



# Practical Advice for Learning Designers

who are working with SMEs and other faculty members to create online courses.



# Introduction

Insendi has had the great pleasure of working with a global network of learning designers from diverse backgrounds. This rich and fruitful opportunity for knowledge-sharing has provided a broad range of cases through which to identify and address challenges that are universal in the field.

Drawing on this knowledge, we've shared below some practical advice for learning designers working in close collaboration with SMEs - an important aspect of many designers' jobs.

Notably, this advice converges around practical skills that underpin the success of a project, and not theoretical foundations of learning design. These practical skills are of paramount importance as learning designers work closely with members of a program team to develop online and blended courses.



## Tip 1

### **Forge and maintain a good working relationship with your subject matter expert (SME)**

When it comes to top tips for project success, learning designers invariably underscore the importance of forging and maintaining a strong relationship with the SME. Research tells us that SMEs often struggle with online course development and delivery. They may approach the process with a range of concerns, including:



“perceived barriers to student success ... uncertainty about their image as online instructors, technical support needs, and their desire for reasonable workload... in online classes”

*(Wingo et al., 2017).*

As a learning designer, part of your job is to identify the needs of your SME, support them through their journey in online education, and help alleviate their concerns along the way. In your first meetings, try to inspire and build up the SME’s enthusiasm by showing them great examples of what their final online course might look like on the LMS you are working with.



Establish open communication from the start and encourage your SME to ask questions and share creative new teaching ideas, no matter how wild. Show that you care about their course by carefully reading through their course materials and finding additional learning resources, such as online tools or YouTube videos. Get to know your SME's approach to teaching as soon as possible: what works well for them in the classroom is typically a great starting point for designing online.

In early development meetings, building a successful working relationship can be as simple as asking the right questions.

The following pages have some helpful examples.





## Enquiries about the course

These are designed to help you understand the needs of the target students, promote SME engagement, discuss their teaching style, and identify opportunities to reimagine elements of the course online.

- ✓ *What are your learners like?*
- ✓ *Why do you enjoy teaching this course?*
- ✓ *How might assessment change when the course is translated online?*
- ✓ *How do you foster social learning on your course?*
- ✓ *How do you normally teach this point?*
- ✓ *Is there anything you think might not work online?*
- ✓ *What can we do when the course goes live to make this a rich experience for learners?*



## Enquiries about the SME's experiences and needs

These questions are designed to highlight any worries the SME may have, help you manage the project around their other commitments, and forge a collaborative working relationship.

- ✓ *Do you have any previous experiences of teaching online?*
- ✓ *How comfortable are you in front of a camera?*
- ✓ *What does your schedule look like over the next few weeks/months?*
- ✓ *Is there anything I can help with in the meantime?*

Remember, many SMEs will not have collaborated previously on course design, or had their work submitted to such close examination. Let your SME know that you are there to help and that their efforts during development, and active engagement during delivery, will pay off hugely in terms of learner satisfaction and attainment of their learning objectives.



## Tip 2

### **Do not worry that you are not an expert in each course subject area—embrace it!**

Hailing from a field of innate learning-lovers, learning designers are often tempted to study each new course subject in depth, which would enable them to converse with the SME in greater detail and possibly author some main content for the course. This is often not possible – given the fact that a single LD may be juggling multiple disparate courses at once – or indeed conducive to the production of a great course; learners are paying for the expertise of a seasoned teacher/practitioner in their field: the SME. A useful distinction to remember is that the LD role is fundamentally that of a content curator, not creator.



The learning designer role is fundamentally that of a content curator, not creator.

During the development of a course, embrace the discomfort of being new to the subject and leverage it to your advantage. Experts sometimes forget what it feels like to not understand basic concepts or methodologies in their field. Teaching materials can become clouded in jargon with gaps of assumed knowledge, making it



difficult for students to follow the learning journey. As a novice in the subject, you can help identify and address these sticking points.

To achieve this, get comfortable asking the question ‘why?’. Why is your SME teaching certain ideas in certain ways at certain points of the course? If you can’t see the relevance of a task or don’t understand how your SME got from A to B, politely ask them to explain or reframe. If you don’t, there is a good chance that a learner will be thinking the very same question when they take the course.

In some cases, you may face bigger challenges that tempt you to take on more of an SME role. For example, there may be large gaps in the course content or assessment structure, which the SME is reluctant to fill. Your SME may miss deadlines or ask you to author larger sections of the course for them. If you face such challenges, you can be firm and politely push faculty to provide content or meet deadlines, bringing in your project manager to help if necessary.

### **How to embrace not being an expert in every subject area**

- 1** Get comfortable asking “Why?”
- 2** Don’t take on more of the SME role
- 3** Brave the difficult conversations



Other learning designers can also be an invaluable source of support and guidance.

Don't be afraid to have difficult conversations, express your views, and clearly set out the distinctions between the responsibilities of an SME and an LD. Remember, you are a subject matter expert in your own field: online learning.





## Tip 3

### Organisation and communication are key skills for any learning designer

Don't underestimate the importance of getting organised from the very start of each project! Most learning designers work with multiple SMEs across a variety of courses. SMEs in turn are juggling numerous priorities, so set clear expectations for them at the start and end of each meeting or development phase. Try to anticipate what the SME may need during a meeting and have all of those resources ready (see below for examples). You may find it helpful to send follow-up emails to summarise agreed key action points.

Liaise regularly with project managers to keep them updated and flag any issues early on. Work together to track and clearly report your progress. Course builds are often big projects with many moving parts, so creating course checklists and procedures can save you a lot of time and help keep everyone

#### Think ahead: will the SME meeting require...

- Style guides?
- Templates?
- Development timelines?
- Demonstrative example courses?
- Activity sequences?

organised. You may also be required to coordinate with teaching assistants, graphic designers, video editors and program teams. It is your role to document and communicate key pieces of information to the correct groups at the appropriate times.



**Your ability to maintain and establish great working relationships will determine your success and enjoyment as a learning designer.**

Insendi advocates the importance of human connection, clear communication, community-building, and social learning in online higher education courses. These values feed through to the way we've built our course builder tool. It goes without saying that learning designers need an understanding of robust pedagogies, in-depth knowledge of their learning platform, and a passion for creating powerful and transformative learning experiences. However, it is your ability to maintain and establish great working relationships that can ultimately determine your success and enjoyment working as a learning designer.

### **References**

Wingo, Nancy Pope, Nataliya V. Ivankova, and Jacqueline A. Moss. (2017) 'Faculty Perceptions about Teaching Online: Exploring the Literature Using the Technology Acceptance Model as an Organizing Framework.' *Online Learning* 21.1, pp. 15-35.



## **Insendi helps learning designers like you create higher-quality online courses, quicker.**

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