



ONLINE
LEARNING
in Public Health Education

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With the advancement of technology over the years, there has been a vast expansion in the use of distance learning for employment training purposes. One of the main benefits of online versus traditional training is that it gives instructors the opportunity to teach pupils who, because of traveling distance and transport limitations or other access challenges, would be unable to participate if the content weren't offered via the Internet. Another advantage most are unaware of is the effectiveness of online education. The latest data from a meta-analysis concluded that online education seems just as efficient as traditional education, and further suggested that students in online learning environments have a greater opportunity to expand their knowledge than other students taught in more traditional methods¹.

Online learning is becoming an invaluable tool for many instructors in the field of public health. Unfortunately, there are many problems that may arise from public health training because of the overall complexity and nature of public health in the United States. Every state, for example, has diverse laws concerning public health—some of which may be obsolete and insufficient in certain circumstances². Furthermore, the issues pertaining to public health are profuse and vary significantly.

The goals of this article are to offer some strategic planning for online public health trainers, and to provide a thorough understanding of the potential benefits for adult workers who might be interested in online public health education.

Ideas for Online Training Instructors

Become Computer Savvy: It is crucial for instructors to feel comfortable operat-

ing a computer and its components—a necessity for online training. Of utmost importance is the complete understanding of the learning management system (LMS) instructors will be using. This should be first and foremost since the LMS acts as a basis for student-instructor communication during the training.

To become an online training instructor, in health care or in any field, it is imperative that you be more efficient in computer usage than the lay person. Microsoft Office, for instance, should be known and used with absolute efficiency. The applications within this suite are synergistically compatible with one another, so your understanding of even the most advanced tools will make you a well-rounded instructor. Other common computer programs public health instructors should be familiar with include Adobe Reader, along with the Web browser(s) and anti-virus software that are currently being used.

Take Advantage of the Internet:

Regular use of the Internet can simultaneously make the job easier and more successful. A perfect example would be to employ the use of Webinars. The portmanteau “Webinar” originates from the words, “Web-based seminar.” A Webinar is different from a Webcast because Webinars are interactive between the presenter(s) and the audience, whereas Webcasts can only transmit information one-way—consequently inhibiting any interaction whatsoever. Therefore, Webinars offer a huge advantage to online trainers because they are able to review criticism, ask/answer questions and initiate debates. In addition to seminars, Webinars are also utilized for workshops, lectures and presentations.

Another great way for trainers to benefit from using the Internet is to provide

online chat hours to their pupils. This would be similar in fashion and design to a university professor having office hours for their students, but instead of meeting trainers face-to-face, the meeting would take place in cyberspace via the Internet.

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Choose Web Sites Wisely: Specific types of Web sites geared to online communities, video-sharing, social networking and blogging can be integrated into online training. Though some of those particular Web sites may prove priceless to trainers, others might cause more harm than good; therefore, a conscientious effort needs to be made when choosing which of these Web sites to employ. Immensely popular Web sites that are accommodating to the needs of the general population should not be the first choice

because of credibility challenges, as well as issues related to Web filtering. In terms of blogging, Web sites that employ the use of microblogging, which can be sent and received via text messages, should be given consideration because of the tre-

mendous number of cell phone owners; in addition, they offer promptness, ease and convenience in both sending and receiving these messages. Additionally, blogging Web sites should have privacy settings that are under the complete control of

the trainer. The main rule for all trainers should be that only individuals directly involved in the training should be able to read and submit blogs pertaining to the training. Moreover, Web sites strictly devoted to what are called "edublogs" are a wise selection for blogging because they are only used for educational functions³.

Suggestions for People Interested in Public Health Online Training

There are some individuals who may register to take public health online training courses for the sake of the learning experience only. However, the majority of trainees who sign up for online training do it as part of a requirement. Whether this requirement is required by law, a prerequisite for class, mandatory training for a job, gaining continuing education credit (CEC), continuing education units (CEU), and/or continuing medical education (CME) for a certification or license, it is primarily up to the trainee to determine the value of the class that they are considering enrolling in.

Courses that are prerequisites, are intended for job training, and/or required by law are rather straightforward, with the options being restricted to what the college, university or employer considers being appropriate for their standards. In other words, the list of suitable training courses in these types of situations is already chosen for potential trainees. Although this serves as practical for trainees, it also makes matters quite limited at times in terms of variability in the classes one may take, even sometimes being restricted to one public health online course, which would therefore make the class compulsory.

At the other end of the spectrum, when it comes to CEC, CEU and CME, the options are abundant. Correct obtainment of CME is uncomplicated for physicians in the medical field because they are only regulated by two organizations: the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education for medical doctors

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and the American Osteopathic Association for osteopathic physicians. For other public health professionals, state-by-state CME obligations are easy to understand. You can visit the CME Web site at www.cmelist.com/list.html to learn more. (Going onto this site may prove useful to individuals who need CME and are interested in online training courses in public health.)

Acquiring CEU and CEC via online training, however, is much more complicated than CME because CEU and CEC are far more generalized, with the many different associations that use them individually determining what counts as acceptable and what does not. Therefore, what is in the best interest of individuals who need CEC/CEU is to contact the organization(s) that they need the continuing education for to determine the courses that may serve CEC/CEU re-

quirements. A suggestion for people who need CEC/CEU and are interested in online training but live outside the United States, is to become a member of, and seek advice from, the International Association for Continuing Education and Training, which is an association devoted to training programs and continuing education of only the highest standard.

Online Training is Vital

Online training is not only vital to public health education, but to adult education in general. Adults can easily benefit from online training's flexibility and versatility. Many of the recommendations outlined in this article for public health online trainers can be employed by online instructors in any area to improve teaching efficacy. Whenever feasible, online training should strongly be considered as an essential tool in adult education and training. **i**

Endnotes

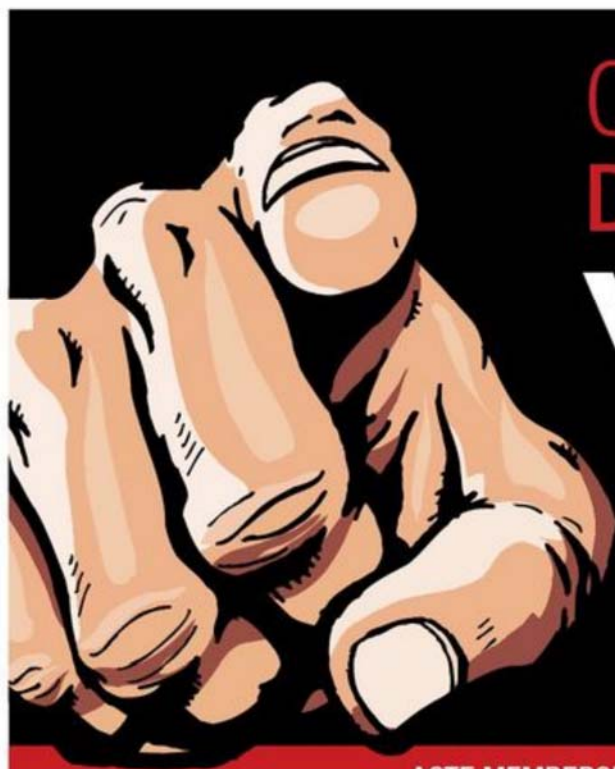
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