



## Five Key Criteria to Evaluate Learning – Online or Off

Over the many years I have been researching and recommending online learning courses for major corporations and organizations, I have discovered there are five primary criteria you can use to evaluate whether any course – either online or instructor-led will produce the performance-based outcomes you desire. What I've found is that evaluating online learning is not hard. It's almost intuitive to end up with a performance-based outcome from good training. This article explains how.

First of all, if you're a senior-level trainer, a chief learning officer, or a director of sales or safety training, like my clients, you are *not* interested in paying money for training that entertains your employees. You want results – whether it's increased sales, reduction in accidents, improved customer service, or prevention of sexual harassment claims, for example. You want the learning you purchase to produce the results you are seeking.

### **Five Key Criteria**

With infinite offerings available in just about every category of online learning, how do you narrow down your options? Start with your network. Ask others in your industry what they have used, has it been successful and how did they like it. Every industry also has trade associations and state governmental organizations that list resources, and you can search online by category key words.

Once you have narrowed your options, ask the online vendor for access. The vendor should provide a link to a library of courseware you can review at no charge. You need to review each online learning option to make sure it satisfies five key criteria:

1. Quality of the content
2. How and how often the content is updated
3. Instructional design components
4. Behavior and performance-based outcomes
5. Reporting

### **Quality of the Content**

Make sure the course covers the material or topics you need covered. Each course should provide an outline of the content, course objectives, and references or credentials (i.e. where the material was obtained; the source's credentials, etc.). Open the course and ask yourself: Are the objectives clear? Is it easy to navigate? Am I engaged? Is it interactive? If it's not covering the content, you should stop. The other criteria don't matter.

## **How and how often the content is updated**

There should be a bibliography or reference, either at the beginning or the end, to what was used to develop the content. Industries such as manufacturing and construction must provide employee safety training (e.g., forklift safety, ladder safety) as required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Online OSHA training should be updated whenever industry regulations change, on a timeline that exceeds standards. The vendor should indicate how updates happen and how often the content is reviewed.

## **Instructional Design Components**

This is the biggie. You want to make sure that there is text, audio and graphics on every screen. All three components must be there, and the text and audio should complement each other, but should not be the same. You want to be able to get the same meaning if you were to turn off either the audio or the text. That will make the content compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, so that a blind person could hear the instruction or a deaf person could see the instruction and both would learn the same content. Another instructional design component is the ability to learn self-paced. The learner should be able to start, stop or move forward at any time. You should not have to wait until the narrator is done talking to either answer the question or to move on when you're ready. There should also be a test bank so that the questions are random and different to cover each of the topics. In other words, I can't retake the test and remember that the answers are ABCDE. Plus, both the interactive exercises and the tests should continually reinforce the learning environment. When told they were wrong, they should be told why the answer they selected is wrong, what the right answer is, and why. Finally, you should be able to select different passing scores for different audiences. If an employee works with electrical or hazardous materials, it would probably require 100% to pass. If the employee has peripheral contact with these materials, 80% correct answers would probably be sufficient.

## **Behavior and Performance-Based Outcomes**

I asked an expert on performance-based outcomes, Ted Vecchio of Performware Learning, what criteria he uses to gauge this. Ted says that performance-based outcomes involve a three-phased model:

1. There has to be a performance standard
2. There has to be a way to measure that the standard was achieved
3. There has to be a way to correct if the standard was not achieved

The performance standards of good online learning courses should be outlined in the course objectives, and there should be clear ways of measuring whether learning was achieved. Keep reading and I'll provide an example.

## Reporting

This is the administrative function, normally referred to as the Learning Management System. What system does the course content run on, and how does the system track the test results? Are you able to see reports in the way that you want to see them? Are the test results easily exportable so that you can generate reports yourself?

## Testing the Criteria

Now let's take a look at two examples in the OSHA safety category – one online course that I would highly recommend, and one that fails in every criteria. The training topic is bloodborne pathogens. It took me less than 5 minutes to conclude that the first course was bad, so let's start with that one.

### **Blind Spots Can Kill** <http://www.msha.gov/Streaming/SafetyHealthClips.asp>

It took me 28 minutes to download this course. A reasonable download time is seconds. A typical OSHA or safety lesson should be 20 minutes to ½ hour in length, so I already took up my half hour in just download time. The "course" is streaming video with talking heads. The people who were talking were the people who had the accident, so they were obviously not experts in this topic. There were no objectives and no topics to be covered. It had no instructional design components. There was no interactivity, no testing, no navigation, so it wasn't self-paced. It didn't ask me to remember anything, so it did not offer me any retention. There was no reporting capability.

### **Bloodborne Pathogens** <http://bickmore.vis01.com/bbp/templateWindow.html>

This one has it all, so let's review each criteria. It's designed by one of my favorite vendors, Vivid Learning Systems.

## Quality of the content

The course material lists references and credentials and verified that it meets Federal OSHA standards. The credentials are clear, the outline is clear, and the topics to be covered are clear. The other advantage to this course is that it can be branded for the client (i.e., the client can add their company logo, look and feel to the course). That way the learner will not automatically say, "This is not my environment so it doesn't apply to me."

## How and how often the content is updated

This vendor updates content in real-time, exceeding the standards.

## **Instructional design components**

The course uses an engaging introductory video that makes the topic important and relevant to the learner. It's easy to navigate and includes all the components of text, audio and graphics/pictures/video. It is interactive, the exercises are engaging and meaningful, it's easily bookmarked and there is a test bank.

## **Behavior and Performance-Based Outcomes**

The performance standard is established by the course objective. There is a test to measure if it was achieved or not. The reporting will flag a learner so the supervisor knows whether corrective measures are needed, and in what areas.

## **Reporting**

Reporting is in real-time, and it's flexible – you can adjust what is acceptable as a passing score and whether learners are required to complete the entire lesson or can test out. Test results can be downloaded easily so clients can run reports in-house.

It took me about 25 minutes to review the entire course and verify that it met all the criteria. The final test is the subjective one – does it fit the company's culture? Sometimes this is easy to determine, but sometimes it's very subtle. That's why I always ask that the highest level authority in the department or division review the course to verify appropriate content and a cultural fit. Clients often hire me to conduct hours of front-end research on various topics so I can present to them the best selections in each category. That way the least amount of time is required for the final in-house reviews before a company purchases or signs a multi-year agreement. My job is to make sure that I'm getting the best possible solution.

If you're in charge of researching online learning yourself, hopefully these five criteria will make your job easier.

If you would rather have an outside expert research, source and make recommendations to you, please contact Kristin Ford at Best in Learning, 952.697.3677 or [Kristin@BestInLearning.com](mailto:Kristin@BestInLearning.com)

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