

Debunking the 4 Myths of Online Learning

By Emily Gregory and Justin Hale

Online learning gets a bad rap—and deservedly so.

For decades (yes, it's been that long!) eLearning courses have been clunky, ugly, awkward, difficult to use, boring and just plain ineffective. As teachers of face-to-face, interpersonal skills, we at VitalSmarts saw the live classroom as the only place where complex interpersonal behaviors could be taught, or at least taught well. For years, we peered over the wall from the comfort of our classrooms at online learning and saw only the glaring inadequacies and technological shortcomings.

But then, something happened. Slowly, online learning platforms started leveraging the best in adult learning concepts and practices. Online learning technologies began to allow for more social interaction, started to deliver bite-sized and easy-to-integrate content, and deployed content with spaced and blended learning options which, when utilized well, translated into powerful learning experiences. Online technologies began addressing challenges and solving problems we battled with for years in live classrooms. To be frank, most eLearning courses still don't take advantage of these technologies. But slowly, we saw the possibilities and became converted to the idea that we could build an online course that would deliver a high-quality and effective learning experience—one that may even be superior (and here's the caveat) for a large percentage of modern learners.

This evolution in learning technology was not random. It was driven by and walking a pace or two behind an evolution in the learner. Learners themselves were changing. Obvious changes included shorter attention spans, higher expectations, and greater susceptibility to distractions. In addition, learners have become increasingly data-driven, protective of their time, and place a greater emphasis on efficacy. Most importantly, the modern learner sees the internet, not the classroom, as the primary place of learning.

As a result of this evolution, we at VitalSmarts are confident the online learning technology can now deliver a rock-solid learning experience. So confident, in fact, that we created Crucial Conversations Online. Utilizing the latest e-learning advances and leaning on our decades of experience in designing award-winning training, we've not only adapted to the limitations of online learning, but completely debunked the myths that online delivery is an inferior modality for learning.

In designing Crucial Conversations Online, we targeted (and effectively, in our opinion) four common myths of online learning to create a top-notch, world-class learning experience:

Myth #1: Instructor-led training is the “gold standard” for every learner.

Myth #2: Online learning's primary purpose is to serve scale, not individuals.

Myth #3: Online learning creates a lack of accountability for the learner.

Myth #4: Instructor-led training is more social and better leverages social learning.

Myth #1: Instructor-led training is the “gold standard” for every learner.

The Truth: Crucial Conversations Online is designed to be the gold standard for many learners.

This is the most common myth of all. In a former life, we said it ourselves dozens of times: “The best option is to get learners in the face-to-face classroom, but if that won't work, you could try a different modality—though it won't be the same.” For some learners, this is a true statement, but for many others, an online modality is actually better. Here's why:

Not all learners are created equal. We often receive feedback that learners struggle when forced to learn at the same speed others do. For example, in the classroom, slower learners may struggle to fully grasp the concepts at a quick pace, let alone, think about ways to apply them. These learners may share feedback that they feel like they are “drinking from a firehose”. Meanwhile, faster learners disengage when the instructor slows the pace to accommodate for others.

In an online modality, slower learners can engage with the content at their own speed. They can learn new skills, spend time with concepts that are more challenging, and even review content they've

already covered—luxuries that are difficult to pull off in the classroom. Faster learners can move quickly, leading to increased engagement, shorter time to application, and less time away from their job so they can quickly tackle problems with a set of freshly-minted skills.

Research also shows that the modern learner is a more distracted one. At a minimum, they check their phone eighty-five times a day, their email fifteen times a day, and are bombarded with chatty co-workers and a barrage of meetings. To address this constant flow of distractions, we've designed the content to be delivered in bite-sized modules and delivered through a variety of modalities ranging from video clips to discussion threads to interactive quizzes and games. This type of fast-paced learning environment is consistent with today's workplace and keeps learners engaged regardless of their learning speed. Not only does this design increase learning and transference, but if learners do get distracted, they can easily pick up where they left off for a seamless training experience.

The spaced and online nature of the course also better accommodates workforces that are remote or find it difficult (or unbearable) to carve out the full days required to attend training in a more traditional classroom setting. With online, learners can learn when it is convenient, or in the very moment when they need new skills to solve a pressing problem. The benefits of spaced learning don't end at convenience. Perhaps the supreme benefit is the mastery of the material. Research shows transference demonstrably improves as people digest and apply small amounts of learning over time, versus all at once—a learning experience that proves to be more difficult to achieve in the traditional classroom.

Myth #2: Online learning's primary purpose is to serve scale, not individuals.

The Truth: Crucial Conversations Online is designed to serve the individual.

Many learning practitioners view online learning as a modality that serves scale, rather than individual learners. After all, when you need to train large numbers quickly and inexpensively, online learning is the modality of choice. When you have more time and money, when you can choose a modality based on effectiveness without consideration of scale, that's when you turn to the more intimate, traditional classroom. Considering the way we've built Crucial Conversations Online, we politely disagree.

A program designed to serve scale treats learners as if they are a monolithic group with the same needs and learning styles. And while most L&D professionals don't believe all learners are the same, many programs treat them as such. Many courses, both online and instructor-led, force learners to learn in specific ways through rote modalities, instead of mapping the modality to the learner.

