Book The Learning Explosion

9 Rules to Ignite Your Virtual Classrooms

Matthew Murdoch and Treion Muller
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Recommendation

Matthew Murdoch and Treion Muller are senior online learning executives at FranklinCovey, a premier corporate training firm whose clients include many *Fortune* 500 companies. Their outstanding, authoritative book makes it clear that they have the chops to teach you how to organize online learning initiatives and how to plan, set up and run virtual classrooms. True to the authors' "keep it short" philosophy, their book is concise. Mirroring their protocol for virtual learning, each chapter ends with interactive exercises. *BooksInShort* recommends their concrete, easy-to-understand, highly enthusiastic explanation of virtual learning programs to chief learning officers, as well as to corporate education and training professionals.

Take-Aways

- The Internet's dramatic rise has created a "learning explosion" that follows nine rules:
- "The Rule of Continual Change" says new technologies quickly become outdated and are replaced. College students already regard email as too slow and prefer texting.
- "The Rule of Knowledge Transfer" states that virtual teaching requires interaction.
- "The Rule of Learning Circuitry" says the right leadership team is crucial to education.
- According to "the Rule of Overcoming Bias," you can surmount your executives' dislike of virtual education by addressing their specific concerns.
- "The Rule of Virtual Accountability" asserts that students must be verbally, visually and kinesthetically responsible.
- "The Rule of Personal Practice" says teachers must be knowledgeable and proficient.
- "The Rule of Thumbs Up" posits using feedback from online learners to change.
- According to "the Rule of Global Positioning," you should address the cultural and linguistic challenges of providing virtual learning in an international organization.
- "The Rule of Sustained Orbit" calls for positioning your online education program in a self-perpetuating loop.

Summary

The New (Virtual) Reality

The virtual classroom is "the new learning reality," the boundary-free corporate training method of the future. Consider the possibilities: At the exact same moment, a Japanese teenager is using his mobile device to teach himself a new subject, an Australian entrepreneur is getting helpful advice from an online social network of peers, and a blogger in Denmark is sharing data with subscribers. This dramatic quest for knowledge – via the Internet, computers and mobile devices – represents a virtual

"learning explosion," whereby information comes in short bursts, practice and feedback mechanisms are instant, and the future is unlimited.

> "The way people learn will always change. If you wish to embrace the learning explosion, you must change as well."

Thanks to rapid advances in technology, the traditional learning model has "exploded" into billions of discrete "learning fragments," from blogs, social media and wikis to podcasts, apps and online communities. The learning explosion began, perhaps, when Johannes Gutenberg developed the Western world's first printing press in 1439. Various catalysts accelerated the process along the way, from Guglielmo Marconi's first radio transmission in 1907 to the invention of the computer at Bell Labs in 1937 and Tim Berners-Lee's creation of the Internet's "framework" in 1989. From 2006 to 2010, "worldwide Wi-Fi coverage" increased 155%. In 2007, one million US students from kindergarten to high school registered for online courses. Research shows they will perform better than students who learn in traditional classrooms. On the corporate side, virtual education jumped from 45% in 2008 to 59% in 2009.

> "To launch your virtual classroom, you need to have enough thrust to lift your project past the gravitational pull of the naysayers, your own insecurities and the craziness of your day job."

Nine rules govern the learning explosion:

1. "The Rule of Continual Change"

When Professor Curtis Morley referred to email in a "respected" university's class for master's degree candidates, one student exclaimed, "Email is for old people!" The brash student explained that most students use email only because that is how their instructors relay their grades to them. Intrigued, Morley polled the class to learn how many students regularly used email. Fewer than 25% raised their hands. "How do you reach one another?" the professor asked. "We text, Twitter or Facebook," the students responded. They explained that email was too slow. Morley asked how the students communicated adequately on Twitter in 140 characters. "You only need 140 characters to say what you need to say," one student replied. "Facebook is for bigger stuff and pictures," another added. "And if you need to write something big, you just post it to your blog. I have an RSS feed of all my friends' blogs."

