

# Online Learning Issues and Strategies for Increasing Retention

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Online distance education is increasingly used for professional development with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) educators worldwide. It can create professional development opportunities that would not otherwise exist locally, in other countries, and among populations that face geographical, sociopolitical, temporal, or financial barriers. Identifying and implementing methods and practices for supporting successful and effective online distance learning or “e-learning” environments can pose significant challenges for institutions and instructor-developers alike.

This article examines some of those challenges and offers some options for addressing them proactively rather than reactively. Planning ahead helps to ensure positive outcomes for all constituents: the learners, the instructor-developers, sponsors, and the institution itself. The content of this article draws on research conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation (Opp-Beckman, 2007)<sup>1</sup> and on the experiences and learning choices that have been part of my work in the Linguistics Department/American English Institute at the University of Oregon (UO AEI); the U.S. Department of State (DOS); U.S. Agency for International Development; and Ministries of Education and agencies worldwide over the last 15 years.

## Rationale for E-Learning

Before embarking on the development of any new learning experience – whether situated in a face-to-face, e-learning, or a hybridized or

“blended” context – it is generally considered to be part of a best practices framework (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2009) to start by conducting an in-depth needs analysis. The needs assessment should take account of the perspective of the learners, the instructor-developers, the sponsor, and the program or institution. The needs assessment then should guide the goals, learning objectives, and overall development, implementation, and assessment of the learning endeavor. For the sake of a common referent, I will use the term “e-learning course” from this point forward, at the same time noting that e-learning can exist in many formats. The formats include but are not limited to self-guided tutorials, short-term webinars, and offline materials distributed via media such CD, DVD, or an e-reader product such as Kindle<sup>2</sup>.

Too often there is an assumption, generally by administrators, that a face-to-face course can be mirrored or replicated with little adaptation in an e-learning environment, that it can be automatically delivered to even more students than would be the case using the same teachers and resources as a face-to-face course, or that all face-to-face teachers can intuitively design and deliver an effective e-course with little additional support or training in tools and methods. In my experience, the opposite is in fact true. The approach to developing e-learning courses and the strategies for encouraging participants to complete them should be aligned with the nature of the means by which they are delivered.

# Strategies for Learner Retention and Persistence

Even programs and courses with excellent content and faculty are negatively affected by high attrition rates and are at risk for overall program failure. This phenomenon is widely reported in online distance education programs around the world and is the subject of much discussion in research and best-practices literature (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Buchanan, 2004; Rossett, 2002; Terrell, 2005). Retention and attrition patterns are common measures for helping gauge student, course, and program efficacy in face-to-face and traditional distance education, and more recently in e-learning environments (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Moody, 2004; Rovai, 2003; Terrell, 2005).

Research on persistence in adult learners explores course completion and the potential for re-enrollment. Studies have shown that learners who have a strong motivation and clear goals with expected outcomes when taking a course and who are able to self-direct their learning are more persistent in their learning (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Guglielmino, 2009). This is true for face-to-face and e-learning courses alike. Results from other research (Levy, 2007) have shown that student satisfaction with e-learning was a key indicator in their decision as to whether or not to continue in e-learning courses.

All of this may seem obvious and logical at face value, but has potentially far-reaching implications for persistence in e-learning environments overall. If a learner feels unsuccessful and, for this reason, does not complete (persist in) his or her early e-learning course attempt(s), the implication is that s/he will be less likely to engage in future e-learning courses. As institutions of higher education move further into the global educational arena, it will become increasingly important to understand how best to struc-

ture, implement, and evaluate online learning opportunities in order to engage and retain connections with ESOL e-learners and practitioners.

Initially, our department was not alone in experiencing significantly higher attrition rates in our first e-learning courses in comparison to our face-to-face courses and programs. We have since then developed a number of strategies to improve retention rates or “learner retention” as evidenced by lower drop-out rates. In addition, we continuously strive to improve our e-learning design framework and administration practices in order to increase persistence in learning, as evidenced by the quality of projects our e-learners have produced, their willingness to return to our e-learning courses for additional training, and the willingness of outside agencies to sponsor e-learning programs through our department.

