an unwavering group. The net effect was good for all of us. And I definitely think it was a classic case of the teacher learning more than her students.

Allison Rossett is an author and professor of educational technology at San Diego State University. She is also a member of ASTD's International Board of Directors; arossett@mail.sdsu.edu.

Send submissions to **Fundamentals**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; fundamentals@astd.org.