The Learning eXPLOSION
9 Rules to Ignite Your Virtual Classrooms

Matthew Murdoch and Treion Muller

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INTRODUCTION

Today’s learning environment is truly unique. The convergence of technological advances and vast amounts of knowledge means that information is accessible to almost anyone at any time. Shifts in the way people learn are driving organizations to explore the transition from traditional training programs to virtual classrooms. In The Learning eXPLOSION, Matthew Murdoch and Treion Muller define nine rules that will help organizations to create virtual classrooms that are effective, and deliver high quality educational experiences.

WHAT IS THE LEARNING EXPLOSION?

According to Murdoch and Muller, society has been marching towards today’s Learning Explosion for over 500 years. They highlight eight key events that have served as technological catalysts for today’s learning environment:

1. 1439: Johannes Gutenberg creates the first printing press and launches the mass media phenomenon.
2. 1907: Guglielmo Marconi transmits radio waves over long distances.
3. 1927: Philo T. Farnsworth develops the first television set.
4. 1937: George Stibitz at Bell Labs invents the first computer.
5. 1957: The Soviet Union launches Sputnik, the first satellite, into space.
6. 1973: The first cellular phone was invented at Motorola by Martin Cooper.
8. 1997: Sixdegrees.com, the first social networking
site, is launched by Andrew Weinreich.

Technological advances like these have taken the traditional learning model and broken it down into billions of pieces of information. Murdoch and Muller refer to these bits of information as “learning fragments.” Learning fragments can be accessed anywhere through mobile phones and the Internet. As a result, new ideas, innovation, and education can be distributed worldwide. Learning fragments offer boundless opportunities for people to learn and they are a key driver in the shift to virtual classrooms or online learning platforms.

One of the most noteworthy characteristics about learning fragments is the ability for people to share them with friends and co-workers. Sharing information has two benefits: it strengthens the learning experience, and it also offers additional opportunities for reinforcement. Learning fragments can be shared through blogs, websites, Twitter, wikis, and other online tools. From a corporate perspective, the challenge is to organize learning fragments and to incorporate them into virtual classrooms. If organizations want to harness the Learning Explosion, collecting learning fragments is essential.

**Rule One: The Rule of Continual Change**

The way people learn is always changing. As a result, organizations can only embrace the Learning Explosion successfully if they accept that they too must change. This means anticipating changes, researching them, and incorporating them into the organization’s education programs. Learning has become something that occurs rapidly and almost instantaneously. One of the side effects of this continual change is the emergence of virtual classrooms. These tools are growing in popularity and cannot be ignored.

**Rule Two: The Rule of Knowledge Transfer**

As organizations move to the virtual classroom format, they must recognize that knowledge transfer happens differently in this environment than in instructor led training. There are four key elements that require a different approach in the virtual classroom. These include content, lesson length, instructional design, and delivery.

**Key Concepts**

1. **The Rule of Continual Change.** Organizations can only embrace the Learning Explosion if they accept that they too must change.
2. **The Rule of Knowledge Transfer.** Content, lesson length, instructional design, and delivery must change.
3. **The Rule of Learning Circuitry.** To create learning circuits, organizations must start with a core team, think big and act small, and find executive champions.
4. **The Rule of Overcoming Bias.** Leaders have biases toward new ways of learning and these must be overcome.
5. **The Rule of Virtual Accountability.** Instructors must ensure that students are accountable verbally, visually, and kinesthetically.
6. **The Rule of Personal Practice.** Competencies relate to platform proficiency, facilitator observation, imitation, and personalization.
7. **The Rule of Thumbs Up.** Trainers should allow students to provide feedback.
8. **The Rule of Global Positioning.** Having knowledgeable aides to navigate language and cultural differences is essential.
9. **The Rule of Sustained Orbit.** There are two types of virtual classroom launches: pure force launches and critical initiative launches.

