

# Six Myths of Designing Online Learning Programs



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It's not just policymakers and donors who hold fast to myths about online learning. Those of us who design and develop online learning programs for international development interventions have our own myths about online design, online teaching, and online learning—which separately or cumulatively can dilute the impact we want our courses to have. This blog post discusses six such myths.

## Myth 1: Online learning only occurs in a Learning Management System

[Online learning](#) often does happen within a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Moodle, but it doesn't have to. There are many “forms” of online learning—the aforementioned LMS (like Moodle or Blackboard), social media *cum* education platforms (like Edmodo), video tutors (in *Skype*, for example), interactive videos, webinars, MOOCs, [scenarios](#), [animations](#) and [games](#). Essentially, any form of learning online IS online learning.

## Myth 2: If technology is involved, then it has to be innovative!

Unfortunately, a lot of online learning suffers from the “old wine in new skins” phenomenon – very traditional, highly didactic, deductive, almost entirely text-based content that is very instructor-focused (where there is one) and often embracing the paradigm of the solo learner.

There are a number of reasons for this. Paramount is a belief among so many of us, that, in the words of Arthur C. Clarke, “technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Technology=innovation, so just adding technology to the existing educational content will magically make it innovative. [QED](#).

There are more prosaic reasons, too, that drive this myth. Many international education development projects lack the time, money, or personnel to create innovative and [quality online courses](#) and, unfortunately, the ethos of “good enough” or “better than nothing” prevails.

Additionally, programs and projects often attach little importance to design (just upload a bunch of reading materials and ask questions and you have an online course!). Finally, [bandwidth](#)—and

the impulse among designers to keep courses as bandwidth light as possible—often results in highly text-based, and one-way, online learning experiences.

### Myth 3: The technology is the pedagogy

This is a corollary of Myth #2 but deserves its own space. A lot of online courses seem to lack an instructional approach, involving readings (or video), some *pro forma* discussions and quizzes.

This may be the result of a mismatch between what we want to do and what the learning platform allows. It may be because we are still struggling to develop native online pedagogies. And it certainly **is** much harder to move problem-based, collaborative, inductive, learner-centered pedagogies from a face-to-face to an online medium and then manage that type of learning among participants who are separated via time and space.

But the biggest culprits here are twofold. First, many online programs pay very little attention to purposeful design of interactive learning experiences (See the aforementioned “good enough” syndrome that colors many international education projects). Next, as discussed in the next myth, many programs pay little or no attention to [preparing online instructors](#) to teach in ways that capitalize on the medium of online learning.

To make online learning as potentially rich as face-to-face learning, and to quell concerns about its quality, we need to invest as much in the human and pedagogical sides of online learning as we do in the technological side.

### Myth 4: No assembly required: Online instructors

I touched on this myth in the [previous post](#). Many “online instructors” in donor-funded, international education projects have never been taught how to teach online (or anywhere else for that matter). This is the result of a pervasive and implicit belief that knowing *how* to use the LMS (and being part of the organization that won the contract) more than qualifies someone to teach online. I also fear it’s the result of an implicit belief that online teaching isn’t really teaching—it’s administering or presiding—and that anyone can do it.

Teaching online involves a completely different set of skills than teaching in a face-to-face setting. Instructors need numerous skills, including:

- **Content knowledge:** Online instructors must know their content and know how to help learners master content in a distance environment.
- **Facilitation:** In the course of an online program, an online instructor will need to motivate online learners counsel them, offer just-in-time support, monitor learning, and provide one-on-one and differentiated tutoring.
- **Technology:** How to use technology—both the LMS itself and its various apps, how to help online learners use technology, how to blend pedagogy, technology and content for learning and an understanding of good online learning strategies and how technology can and cannot support learning.

- **“Presence:”** Strong and skilled facilitation of knowledge, of the learning process, and of learners, and helping learners become socially and academically integrated in the course ([Burns, 2011](#)).

We do a great disservice to online learners, to online instructors, and to online learning, by failing to prepare instructors to teach online.

## **Myth 5: Platform + People = Community of Practice**

Online communities of practice are *à la mode* in international education projects, the idea being that networked groups of learners can capitalize on the “strength of weak ties” to collaborate with and learn from other learners with whom they would not normally interact.

All good. However, simply placing people in an online course (or “experience”) and calling it a “[community of practice](#)” (or learning, or a professional learning community, or a virtual learning circle) doesn’t make it so. Communities do not happen *ex nihilo*. Communities, online ones in particular, need to be carefully designed, managed and nurtured so that these communities do in fact build social capital.

People need a reason to come together and they need to see value in interactions with one another. They need to be taught how to collaborate (online and in general) and online interactions need to be facilitated. All of this requires careful design considerations, careful selection and training of online facilitators, time, planning, resources—all those inputs that so many international education projects skimp on.

## **Myth 6: They’re digital natives—they don’t need to learn how to learn online!**

One of the most persistent and dangerous myths is that online learning is easy, and that it’s almost second nature to younger learners who’ve grown up with technology. But in fact, we underestimate how long it takes and how hard it is to learn online (See Myth #4 regarding attrition [from the previous post](#)). Online learning places numerous “Do-It-Yourself” demands on learners, many of which our digital natives don’t confront on a regular basis.

For example, to engage in the learning experience:

- Online learners have to interact with technology with which they may not be familiar.
- They have to read and write (a lot), and do so in a way that pays attention to tone and voice. in the case of instant messaging, they need to be able to do this quickly.
- They have to manage their own time, their own schedule, and ensure that they are disciplined enough to complete a course of work in a highly unstructured environment where they are separated from the instructor and other learners via time and space
- Learning online also imposes a greater cognitive load than face-to-face and print-based learning. This is especially true for reading and collaborating online.

Because online learning places such unique demands on learners (many of whom come from education systems that stress compliance vs. independence and passive versus proactive learning), the risk of learner attrition is high.

To ensure that our online learners successfully complete their courses, online learning programs must prepare novice online learners to succeed in this new medium. They must help online learners develop self-regulation, self-direction, and time management skills; as well as other related skills like reading and writing online, Netiquette and digital citizenship.

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