

Can e-learning be better learning?

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Every now and again something comes along that really excites you. For me that's usually the discovery of a new connection. It's like life is a jigsaw puzzle, and you push the pieces around on the table, and then, suddenly, about seven pieces go together all at once. That's what happened for me this week.

You know, e-learning has its own design protocols: keep it short and to the point; make it work well on mobile devices; hook it into social media; be sure to tell a story; and, always create links to further reading. There are more, depending who you talk to.

But there are higher-level questions I always ask up front:

- Why are we doing this?
- Is this about better access to learning?
- Or, is this about better learning?
- Or, are we going to attempt both?

Almost by default, e-learning creates better access to learning. Assuming the learner has a smartphone ([by 2018, New Zealand will have 90% smartphone ownership, Frost & Sullivan](#)) then you are putting the learning materials into the learner's hand; whether they are sitting in the classroom, riding on the bus, or lying on their bed bored on a wet Sunday.

The added value comes when you can also make it better learning.

The seven pieces of the jigsaw that fitted into my big picture were called, "The seven models of co-teaching". I was building the Moodle component of one of CORE's programmes of professional learning and became seduced by the content. Gosh, I thought. Golly. This could inform online learning design! [The source for this material](#) suggests four types of co-teaching, but the principles are the same.

Let's go off down a side road for a minute — well, a cul-de-sac really — and look at how online learning design hasn't changed much since its early beginnings in CBT Computer Based Training in the 1990s. Read a passage of text, answer a quiz. That's just not true, I hear you cry! We do engaging videos with images of people talking and moving their hands overlaid on PowerPoint slides, and then we have a quiz, and a forum where the learners can discuss their ideas. I rest my case that e-learning design has not changed much, only the media have: ingest by some means this chunk of content, do a quiz. Nobody uses the forum anyway; only where a lot of resource is poured into it.

Admittedly, that's a bit of a jaundiced view of e-learning design, and I am not trying to deny that there are people doing a whole lot better than that. But they are not the majority. Our Learning Design team at CORE are always looking for new ways to make e-learning easy to access and better learning. But in reality, change is incremental not radical.

So now, let's look at the seven models of co-teaching, the content about modern learning practices that had grabbed my attention.

I want to roll the first three into one:

One teach; one observe — Large groups co-teaching strategy which is useful when doing things like gathering data for teaching as inquiry.

One teach; one drift — One teacher leads the instruction while the other moves around the learners, checking for understanding, clarifying, checking correct process etc.

One teach; one support — One teacher takes more of a lead role, with the second teacher providing something that complements or enhances the instruction.

Imagine one teacher teaching in the online space, with lectures, texts, and readings, and the other teacher moving about in the forum acting as a catalyst to discussions: challenging ideas, teasing out the thinking, offering further resources tailored to the individual student's interests. Those forums could suddenly come to life and become vibrant learning communities.

Team teaching — Both (all) teachers take an equal role in leading the instruction of a large group.

I have actually experienced 'Team teaching' on a Coursera course Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects. Professors Dr Barbara Oakley and Dr Terrence Sejnowski took roughly equal turns to deliver the video lectures. Coming from different disciplines (Oakley is an engineer, Sejnowski is a biologist), but teaching the exact same subject, they gave participants two distinct approaches to the material. Oakley came across as a little wacky at times, but the more conservative Sejnowski endorsed her ideas. They complemented each other well.

Parallel teaching — Small group strategy where groups of learners cover the same material with different teachers.

Imagine if two teachers taught the exact same material to two discrete groups? That's a little like the Caves Tour model of e-learning design. The metaphor describes participants queuing for a guided tour of the caves (materials), the next tour starts soon and each group goes around together, but separate from other groups. E-learning like this usually runs in a weekly cycle and each week the teacher covers a new topic. Suppose as an associated activity the two groups did teachback in a forum? The slightly different take on the subject as described by each of two teachers would lend a gnarl and a richness that could be compelling. The metaphor holds. It's like visitors to the caves exchanging highlights of the tour in the carpark: our guide said this, our guide did that! Did you see the stalactites? Did you put your hand in the freezing water?

Station teaching — Small group strategy where groups of learners cover different material with different teachers.

Consider a branching approach where one third of the students learn one third of the material with one of three teachers. The other two study teams learn their third with two other teachers, all run in parallel. Then they all come together in a forum at the end and assemble the three parts. It would take a lot of orchestration and effort on the part of the teachers. It would require buy-in from the learners. But, if it could be made to work, it would create a rich and rewarding learning experience that had a high chance of sticking.

Alternative teaching — One teacher leads the instruction for a larger group, which frees up another teacher to work with a small group on a very specific learning need.

Experienced online facilitators can manage large groups of students, especially if the course has been well designed. Twenty-five participants is often cited as the largest viable cohort. But I think that, for a short duration at least, an online teacher might manage fifty. Freeing, perhaps, a colleague to develop the next topic or module. In the next term or semester the two might exchange roles, because a change is as good as a rest. A two-person team working in this way would have long legs.

The challenge is to find management who are not expecting e-learning to create staffing efficiencies and save them money. For teachers (tutors, trainers) to get sponsorship for approaches that will make learning better at a greater cost conjures up camels and the eyes of needles.

If you think of e-learning design as designing spaces in which to learn, this approach may lead you to some new thinking and some new ways of doing things.

Links

Dr Richard Villa, [Effective Co-Teaching Strategies](#)

Coursera [Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects](#)
(Professors Dr Barbara Oakley and Dr Terrence Sejnowski)



Stephen Lowe

[Stephen Lowe](#) has an MSc in Computer Science from University of Liverpool in the UK. He developed and taught a 3-year multimedia course at Aoraki Polytechnic before coming to CORE Education seven years ago as a Learning Designer.