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One such strategy has been the modification of instructional design principles, tasks, and tools to fit the needs of course participants in order to in-

crease their level of access to e-learning content and professional networking. Formal and informal continuous assessment at all levels – of the learner’s needs and performance, of the instructor’s needs and performance, and of the course and program in which it is situated – plays a crucial role in monitoring and making adjustments to e-learning design, development, and implementation.

Another cluster of proactive strategies has been to allocate more resources to retention before the course begins. We have found the pay-off to be significant, again in terms of both learner retention and persistence in learning over time. Here are a number of the strategies we have found to be effective:

- Allocate budget for additional administrative personnel and anticipate an increased length of time in order to facilitate and complete administrative tasks related to

the registration process, tracking of student records in university and departmental databases, needs analysis surveys, pre-course orientation, etc.

- Allocate budget to cover instructor-developer time for the creation or “authoring” of new courses, recognizing that it is necessary to start almost from scratch in designing an effective e-learning course that makes appropriate use of technology. It is not simply a matter of transferring content from a face-to-face version of the course.
- Increase contact with individual prospective e-learners via email prior to the start of the course in order to help them prepare. This can involve making available surveys and self-tests. It also includes providing information and resources dealing with e-learning readiness as an aspect of self-directed learning, an understanding of intellectual property in a U.S. context, and the ability to use appropriate citation practices.
- Provide e-learners with diagnostics to determine the degree of access and level of connectivity to the Internet (in some cases even a steady supply of reliable electricity!) along with appropriate hardware and software resources. Not to be forgotten is assessing the degree of familiarity with core e-learning skills such as the mechanics of manipulating files, use of email and web browser software, use of word processing software and commonly used text readers such as Adobe Acrobat Reader (PDF files), basic strategies for trouble-shooting a crashed or “frozen” computer, and the use of anti-virus protection software.
- Anticipate a somewhat higher degree of attrition and offset that by slightly over-enrolling courses, but usually no more than 5-10%.
- In the case of no-show, slow-to-show, or missing-in-action participants, we actively

“virtual shoulder tap” individuals by email or other electronic communication and contact with his or her study partner, an e-learning alum from the same institution, or the course sponsor. In this way, we can generally find out why that person has dropped out of communication. With this type of early intervention, we have been able to successfully encourage, negotiate, and support re-entry of temporarily missing participants into the course while there is still time for them to catch up.

The above examples of “weeding out” and “shoring up” strategies have become a regular administrative and teaching practice prior to and during the extended orientation period for our e-learning courses. They have helped stabilize class enrollments and lower dropout rates once the course has started. However, these activities have not in themselves been enough to prevent attrition in all cases.

A third strategy has been to pay closer attention to the frequency and quality of online interactions between instructors and learners and among learners themselves. Initially, UO AEI online courses primarily attracted students who were new to e-learning. More recently, we are seeing experienced e-learners and we have had good success strategically “seeding” courses by integrating them as peer learners, guide-on-the-side help resources, or as mentors. This has led to the creation of many different kinds of groupings of participants with both pleasing and, in some cases, surprising results. We have also developed rubrics and models to make explicit the kind of academic interactions we expect to occur in class discussions and other forms of communication throughout the e-learning course process.

As a final but by no means exhaustive set of suggestions, we have found it to be very beneficial to systematically include in our budgets professional development funds in support of outreach (e.g., attendance at regional and international conferences where our e-learning participants reside), participation in virtual profes-

sional development events, and the purchase of additional hardware, software, and books at the request of our e-learning faculty. In recognition of their need to “teach” sometimes on days and at hours outside of the typical on-campus Monday-through-Friday 8AM-5PM schedule, we routinely check out laptops to them for extended loan and for “anytime anywhere” instruction.

