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DIGITAL INSTRUCTION

We are all in the midst of a pandemic and will probably continue to be at least through the fall. As a result of this crisis many small businesses have failed and larger businesses have learned new ways of doing business. Techniques that have been available for some time have suddenly become standard ways of doing things. Instructor-led classes have been replaced by video and online classes, for example, and we've all learned a lot more about doing online conferences from home.

Some of these new approaches will go away as the state vaccination programs proceed and fear of infection declines. Some will rush to return to offices and personal meetings, but others will resist reverting to the way things were. For example, there are major advantages to online meetings. They save significant amounts of travel money and time. A sales force can gather for a national online meeting in minutes rather than scheduling a meeting that requires days of travel to gather everyone. We've known these basics for a long time, of course, but there has been resistance to adopt them. Some argue that face-to-face meetings promote honesty and comradery that will always be missing in digital meetings.

Similarly, some argue that training in a face-to-face class provides a better learning experience. Others argue that, with a little work, an online meeting can be equally effective. Digital meeting systems, for example, can break an audience down into small groups that can work on cases. The instructor can visit one small group and then another, helping each team with its work. Instructional materials can be as easily delivered online as they can be passed out in a classroom.

A recent study by the Association of MBA Schools provides some insights. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, 91% of MBA programs have offered some kind of online instruction. 85% have

offered lectures online that would have otherwise been delivered in classrooms. 74% of MBA programs have made significant investments in online instruction technology. 88% of Business School leaders said that the digital approaches have been very, or somewhat effective. 52% say that online teaching is the same as or better than traditional classroom teaching. 73% say that the biggest problem is simply transforming instructional materials to fit an online format. 39% of Business School leaders suggest that online instruction is ineffective if you are trying to deliver soft-skills training. Most Business School leaders suggested that a combination of traditional and online instruction will replace traditional instruction in the next five years.

That's a lot of data to absorb, but surely it's not surprising. Things were forced to change, and most were dragged resisting, into a new world over the course of the past year. Some will be only too glad to revert, but many, having experienced the new world, will try to develop a new and more balanced approach. Leaders of MBA programs will see the advantages of the new approach: Providing more instruction for students throughout the world at a far lower cost, creating classes that bring together students from different countries to work on common case studies, and so forth.

The analysis of the results isn't very sophisticated. As someone with a considerable background in instructional technology, I would analyze courses by defining learning objectives and then tracking results against specific objectives. For example, there are cognitive objectives. One wants the student to learn a vocabulary, to identify situations typical of one typical situation or another. One wants students to do various types of calculations, or write reports describing certain results. All of these objectives are mental; they can be described and demonstrated and copies of typical outcomes can be emailed to participants. Put more technically: the stimulus is a video, a picture or text and the student is required to think and generate a spoken or written response. All this can be simulated and checked online.

Assume, instead, that the objective is to interview, or try to persuade a customer. This can be done by means of role play, and it can be done online and observed by other students. Or assume that the objective calls for a group of people to meet, discuss and create a mutually agreed-upon diagram of a business process flowchart. Once again, this can be done online. Someone has to create the diagram, although if you are willing to invest in the software, you can arrange for a software program to allow each student, however widely

separated, to go online and modify the diagram while others watch, and offer modifications of their own.

Much of this used to be hard, but computing interfaces have come a long way, and video, combined with interactive software environments, like Zoom, or process diagramming programs can facilitate this. It takes an effort to find and assemble the right package, but most MBA instructors have spent the last 6 months doing just that.

There are, undoubtedly, some instructional objectives that require behaviors that are hard to simulate online. There are always going to be situations in which students are going to want to be mentored by someone who can put their hand on their shoulder and say “don’t push quite so hard,” or “that was really well done.”

Overall, however, the world has shifted. We had the technology, but there was resistance that was going to take a couple of decades to dissipate (or retire). Now the change has been imposed on us in a single year. Some will simply revert to what existed before, but most will find they can work with the new and that a digital approach offers overwhelming advantages.

Processes are going to be revised and improved. We are moving into a new world.

Author

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