Information about the author and subject:
http://thelearningexplosion.blogspot.com

Information about this book and other business titles:
http://www.franklincovey.com

Related summaries in the BBS Library:
**Virtual Team Success**
* A Practical Guide for Working & Leading from a Distance
  By Darleen M. DeRosa & Richard Lepsinger
Content. The amount of content that a student can absorb when they are physically located in a classroom is greater than when they are in a virtual classroom. As a result, instructors must become skilled at two methods for transferring traditional classroom content to the online classroom: summarizing and chunking.

Summarizing takes the content from a full instructor led course and creates a shorter version for use in the virtual classroom. When summarizing, it is important to focus specifically on the core principles and skills that the virtual classroom students must learn.

Chunking, in contrast, retains all the content from an instructor led course, but breaks it into shorter sessions for use in the virtual classroom. Chunking results in an online course that is comprised of multiple sessions. Between sessions, students can be assigned homework exercises, resulting in a blended learning experience.

Length. Long virtual classroom sessions are not productive, since students become saturated and reach a point of diminishing returns. Murdoch and Muller recommend designing virtual classroom sessions that are between 90 and 120 minutes in length. During this period of time, it is possible to thoroughly teach three to four points with students remaining engaged. One thing to keep in mind with virtual classrooms is that online exercises and activities usually take less time for students to complete than in a traditional classroom setting.

Instructional design. A major challenge for online instructors is holding students’ attention in the face of numerous distractions. The key is to engage with students often. Murdoch and Muller have developed an instructional design knowledge transfer process called the “Simple Online Learning Instructional Design,” or SOLID Process. This ten step process can be used to take an existing instructor led workshop and transfer it to a virtual classroom. The steps include:

**Learners no longer have to travel to a specific training destination to find information. They can simply turn on their phone to instantly find learning fragments or turn on their computer and attend a virtual classroom.**

1. Identify the instructor led training (ILT) that must be transferred to an online forum.
2. Determine what ILT course materials already exist.
3. Decide whether to use summarizing or chunking to deal with the content.
4. List the virtual classroom tools that are available in the online learning platform.
5. Develop a virtual classroom outline, keeping the platform tools, content approach, and instructional design best practices in mind.
6. Adapt the ILT course materials to the virtual classroom format.
7. Review the prototype with a content subject matter expert and make any necessary changes.
8. Test with end users.
9. Accept and apply feedback.
10. Repeat testing and feedback steps until the course is ready to be launched.

Delivery. There are two aspects of delivery that instructors must keep in mind with online training courses: the virtual learning environment, and delivery technique. In a virtual classroom, both learners and instructors must prepare for class. Students should check their computer configuration and network connection in advance, print out any necessary materials, and eliminate as many distractions as pos-

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**About the Authors**

Matthew Murdoch holds an M.B.A. from the University of Utah and is FranklinCovey’s Global Director of Online Learning.

Treion Muller has a master’s degree in instructional design from Utah State University. As FranklinCovey’s Chief eLearning Architect, he is responsible for developing all of the company’s online learning initiatives.
sible. Instructors should follow the same steps as students, with special care given to the reliability of their network connection. With regard to delivery technique, trainers must ensure that there is a high level of interactivity and student involvement. Practicing in advance and soliciting feedback after the course is always recommended.

Building your learning circuitry is not going to be quick or easy. But the time you take to create learning circuitry within your organization will not only help you move your corporate learning online, but also help you gain more credibility and prominence in your organization.

**Rule Three: The Rule of Learning Circuitry**

Learning circuitry refers to the way different groups in an organization work together to ensure that training programs are successful. Functions like sales, marketing, training, and delivery are all integral to a strong learning circuitry. To create learning circuits that can be used to launch and administer virtual classrooms, organizations should follow five steps.

1. **Start with a core team.** When organizations first begin to move training to an online format, it is best to start with a small core team. Murdoch and Muller suggest assigning each core team member one essential strategy, and then to hold frequent meetings to report on progress.

2. **Think big and act small.** Although it is fine to create a broad vision of where the organization’s learning circuitry will go, it is a good idea to break that vision down into smaller pieces that can be incorporated into a systematic approach.

