

E-LEARNING COURSE DEVELOPMENT PRELIMINARY PLANNING GUIDE



This Guide offers general guidance for sites that are interested in creating an e-learning course.

First Things First: What Is Your Course About, And Who Is It For?

This question may seem very obvious, but before you begin the process you should have a very clear idea of what the course you'd like to create is going to teach (intervention methods, a specific set of professional skills, information about a particular group of child trauma victims) and who is the audience for your course (students, professionals, para-professionals, all of the above, etc.). Knowing this information will keep you focused on your goals and assist you in making many of the decisions you'll need to make in the development process (see below).

Planning the Site – The Software and Programming

One of your first decisions is whether it would be best to build your course using an existing learning management system (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) or program it from scratch using a more flexible software framework (e.g., Ruby on Rails or .net). The latter typically requires someone with experience in coding/programming. This decision has clear trade-offs. Using an existing learning management system offers both the assistance of built in features and tools that you won't have to create for yourself, but it also limits the flexibility of what you can do with your course and how it can look. As you make this decision, consider the complexity of course content; the functions and features of available learning management systems (i.e., whether you can easily create a course structure that allows for an engaging, effective learning environment); and the availability of skilled programmers who fit your budget to build your course.

Learning Pathways

You get to decide how learners navigate your course. For example, will they be required to follow a specific sequence of modules, or will they be allowed to explore content as they choose? The adult learning literature suggests that self-directed exploration is associated with greater satisfaction, but sometimes course material needs to be taught in a very specific order. Balancing these concerns should be thought out. In addition, how will your course determine when a module or section is complete? For example, it is possible to require learners to watch entire videos before moving forward. While such requirements may be off-putting to some learners, your content might make it necessary. Like so many issues, we don't think there's a wrong or right answer to this for every course, but you should be consciously thinking about them.

Consider the Back End at The Beginning

To get the most out of your course from an evaluation perspective, you must from the beginning think through the kinds and amounts of data you want to be able to get from your course. You'll probably want some kind of test results, but what else will you need?

Information about how much time each learner spends on each page? Page view counts? When non-completers give up? Information about how long it takes learners to complete a module? There are no right or wrong answers to those questions, but you should have a clear sense of how you want to analyze data from the course and ensure that the database associated with your course contains the variables you need in a format that you can access and analyze. Conversations about these issues are critical at the beginning of course development because it is much simpler and less expensive to design what you want up front than it is to try to re-engineer after a course is up and running.

Content Types

We encourage you to avoid “text only” e-learning courses – which includes posting power point slides to the web. If you are going to the trouble of creating an e-learning course, you should make sure that you are taking advantage of the functionality of the internet. Posting a text document, pdf, or slideshow online – even an audio-narrated one – does not capitalize on the features available within the medium.

Of course, there will almost certainly be text as part of any e-learning course. Text on the internet, however, is not really the same thing as text in a book or manual, which most course or treatment developers are used to writing. In an e-learning format, it’s important to keep text in smaller, digestible paragraphs that make clear points. This is much more difficult than it sounds, but minimizing text improves the learner experience considerably (think of it this way – people aren’t coming to your e-learning course to read a book. If they wanted a book, they would buy a book.)

Most e-learning courses will also include video content. The level of professionalism and technical abilities varies widely across videographers, and of course so do costs. But you may not need all the bells and whistles that some video teams might want to sell you. Often for e-learning courses, simpler is better. Have preliminary conversations with your video team about what information you want your videos to convey. Sometimes, video professionals are equally concerned with didactic and artistic aspects of video production and will try to make the videos “visually interesting.” Artistic, interesting videos are great, but you need to decide whether they are best suited to conveying the message of your course.

Equally important is to think about how and where videos will be shot, and who will be in them (e.g., how many people are on screen, what lighting is needed, office versus studio look to the video, actors versus ‘real’ people, etc.). Also, consider how long will your videos be. How long will your audience be willing and able to maintain their attention? Are there aspects of your videos that will help sustain attention if they need to be longer? Finally, think through whether your videos will be scripted or more improvised based on experience.

Accessibility for All Content

There should also be early discussions about accessibility (which will affect choices about the colors and styles that you use in your course design), video closed captioning (which is also a budget item that has to be considered), and multi-lingual content (e.g., example videos or handouts in English and, for example, Spanish; closed captioning in multiple languages, etc.).

Making content accessible to all relevant learners is not only the right thing to do, but it is a requirement in most educational institutions and can come with steep financial penalties if violated.

Disseminating and Maintaining the Course

Decide how you will share the course with others and develop a plan for dissemination. Some issues to consider:

- Who will provide customer service/assistance to the learners, and how will the costs of those services be paid for?
- Who will maintain the technological aspects of the course when something “breaks” due to a browser upgrade or other technology change?
- Will there be a fee to take the course? If so, how will payments be accepted? Who will work with learners who have questions about payment types or other issues?
- What credentials/prior education, training, or experience is required to be eligible to take the course?
- How will you let potential learners know about your course? What might induce them to spend their limited time completing it? If your learners need them, continuing education credits can be a powerful enticement. But offering CEs comes with a lot of questions: how many hours? for which type(s) of professionals? what additional components need to be built into the course to award CEs? CE credits can be very important to learners, but obtaining and maintaining approval to offer them is continual work.

The process of developing an e-learning course involves many decisions that have broad implications for the design, flow, and reception of the final product. EQUIPTT offers consultation about getting the most out of your technology products to all NCTSN members.

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