Various approaches to e-learning continue to evolve

Blended learning is the most common, while game elements get some play

By MIKE COSTANZA

Online instructional programs are increasingly taking the place of traditional educational methods as businesses seek to cut their training costs. As these programs have proliferated, different online learning approaches have evolved to take advantage of the latest technology.

"Everything that you would have done in the olden days we have found a way … to do electronically or online," says Karen Hyder, the founder, CEO and owner of Kaleidoscope Training and Consulting. "We don't drive to the training center and sit in a physical classroom."

Though many corporate educational programs continue to depend on traditional methods, high-tech approaches are finding purchase. According to a survey by *Training* magazine, 28.5 percent of corporate instructional hours were delivered via online or computer-based technologies in 2014, up from 18.5 percent in 2009.

The switch to online approaches is taking hold locally as well. LPA Software Solutions LLC, which specializes in teaching the use of IBM software, originally did so solely by traditional means. LPA instructors spent as much as five days at customers' sites—no matter where they were—training their employees.

"From a customer perspective, there's a cost to that," says Rich Chester, LPA's Director of Business Intelligence Practice. "From an instructor wear-and-tear side … there's a cost."

About three years ago, LPA began looking into replacing some of its traditional courses with those taught online. Nowadays, about 10 percent of the firm's courses are given at least in part over the Internet. Many of those courses use a blended learning approach, in which students interact with their instructors and then participate in online coursework.

"There's a combination of lecture and demonstration, and then there's a self-based

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workshop," Chester says.

Part of the appeal of online learning is the many different formats that can be used and how they can be customized. Gamification, for instance, incorporates the elements of a game into the coursework to engage students in learning.

"They use the compelling elements of gaming to teach … lessons that go deeper and deeper and have levels of complexity and strategy," Hyder explains. "If I know that I am earning points for how well I perform on this quiz or this series of test questions, I might work a little harder."

Ardent Learning Inc., a global training firm that's headquartered in Rochester, has used gamified courses to help motivate customers' managers to improve their skills.

"It is just adding extrinsic motivations to a learning scenario," says Barbara Bucklin, the global firm's director of instructional design.

In Ardent's course, students view videos showing scenarios they could encounter on the job. They then break into teams and answer questions that are posed to them online via iPads.

"The course was teaching them problem-solving and decision-making," Bucklin says. "They … got points for answering questions correctly."

CypherWorx Inc. also includes gamified courses in its catalog. The Fairport firm, which uses only online courses for instruction, helps train child care workers, zoo employees and others in the skills they need to function on the job.

"If there are keywords that you need to know as part of your job, you might do a crossword puzzle or a word search," says CEO and founder Paul Cypher. "You might do a learning game that requires you, in order to move forward, to answer certain types of questions."

More and more firms are placing their

employees in classrooms for the instruction they need, according to Hyder—virtual classrooms. The "classroom"—basically an invitation-only website—gives an instructor a place in which to effectively present his or her material online.

"We can do live application sharing—which means I can show you a software application that's running on my screen, and you can see me while I click and use menus," says Hyder, who specializes in setting up virtual classrooms. "We can share uploaded PowerPoint files or other files."

Students and instructors might discuss course subjects via standard telephone or VoIP (Internet-based telephone) or by texting or chatting online. Hyder uses available software programs, such as Adobe Connect, to set up the classrooms for her customers.

In addition to cutting a firm's training costs, virtual classrooms can also benefit the students who log in in a personal way. Since neither the instructor of a course nor those who have enrolled in it know each other's identities, the students might feel more comfortable speaking their minds.

"It can be a really great opportunity for different personality types to participate actively in something that they might not otherwise participate in," Hyder says.

Learners who want to avoid all classrooms—even virtual ones—can make use of augmented learning. Programs that reflect that instructional approach allow users to access information and training materials via tablets or other mobile devices where and when they need them. An assembly line worker could obtain needed information and guidance regarding the operation of the line's machines on a smartphone while standing in front of them.

"I'm getting computer-based input saying, 'This is machine XYZ, and it does this, and it works this way. Pull this handle, press this button,' " Hyder explains.

Whatever instructional approaches online programs use, the market for them appears to be growing—especially for some firms. CypherWorx did over $2 million in sales in 2015, according to Cypher, and expects to do well over $3 million this year.

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