



Online training versus classroom education

Consider structural aspects, personal learning style

The emergence of new online educational opportunities in OHS in the last five years is astounding. Today there are a wide variety of platforms available and tools accessible for making online education a great learning opportunity. But the debate goes on as to which is better: classroom or online education.

Everyone is familiar with the classroom style of learning. There are lectures, videos, group discussions, group presentations and case studies. There are essay assignments and many types of written exams. There is a lot of human interaction, for all that is good and bad about it. In a classroom course, the student can easily gain understanding of the lectures by listening and reading the instructor's face and body language.

The value of a live, instructor-led classroom training experience is undeniable. If the instructor is a competent subject-matter expert who knows how to engage adult students so they understand and retain the material, live classroom training offers the best overall learning opportunity.

There are however three challenges:

- Universities find it difficult to hire competent subject-matter expert instructors.
- Classes fill up quickly making it difficult for students to take the courses they need to complete their certificates in the time frame desired.
- Not everyone can access classroom education because of where they live and the shifts they work.

STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

Classroom education: It is typically only offered in larger urban centres. Most courses are semester-based with 13 weeks of class one night per week for three hours per night. Alternate formats may offer classes over three weekends in a five-week period or a condensed five-day format. Course materials typically include hard copy textbooks. You are required to be in class when the classes run. The main advantages are the student-to-student and student-instructor interaction and the familiarity of the classroom-learning environment. The main disadvantage is having to physically travel to class.

Semester-based synchronous (at the same time) online programs: These programs are very similar to the classroom offering except students can

be at home online at the same time they would have been in class. Course materials may be online and may include hard copy textbooks. Semester-based synchronous programs use a variety of teaching tools including weekly live online lectures and making use of asynchronous online discussion forums. Assignments, quizzes and exams are administered online. The main advantage is students don't have to physically go to the university; they just have to be prepared to be available for online class every week at a fixed time and be able to access a computer throughout the week to participate in other activities and assignments. Student-to-student and student-instructor interaction is virtual.

Semester-based asynchronous (not at the same time) online programs: These programs allow students more freedom to go online and participate in online learning activities. Course materials may be online and may include hard copy textbooks. There are not fixed times students have to be online. Lectures are recorded and can be accessed whenever it is convenient. Online discussion forums are accessed whenever a student makes time to do

so within the defined course schedule. Quizzes and exams are allowed to be taken anytime within a time window of a week or two. Student-to-student and student-instructor interaction is also virtual.

Continuous intake self-study online programs: These programs offer the ultimate in flexibility. You can start and finish a course anytime and you are not limited by semester timetables. All course materials needed are provided online and can be downloaded allowing access anywhere and anytime you want to study. Quizzes are taken online when it is most convenient to the student. There is no student-to-student contact and student-instructor interaction is typically limited to email discussion.

So which format is best? One size definitely does not fit all. Is there a classroom-based course convenient to where you work and live? Does your work schedule allow you to commit to certain learning activities following a fixed schedule? Do you have variable periods of time available for learning or will a semester-based system work for you?

You should also be honest with

yourself about your motivation, self-discipline and organizational skills. Classroom education and semester-based synchronous programs create a structure that some students need imposed on them. Semester-based synchronous programs and continuous intake self-study programs require the student to be better at planning and be more self-disciplined if success is to be guaranteed.

Before choosing a program type it is good to know your learning style. To what extent are you an auditory, visual or kinesthetic learner? A properly designed classroom program will offer a learning experience for all learning styles. Online programs will typically include program elements suited to the auditory and visual learner.

Consider whether or not you prefer to teach yourself or if you benefit from facilitated learning. Some students feel held back by the pace of semester-based courses. If this is you, then the continuous intake self-study programs may be best. If you prefer to be led through the course materials, an alternative program type would be best.

So when it comes to determining which is better, classroom or online education, the answer quite simply is "it depends."

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