3. **Find executive champions.** An essential part of a learning circuitry is cultivating executive sponsors. These individuals play an important role in clearing obstacles to progress. Since all executives value initiatives that contribute to the bottom line, it is often useful to link virtual classroom projects to critical business objectives. One way to demonstrate this linkage is through a well executed business plan.

4. **Build it right the first time.** Before building a virtual classroom program, it is important to conduct thorough research and analysis. This will help guide what is necessary to build the right learning circuitry. An especially important part of this due diligence is support from the IT team. Rushing into decisions can waste time and money.

5. **Measure progress and tell people about it.** It is important to track the project’s progress, so data is available to support status reports and to compare results with traditional training efforts. Key metrics include the number of people trained, costs saved, and feedback scores. When compelling data is available, it can be beneficial to publicize the success story and keep the momentum growing for virtual classroom training.

**Rule Four: The Rule of Overcoming Bias**

One of the realities of the Learning Explosion is that it uncovers biases that people have toward new ways of learning. In their experience, Murdoch and Muller have found four types of biased leaders in organizations:

- **Turf Protectors.** Turf Protectors view new forms of learning as a threat to their position and power. One effective response is to gather facts and show them to the Turf Protector. It may not be easy to prove the validity of virtual classrooms, since Turf Protectors frequently establish barriers to prevent new initiatives from threatening their job or image.

- **Creatures of Habit.** This type of person likes the safety of familiar programs. Although they avoid new ideas, their eyes can be opened to the value of innovative types of training. It may be helpful to show how far ahead the competition is getting. Another approach is to offer both instructor led training and online training, and then identify which course format people preferred.

- **Nail Biters.** These individuals avoid online training because they do not understand the underlying technology. Knowledge can help them overcome their fears. One effective approach is to educate Nail Biters about the pros and cons of the new technologies and to schedule an online demonstration with a technology vendor.
The Unenlightened. Some leaders simply are not interested in online training, even though it is the wave of the future. It may be necessary to go over these people’s heads to find champions in the organization. If unenlightened leaders are the norm in the organization, however, it may be time to look for another job.

Like leaders, learners can also have biases about online learning. Positive word of mouth can help alleviate concerns. Other solutions include scheduling more virtual sessions than instructor led ones, getting executive endorsements, and simplifying the procedures related to online training.

**Rule Five: The Rule of Virtual Accountability**

During an online training session, attendees may not feel as accountable as they do in a traditional classroom setting. Their body language and nonverbal communication are not visible. As a result, virtual classroom instructors must ensure that students are held accountable in three ways: verbally, visually, and kinesthetically.

There are many ways that online course instructors can hold their students verbally accountable. For example, Murdoch and Muller recommend that some form of verbal interaction occur at least every two to three minutes in a virtual classroom. Other techniques include using people’s names, asking students to elaborate on comments, and asking open ended questions.

When trainers keep students visually accountable, there is a greater likelihood that their behavior will change as the result of the training. To create visual accountability, instructors should orient learners about the tools available in the virtual classroom, create attractive visuals, ask learners to account for what they are seeing, and provide a visual road map.

Studies have found that people learn better when teaching involves movement. As a result, kinesthetic accountability is a good thing to incorporate into virtual classrooms. Every two to three minutes, the instructor should require students to interact in some way. Other approaches are to offer hands-on material that can be downloaded, provide short offline activities, and modules that include Flash interactivity.

**Rule Six: The Rule of Personal Practice**

The most effective virtual classroom instructors have developed four competencies related to personal practice: platform proficiency, facilitator observation, imitation, and personalization.

- **Platform proficiency.** It is essential that virtual classroom instructors immerse themselves in their organization’s online learning platform and become proficient with the various features and tools. Instructors must be comfortable enough with the platform to solve common technical problems on their own. Regardless of technical expertise, however, sometimes things will still go wrong. In these cases, it is necessary to have a backup plan in place.