We believe it is important to maintain not only the participants’ level of satisfaction with e-learning, but the instructors’ as well. To this end, we encourage open sharing and collaboration on all e-course content. We also carefully mentor instructors who are new to e-teaching, pairing them with those who are more experienced.

## Future Directions

The future is bright for e-learning in ESOL as connectivity and access to online tools and resources increase worldwide. While there are decided pros and cons to both face-to-face learning and e-learning, it is clear that e-learning can help establish and maintain connections that would otherwise not exist. At a local level, we are working this year to further align goals, expectations, and policies across our e-courses. We are also actively engaged in experimentation with and piloting of new tools and e-learning models. To that end, we welcome queries and collaboration with other institutions and colleagues. A list of sample e-learning courses offered through the UO is in Appendix A. For further information, you are welcome to contact the author.

## Notes

1 This research was supported in part by grant funding through the U. S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of English Language Programs.

2 Kindle is a product available through Amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com>) and provides consumers with an electronic means of accessing text-based and other forms of materials. This reference is intended as an example only and not an endorsement of the product itself.

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## Appendix A: Examples of Successful Courses

The following four e-learning course-projects were developed for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators. For each e-learning course, there is a brief statement of purpose; the names of the primary developer-instructors in alphabetical order by last name and included in order to give credit to those who worked on the team; a list of the tools used for delivery, all of which with the exception of Blackboard are freely available; and website addresses for additional information, as desired.

### Oregon-Iraq Guided Online English Studies (OR-Iraq GOES) and Tandem Teacher Training

**Purpose:** Interrelated year-long courses to provide high-interest learning materials for EFL students alongside professional development for EFL educators in Iraq and Kurdistan.

**Instructor-developers:** Robert Elliott, Char Heitman, and Deborah Healey.

**Tools:** Supporting websites with open content; course management systems (CMS) such as Blackboard and Nicenet; and other education-appropriate tools such as Blogger, Google Sites, Hot Potatoes, SnapGrades, and SurveyMonkey.

**Websites:** <http://aei.uoregon.edu/de/iraq/> and <http://aei.uoregon.edu/de/iraqelt/>

### Shaping the Way We Teach English

**Purpose:** Video-based introductory training materials for pre-service and in-service EFL educators worldwide, accompanied by a manual and other resources for guided observation of the videos, plus recommended online readings.

**Instructor-developers:** Sarah Klinghammer and Leslie Opp-Beckman.

**Tools:** All resources are available through the website below. A related 10-week course is regularly offered online through UO's Blackboard system.

**Website:** <http://oelp.uoregon.edu/>

### E-Teacher Scholarship Program

**Purpose:** Online 10-week courses for EFL educators worldwide (outside of the U.S.A.), sponsored by the DOS and coordinated by the University of Maryland Baltimore County and University of Oregon consortium.

**Instructor-developers:** Courses developed and taught by Agnieszka Alboszta, Robert Elliott, Char Heitman, Deborah Healey, Deanna Hochstein, Kay Westerfield, and others; program coordinated by Fernando Fleurquin (UMBC), Cynthia Kieffer (UO), Leslie Opp-Beckman (UO), and Joan Shin (UMBC).

**Tools:** Supporting websites with limited open content; course management systems (CMS) such as Blackboard and Nicenet; and other education-appropriate tools such as Blogger, Google Sites, Hot Potatoes, SnapGrades, SurveyMonkey, and Zoomrang.

**Websites:** <http://aei.uoregon.edu/eteacher/>; <http://exchanges.state.gov/englishteaching/eteacher.html>; <http://umbc.uoregon.edu/eteacher/>

### Thai-UO Videoconference Series and Tsunami Zone Project

**Purpose:** To provide EFL professional development for cohorts of educators throughout Thailand in year-long, sequential programming.

**Instructor-developers:** Cynthia Kieffer and Leslie Opp-Beckman.

**Tools:** Digital videoconferencing and open content, as supported through the website below.

**Website:** <http://thaiuo.uoregon.edu/>