

## ***STAND UP OR SIT DOWN: Training for the Next Decade***

Carafes of coffee, stacks of cups, and trays of pastries fill a table in the back of the room. A laptop and projector are in the front. Promptly at 8:00 a.m., 24 sales reps from ten branch offices file into a Dallas hotel conference room. Their badges clearly give their nicknames and in smaller print their branch offices and city locations are printed. It takes them about 10 minutes to get coffee and to find their seats behind the name tents strategically placed around the three tables set-up in a U-shaped pattern.

At 8:15 their trainer begins by saying, "I hope you all had a pleasant trip. I realize most of you know one another, but let's go around the room and say our names, our branch office, and something about ourselves that we would like to share with the group," and another corporate training session, a *stand up* corporate training session, begins.

The question is, will *stand up* training be replaced by *sit down* computer-based, online distance delivered sessions? What will be the training scene for the next decade in corporate America? Stand up training is so familiar it needs no explanation other than the scenario presented above. Sit down training is instruction delivered at a distance—in either time or location—most often to students who are sitting behind a computer connected to the Web. Often other technologies, such as audio-bridges, compressed video sessions, and satel-

lite downlinks are used, but in none of the sessions is there an instructor in the front of a classroom of students.

Obviously, predicting the future is a task not relished by many researchers, but the outcomes of well-constructed research efforts often permit an understanding of the past and present. These understandings make forecasting the future more accurate. So, by looking at the research, is it possible to determine if stand up training is going to be replaced by sit down, online instruction.

First, if the research on learner preferences is examined, two conflicting results are obvious. Learners increasingly *demand* to be permitted to learn at a distance. They appreciate the convenience of instruction delivered to locations near their home or workplace, and if training is available any time they want it or need it, then learners are even more pleased. The more learners find out about distance education, the more they demand the opportunity to learn at a distance, at least some of the time.

On the other hand, when asked, almost 90% of any group of learners say that if they have complete freedom to choose—freedom from time constraints, travel problems, and financial obligations—they prefer to learn face-to-face in the classroom, laboratory, seminar room, even lecture hall. The problem is that many—even most—learners, especially adult learners, do not have freedom to choose because of time

constraints, travel problems, and financial obligations.

The tension between learner demands and preferences is at the root of the training dilemma. How do training organizations balance learner preferences with their student demands? How do trainers plan for a future that promises to make technology available to nearly every adult learner? This question, and related ones, is being examined by a number of researchers, including Charles Schlosser and Marsha Burmeister ("Best of Both Worlds: The Nova/ITDE Model of Distance Education," *Tech Trends*, November 1999, 45-48). At the heart of their paper was this theme—effective education and training should include both face-to-face and online instruction, and the decision for the corporate trainer is what is the correct percentage of each. In other words, there is a continuum with face-to-face instruction on one extreme and on-line instruction on the opposite end. Instructional delivery for a unit, course, or program can be planned and delivered anywhere between and including the two extremes. As a matter of fact, Richard Clark and others have clearly stated that instructional delivery is not related to achievement.

Actually, Schlosser and Burmeister advocate a best of both worlds strategy that has a 2/3 vs. 1/3 split, with two thirds of any major

instructional event, such as a course, delivered at a distance, and 1/3 delivered face-to-face. They indicate that this split is a good starting point for instructional design, especially for adult learners. Unfortunately, their position is supported only by practical experience, not experimental research.

As researchers explore the relationship between face-to-face instruction and distance instruction, it is hoped that a formula, model, or recipe can be developed that will help the trainer determine the appropriate mix for a given course with specific objectives, and learners with a certain set of characteristics. Just as instructional design models permit the development of instructional events with predictable outcomes, a distance education model should predict delivery strategies that will optimize learning while achieving the greatest cost-effectiveness.

Stand up and sit down instruction will coexist in the training environment of the next decade; of this there is considerable agreement. It is also becoming clear that some organizations will gravitate toward one extreme or the other, but that most trainers and training departments will use both strategies as part of a comprehensive training scheme.

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