- **Facilitator observation.** Skilled online instructors are able to monitor students’ engagement and encourage interaction, even though the students are not physically located in the same place. To learn these skills, it can be useful to observe other facilitators either during a live event or through a recording.

- **Imitation.** After observing effective online instructors, it is a good idea to imitate their behaviors with a live audience. Ask the practice audience to provide constructive criticism.

- **Personalization.** After gaining platform proficiency, observing a skilled facilitator, and imitating their practices, instructors should feel free to personalize their teaching with their own style and customized content. Different types of customization include anecdotes, stories, and images.

Practice-teaching and understanding your platform will help alleviate any anxiety you may have prior to teaching. There is no substitute for good preparation, and your attendees will be able to recognize this.

**Rule Seven: The Rule of Thumbs Up**

In today’s digital world, people can leave their mark through rating purchases or providing online feedback on experiences. This behavior can be leveraged in the virtual classroom environment. Trainers should
provide students with the opportunity to provide feedback which can be used to continuously improve the learning experience. Murdoch and Muller outline five steps to an effective feedback process:

1. **Make the feedback tool easy to use.** The feedback mechanism for online courses should be easy to find, navigate, and use. A variety of free and fee-based online survey and collaboration tools can be used for this purpose.

2. **Keep it short.** The most successful rating systems are simple. The authors recommend asking two to five feedback questions and offering people the option to add their own comments.

3. **Listen and learn.** Once feedback has been gathered, the next step is analyzing the information to identify what changes should be made. A key part of the analysis should be looking for patterns in the feedback and recurring suggestions.

4. **Apply changes.** After making student-recommended changes to the virtual classroom, contact the learners who made the suggestions and thank them.

5. **Repeat often.** It is a good practice to schedule time to regularly review course feedback and to continually improve the online training experience.

**RULE EIGHT: THE RULE OF GLOBAL POSITIONING**

Since globalization has become commonplace in the business world, the probability of conducting virtual classroom training with international students is high. Murdoch and Muller strongly recommend having knowledgeable aides to help navigate both language and cultural differences.

With online training, content can be localized quickly and a high quality localized product will advance a virtual classroom initiative rapidly. For the best results, it is advisable to use localization resources in the countries where the training will be delivered.

**RULE NINE: THE RULE OF SUSTAINED ORBIT**

When launching a virtual classroom initiative, there are a variety of forces which can hinder success. These include leaders’ biases, budget restrictions, inadequate planning, or lack of focus. Based on their experiences, Murdoch and Muller suggest that there are two types of successful virtual classroom launches:

- **Pure force launches.** These launches succeed due to immense effort by a team that is focused and dedicated. They understand the vision and do whatever is necessary to attain it.

- **Critical initiative launches.** These launches often support important customers. In this case, it is important not to overpromise to clients and then not be able to deliver. To avoid this, ask experts on the project to speak directly with clients to set expectations.

The launch of a virtual classroom can only be a success if the key team members in the learning circuitry are trained properly. Two primary types of launch training are outreach training and technical support training.

Outreach training is designed to educate people who will be selling the virtual classroom offerings. Weekly pre-launch meetings are advisable to ensure that every team member is held accountable. After launch, daily meetings should be held to address issues.

Technical support training is appropriate for every team member, not just people on the technical support team. Effective technical support training includes hands-on instruction, as well as a thorough frequently-asked-questions document.

**FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

**Reading Time: 3.5 hours, 186 pages**

In *The Learning eXPLOSION*, Matthew Murdoch and Treion Muller share best practices related to moving traditional training to virtual classrooms. Useful tools, practical tips, and rules are included throughout the book. Each chapter concludes with Learning Explosion Action Plan that will help readers make the transition from instructor led training to a virtual format. Since the ideas build from one chapter to the next, the book should be read from cover to cover. *The Learning eXPLOSION* would be of greatest interest to corporate trainers and instructional designers. At the end of the book, notes and an index have been provided for reference.
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