



WHY MOOCS AND EXECUTIVE EDUCATION DON'T MIX

SEVEN GUIDELINES FOR ENSURING A BETTER ONLINE BUSINESS PROGRAM

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After the scurry of educational providers scrambling to be part of MOOC mania, the hype has all but dissipated, primarily due to low traction rates and lackluster results.

Undoubtedly MOOCs have their place for disciplined and curious individuals with an iron will, available time and a natural predisposition to persevere. However, for time-stretched executives juggling high-pressure professional objectives and increasingly scarce personal time, MOOCs have not provided the hoped for panacea.

Expecting executive learners to stay the (online) course based on a cobbled together jumble of videos, articles and chat rooms is farfetched. In such circumstances, expecting tangible results such as measurable business impact or observed behavioral change is delusional.

For virtual learning to work, providers should follow—and executives should look for—these seven guidelines:

1] Start at the end. In the creation of any learning experience, being crystal clear on participants' learning objectives is the place to start. Bloom's taxonomy has long since suggested ways of sharpening objectives to avoid undesirable fluff such as "by the end of this program participants will be better strategic thinkers". If this is true in the classroom, it is of paramount importance online. Switching on the studio lights or deploying the latest widget before learning objectives have been crisply defined ensures a mediocre mix of multimedia segments that simply will not lead to executive learning.

2] Treat executives like executives. When measuring progress, deploying a range of quizzes or multiple choice questionnaires may seem expedient. However, such a scholastic approach is not appreciated by executives and in many cases fails to provide meaningful data other than basic knowledge retention. The increasing trend toward the use of ever more powerful algorithms may debunk this current impasse, but clearly we are not yet there.

On the other hand, asking executives to test hypotheses, draw conclusions and submit evidence-based results on how they have used a particular concept in their professional arena, not only provides a more effective learning experience, but allows learning facilitators to engage in a constructive dialogue with participants where it really matters.

3] Change the channel. Far too many educational providers think that online learning is simply a virtual version of what works in the classroom. Wrong. A copy-and-paste of PowerPoint slides with a few snippets of classroom footage is a recipe for disengaged executives, poor traction and massive dropout. The best online executive programs have a fresh learning design that is built around the virtual channel.

4] Respect the "holy trinity" of virtual learning. Successful virtual programs weave together three distinct elements: **design**, covering learning objectives, evaluations and the overall learning journey; the **production** of video and written content and online interaction mechanisms; and **delivery** via a platform and chosen "delivery agents" such as online coaches. Do any of these in isolation, and the program will fail. The most common error occurs when video production is outsourced with scant regard to the original pedagogical design. Watch out for slick videos where learning objectives have been "lost in translation," leading to limited knowledge transfer and very little measurable impact.

5] Keep the content fresh and easy to digest. Executives undertaking virtual programs expect and deserve fresh, cutting-edge content. If the material is stale, even an Oscar-winning on-screen performance or the latest technology won't save the day. Content must also be easily digestible; don't expect executives to watch a long classroom video featuring the backs of people's heads and a shaky camera. By the same token, serving up lengthy articles to be consumed in one sitting is likely to lead to a reflux reaction.

6] Continuously demonstrate impact. If we want time-scarce executives to spend more time online, there had better be a compelling reason to do so. Any proposed learning activity that does not have a direct impact on the executives' business arena is a waste of their precious time. The best way to tap into a participant's intrinsic motivation is to ensure measurable results that both she and her colleagues can easily observe in the workplace.

7] Leverage qualified feedback as a catalyst for change. In many online programs, for reasons of cost or poor design, the feedback participants receive is at best worthless and at worst erroneous. It ranges from unstructured comments from random participants with little or no relevant expertise, to enforced peer feedback as part of a point-scoring system to gain a virtual badge. Either way, such feedback can hardly be characterized as meaningful.

If education providers want to get serious about online learning, they need to get serious about feedback. Online facilitators, learning managers and program coaches are the true catalysts for change in the digital arena. Whether that feedback comes in writing, through a Skype call or online video chat is immaterial. What counts is that the feedback is personalized, that it comes from someone who genuinely cares about the participant successfully completing her learning objectives, and that the coach is recognized as being able to provide insightful and provocative input. Targeted bullseye questions that cause participants not only to reflect, but to take action, are the best way to ensure that online learning leads to meaningful change.

To sum up...

MOOCs and executives are far from a marriage made in heaven. Yes, some steely individuals may be prepared to cut through reams of broadcast material to unearth their own learning nuggets. And maybe some professionals are willing to go “back to school” and be treated as participants rather than executives.

But in most cases MOOCs will not provide the meaningful learning executives are looking for, and indeed have often already gained in face-to-face programs.

Educational providers need to double their efforts to be executive-centric, implementing dedicated design, production and delivery techniques to create a learning experience that generates measurable impact. Anything less will not do.

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