We took the latter approach in building Crucial Conversations Online: we mapped the modality to the learner. We've incorporated many different learning pathways so learners can choose what works best for them. We've added additional videos and podcasts for audio/visual-

oriented learners; a library of Q&A articles for those who learn best by reading and want to better understand how the skills come together to solve real problems; and role play exercises, journaling sessions, and photo resources for a more tactile, hands-on learner.

In addition, learners are in control of their own experience and can move through the content at a pace that best aligns to their preferred learning speed and their individual time constraints. By providing this type of flexibility and control, learning is completely focused on the individual. Learners can also experience the skills and content they need when they need it, as opposed to being tightly directed by a traditional classroom agenda. To be clear, we're not disparaging the face-to-face classroom—many learners thrive there—but for some, they'll find it easier to tailor their own learning in our online course.

When done well, online learning does not take an assembly-line approach of pushing each learner through the same path. Instead, online training is the ultimate experience in personalized learning—allowing each learner to wander and discover, to explore and ponder. Two wildly different learners may go through our course and both leave feeling like they've had an experience hand-crafted to their specific needs.

Myth #3: Online learning creates a lack of accountability for the learner.

The Truth: Crucial Conversations Online is built to provide a greater sense of accountability.

In a traditional classroom, a facilitator can keep tabs on a learner's attention and progress—to a certain extent. Often, learners get distracted or fail to participate. Due to the number of people in a classroom, it's challenging to keep everyone fully engaged. Engagement is measured by attention, not learning. Facilitators do their best to juggle the demands of both teaching the course and also keeping people accountable for their attention and learning. Not to mention, the accountability a facilitator creates around learning and application typically ends the moment the learner walks out the classroom doors.

While keeping an online learner engaged also presents challenges, there are benefits of the online modality. Course managers can view each learning activity a learner has (or hasn't) completed, signaling each learner's progress through the course. And because of the spaced nature of the modality, course managers can follow up with learners multiple times during the course to offer encouragement and coaching—all while holding the learner accountable to applying the skills outside the classroom. With more opportunities to monitor individual progress and learning activities, a course manager can better control engagement and skill mastery online than in a traditional classroom.

Myth #4: Instructor-led training is more social and better leverages social learning.

The Truth: Crucial Conversations Online allows for more social interaction and learning when it counts.

When teaching interpersonal skills, many practitioners see social learning as imperative. We agree. That's why we've meticulously built social components into our online course—especially when it matters.

In a traditional classroom, learners interact with a handful of peers during a classroom discussion and often practice skills in small groups or one-on-one pairs. In addition, they may get a smidge of personal interaction with the instructor. We actually see this level of social interaction as a constraint rather than a strength.

In Crucial Conversations Online, a group of learners can discuss the application of a skill in social threads. When a learner practices a skill, they do so for the rest of the class to observe and provide feedback. Conversely, learners can also see how the other members of their group apply the same skills. So rather than just seeing a partner demonstrate the behaviors, learners can see how everyone in the class approaches the skills—allowing them to pick up even more social nuances than they might in a classroom. Rather than a handful of social exchanges, online learners experience dozens and dozens of interactions.

Additionally, the spaced nature of the course allows course managers to give feedback to each individual learner—this type of one-on-one coaching is at the heart of effective learning.

A Powerful Modality for the Modern Learner

Over the decades we've spent teaching interpersonal skills, we've learned that no learning modality—traditional classroom, live instructor-led online class, or asynchronous online learning platform—is going to address all the needs and preferences of every learner. What we've found is that to address the needs of large groups in the most efficient and effective way, a multi-modality strategy proves time and again to be the most successful. That's why we're excited about Crucial Conversations Online.

For modern learners who are comfortable with technology and thrive in an online environment, who crave social collaboration and learning, who want their learning on demand and specific to their immediate needs, and who find it difficult to carve out the time or impossible to sit through day-long classes, Crucial Conversations Online is the ideal solution. And we can comfortably wager that while this type of modern learner may feel few and far between today, they will fit the archetype of learners in your organization in the very near future.

Equipped with traditional classroom training, live instructor-led online classrooms, and now the online asynchronous class, learning

professionals have a powerful arsenal to meet their learners when and where learning will be most powerful.

About Crucial Conversations Online

Crucial Conversations Online takes VitalSmarts award-winning dialogue skills on-demand—but it's not the dry, sleepy experience you've come to associate with online training. Crucial Conversations Online turns traditional online training on its head by harnessing the latest instructional design behind modern learning to deliver a flexible, social, and interactive experience that translates into real behavior change.

Crucial Conversations Online offers 10-12 hours of instruction, recommended to be consumed 2-3 hours per week over four weeks. Crucial Conversations Online is designed to reach the modern-learner with bite-sized learning modules, social learning and reinforcement, and ease of access. Users learn through self-paced activities focused on observing and recognizing the skills, and then applying those skills to a crucial conversation of their own.

Learn more at vitalsmarts.fr/online-learning.

About Emily Gregory

As the Vice President of Product Development and Client Delivery at VitalSmarts, Emily leads the product teams, works with clients to customize products for their organizations, and sets the standard for all facilitators. Working closely with the *New York Times* bestselling VitalSmarts authors and thought leaders, Emily brings the best of social science research to organizations in meaningful and actionable ways.

About Justin Hale

Justin is one of the key subject matter experts on the VitalSmarts development team and is the VitalSmarts virtual training guru. He has led the effort in virtual and online development and instruction. Seventy percent of attendees rate Justin's virtual courses as equally engaging as or more engaging than the face-to-face training they've attended.