> "The learning explosion is moving faster and faster and shows no sign of slowing."

Even though email is a relatively new technology, young people already dismiss it as out-of-date and slow, especially when compared to texting within their social networks on their mobile devices. These students soon will come to work in your organization. Can you meet their training and educational needs – and their expectations? The virtual classroom is your best bet for staying current and reaching the next generation of employees.

2. "The Rule of Knowledge Transfer"

The virtual classroom demands new pedagogical approaches. To keep your classes short, you can't provide as much content as a traditional class might, so you must summarize your "instructor-led training" (ILT) material. Or, to include everything you'd offer in a physical classroom, break the substantive material into a series of virtual classes – a process called "chunking." While some teachers stop at 20 minutes, the ideal period is between 90 minutes and two hours.

> "There is a point of diminishing returns with how much your learner can absorb in a single online session."

Online students are easily distracted, so build in a lot of interaction. Plan and implement your online approach by utilizing the 10-step "Simple Online-Learning Instructional Design" (the "SOLID process"). First, determine what you want your virtual classroom students to learn. Second, list the ILT course materials – videos, slides, and so on – you are adapting. Third, decide whether to summarize or chunk. Fourth, list your online tools: "chat, polls, whiteboard, breakout functionality, assessments, emoticons, screen sharing," and so on. Fifth, outline your curriculum based on your platform and materials. Sixth, fit it to your online class. Seventh, ask a "subject-matter expert" to screen your plan. Eighth, try your work with students. Ninth, adjust it according to their feedback. And tenth, "repeat testing and feedback steps until…it is ready for launch."

> "Keeping things short is one of the most important learning principles in today's media-rich world."

In a virtual classroom, delivery is everything. Before you start teaching, make sure your equipment and network connection work correctly. Have a backup computer and a backup network connection on standby. Practice speaking aloud a few minutes prior to each class. Never run virtual classes in hotel rooms because they often have lousy network connections. Before class, put a "do not disturb" sign on your door so your colleagues will not interrupt. Turn off your phone, and close any unneeded computer programs, like email. You can't see your students, so you must engage them verbally. Foster interactivity. The more visuals you use, the better.

3. "The Rule of Learning Circuitry"

Solid-state technology depends on superior electronic circuitry. Your learning circuitry is formed by the links among your business units as they come together under the right leadership team to support your virtual learning program. You need a small "core team" whose members have the skills to give your initiative the proper debut. Participants might include a "business leader," an "instructional designer," a teacher, and an operational manager (if the program is for an internal audience) or a marketer (if the program is for an external audience). Try to make your educational package as perfect as possible. Think ambitiously, but start small. Recruit an influential executive as your "champion." Once the program is running, measure your results and spread the word.

4. "The Rule of Overcoming Bias"

Many senior executives and supervisors have a tendency to dislike online learning. Their prejudice against it can become a roadblock. Take these steps to address the concerns of each kind of opponent:

- **"Turf protectors"** – They want to shelter their operation from anything that could displace their authority or influence, and they claim that nothing beats traditional classroom training. Explain persuasively why virtual classrooms are effective.

- **"Creatures of habit"** – These folks are suspicious of anything new and stick with the old ways. Show them that if students have a choice between a virtual or physical classroom, most choose online learning and enjoy it.
- **"Nail-biters"** – The virtual classroom can make certain individuals anxious if they don't know how it works or if they are wary of new tactics. Help them to evaluate virtual learning accurately.
- **"Unenlightened"** – This group just can't see the value of virtual classrooms. If your supervisor can't grasp the benefits of online learning, approach managers and executives higher up the ladder.
- **"Biased learners"** – Provide a range of virtual learning opportunities. To alleviate students' sense of nervousness, avoid complex technical terms. Publicize endorsements from executives.

5. "The Rule of Virtual Accountability"

In a traditional classroom, the student who violates accepted norms pays a price. If you sleep in class or disrupt other learners, you will suffer the consequences. Establish virtual accountability in your web classroom in three different forms:

- **"Verbal"** – Encourage student participation. Directly ask for open-ended responses, and address learners by their names. Make live verbal interaction customary "every two to three minutes."
- **"Visual"** – Ask your students to comment on your visuals, such as PowerPoint slides. Develop a "graphical model" that tells a narrative or that provides a road map to your essential points.
- **"Kinesthetic"** – You are in a football stadium and see friends in another section. To signal to them that you are present, you wave. Such kinesthetic action is vital for many forms of communication and learning. Provide teaching aids that your students must download personally. To keep them involved and engaged, instruct them to conduct a kinesthetic field exercise outside the virtual classroom.

6. "The Rule of Personal Practice"

Virtual classroom instructors must be experts in their subject material and knowledgeable about new online teaching techniques. Practice your pedagogic craft, know your subject area deeply and learn all you can about your technical platforms. These platforms, such as Citrix GoToTraining, Microsoft LiveMeeting, Cisco WebEx and Adobe Connect, include helpful tutorials, video demonstrations, blogs, user guides, white papers, and so on. Online user communities can also help you come up to speed.

> "Interaction beats distraction." (Dave Green, virtual-classroom instructor)

To assess how your students perceive your class, set up a second computer so you can watch what you're doing and see exactly what your learners experience during your training sessions. Observe other online educators. Incorporate their best practices into your presentations. The axiom "repetition is the father of all learning" applies to every student, including instructors who are learning how to teach in virtual classrooms.

7. "The Rule of Thumbs Up"

Ask your online students for constructive feedback. Make responding simple by using such online tools as SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang. Avoid complicated response mechanisms. Ask students two to five short questions – no more – about their virtual learning experience. The purpose of requesting feedback is to learn from it and to adapt your work accordingly. Pay particular attention to repeated comments. Follow the example of InterContinental Hotels Group, which conducts quarterly feedback audits of its workshops.

8. "The Rule of Global Positioning"

Thanks to the Internet's ubiquity and today's robust network connections, conducting an international virtual classroom is usually technologically feasible. However, some countries do present technical barriers, such as electricity or bandwidth issues. Even securing a conference-call number can be a headache in some nations, such as the Philippines, where the government controls the telephone system. Cultural and language differences also pose challenges. To be sure your content will travel well, ask employees on the ground to translate and localize your educational materials for their colleagues. Running a global virtual classroom often means working harder, including putting in time at odd hours to accommodate students in distant time zones. If you go global with your virtual learning initiative, always expect the unexpected.

9. "The Rule of Sustained Orbit"

Initiating your virtual classroom calls for a highly focused effort. You may wish to promulgate brochures, FAQs, "technical-support materials," classroom demonstrations, online demonstrations, and more. Whether your learning initiative is local, regional, national or global, launch it with panache. Feeble launches account for the failure of more online learning initiatives than any other factor. Once your virtual learning initiative is going strong, your next goal is to position it in a self-sustaining pattern or orbit, such as steadily training a certain number of students in a specific period or earning a targeted amount in fees. Set goals for your program. Perhaps it can earn revenue to cover its costs, save your company money, provoke a higher internal demand for virtual classes and garner praise from your top executives.

You've Adapted to the New Learning Paradigm – Now Do It Again

Some organizations refuse to adjust to the new online learning revolution. As a result, they remain stuck in a traditional learning environment that is becoming increasingly obsolete. If you end up mired along with your company, you may have to rethink what you want for yourself and your professional development. Can you move along to another firm that is not afraid of the future, or can your organization conquer the rules of the learning explosion? Even once you have mastered the virtual classroom, prepare for everything you've learned to change. Such upheaval is inevitable – and sooner rather than later. With technology, advancement is the only constant. The Internet tools you use to teach will develop, as will your platform, online applications, mobile devices, social networks, and more. You must be flexible and perpetually ready to embrace the newest innovations and latest methods.

About the Authors

Matthew Murdoch is the global director of online learning at FranklinCovey, an international training firm, where **Treion Muller** is chief e-learning architect.