It’s the second week in September at SAP’s training center in Newtown Square, PA. Instructors Nicole Duffy and Matt Mantooth are presiding over what we refer to these days as the “traditional classroom.” Six rows of tables with workstations, a large projection screen in front, and three white boards.

This is Day 3 of Enterprise Data Warehousing (BW310), and despite rumors to the contrary, classroom training is alive and well here. Seventeen students from “all over” – Greater Philadelphia, New York, Ohio, Massachusetts, Calgary, Vancouver, and even Australia – make their way to their workstations, course manuals in hand. Duffy leads today’s session from an oversized podium, which has ample room for three computers, her course manual, notes, coffee, a water bottle, her cell phone…

BW310 is no walk in the park. It’s five days of intensive training, sprinkled with labs and group exercises covering data warehousing and modeling, data loading, how to use BI data, queries, administration and more. Duffy starts class by reassuring her students that the lessons they studied in the first two days will start making sense today. The class is taking a wait and see attitude.

“ Instructor-led training and online courses complement each other. A classroom course like this one (BW310) will give you a strong understanding of business warehouse concepts. Then, if you want to expand your knowledge of BI, you don’t need to come back to the classroom. You can take them as independent online learning.”

- SAP instructor Nicole Duffy
First on the agenda is a group quiz. Students sit in groups of three, discuss the questions, then present their answers to the class. Most groups nail the exercise, but if they don’t, Duffy or someone in the class lends a hand. After the quiz, Duffy moves through a series of course modules. Careful not to overwhelm the class with too much information, she lightens the mood with stories from other classes, a rundown of SAP fantasy football tools (powered by SAP HANA!), and a plug for Wawa convenience stores (one of the students in class works for Wawa).

Near the end of the day, everyone works on a pair of labs. It’s hard to say if fatigue, information overload, or a little of both have set in. Duffy and co-instructor Mantooth are kept busy helping students who struggle with the lab. “The labs for this course are well written,” Duffy says. “But they aren’t as intuitive as you might expect. I still find that I have to go around the room explaining them.”

For Allen Williams, a Data Management Analyst working for the U.S. Navy, the personal interaction is why he’s sitting here. “Being in a classroom you get to interact with people and help each other. You just can’t do this another way,” he says.

The virtual option...

Of course, people are doing it “another way.” Every day students and instructors are trading the in-person classroom experience for the “virtual live classroom.” Instead of walking into a classroom, they log in to a virtual meeting room where an instructor leads them through the class. These days, more than half of the courses led by SAP instructors are delivered this way. But how do you match the personalized, hands-on approach that a traditional classroom offers?

A good instructor can make all the difference in how people learn.

“In the virtual environment, students can raise their hand with the status indicator or simply ask for help on the conference call,” explains SAP instructor Mantooth. He asks them to share their screen in the virtual meeting room, and they work out the problem together. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll have them give up control of their screen so I can drive the mouse and keyboard.”

“When you come to a class you get the sense that you’re not alone. Coming here, seeing the SAP logo, it creates an attachment to the company. SAP is not just a job anymore.”

- BW310 student Chacha Mwita
Back to Class, continued

It’s subtle techniques like these that earn SAP instructors high marks with students. In fact, SAP’s North America instructor team is regularly at or near the top in global rankings. In student evaluations for classroom and virtual training, they receive high marks for their knowledge, as well as their ability to deliver training at a pace that works for all students – even when experience levels vary in the “room” they’re working.

The debate

Can you remember a time we weren’t debating the merits of online learning vs. instructor-led classes? It’s no surprise that those attending this BW310 session advocate instructor led training. “There are so many different perspectives,” says Allen Williams. “Different people ask different questions that you wouldn’t think of otherwise.” Patrick Banks, who travelled from Australia for the course adds, “Being in the presence of someone else changes the dynamic.” Chacha Mwita a BI Applications Analyst at Glatfelter, appreciates the chance to work with others in a classroom setting. “When you come to a class you get the sense that you’re not alone,” he says. “Coming here, seeing the SAP logo, it creates an attachment to the company. SAP is not just a job anymore.”

Many students in class agreed that classroom training is more focused, enabling them to work without distraction from outside pressures. And while it’s focused, it’s also adaptable. In instructor-led training, if the instructor notices that students aren’t “getting it,” they can improvise, adjusting class activities to better serve learning objectives. That’s not always the case for e-learning where topics are essentially hardcoded into the lesson.

The critics

Asking people who have chosen to invest in classroom training is a bit like preaching to the choir. You won’t find many critics. But there are others who would do everything in their power to avoid the classroom scene.

Enter Colleen Lee, an SAP Security and Roles Manager in Brisbane, Australia. She’s written a widely read blog on the SAP Community Network (SCN) titled “Learning - I’m doing it my way,” which at this writing is at 1,000 views and climbing. She’s blunt about her classroom experiences.

“Being in a classroom you get to interact with people and help each other. Different people ask different questions that you wouldn’t think of otherwise. You just can’t do this another way.”

- Allen Williams, right, working on a BW310 class exercise with colleague I.B. Kanu.

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“I am one of the worse participants you could have in your training room,” she writes. “I’m the type of student who has the attention span of a gnat. After about 10-20 minutes of content I’ve tuned out and am doodling in my notepad to stay awake.” But as an independent consultant (who hails from a family of teachers), she understands the value of training. “Learning did not stop the day I graduated university. SAP did not stand still the day I completed my training course. SAP evolved: new versions, components and concepts. With each evolution there was more to learn. For me to remain employable, I needed to keep up.”

As you might expect, Lee’s blog has sparked a lively discussion on both sides of the argument. For her part, Lee offers some practical advice: “Knowing what works for you and does not is important to succeed in learning.” In her case, this means having the flexibility to consume content her own pace. Not surprisingly, this has led her to explore SAP Learning Hub to obtain her SAP Security certifications.

“I know I will stop and restart a course a few times over before I complete it. I know I will more than likely switch between three or four courses by the time I finish the first one. But I know I can always come back to them and chip away at a chapter – up to 20 minutes at a time…I can become busy, push training to the side and then pick it up later. And finally, I can get my hands on the course material I need to prepare for my certification.”

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How “time shifting” is driving changes in learner preferences

We’ve known for years that people respond differently to various modes of learning. Colleen Lee is a perfect example. She knows she doesn’t learn effectively in the classroom, so she chooses to study on her own.

But these days, there’s another significant driver of learning preferences: daily life. People’s calendars are filled with work and life commitments. They need to squeeze in opportunities for learning when they can, and only invest the time they have at a particular moment. In his Chief Learning Officer article, E-learning Reaches a Milestone, IDC’s Cushing Anderson calls this phenomenon “time shifting.”

Anderson writes that this phenomenon “is a more important factor in determining learner convenience than simple ‘place shifting.”' In place shifting, learners choose options like virtual instructor-led training so they can control their location. They no longer have to travel, and can learn in a place that is convenient for them. But they are still locked in to a set class time.

Asynchronous online learning offers the benefits of both time and place shifting. Anderson concludes that because people need to control when they learn, more of them are selecting this type of learning for training.

The emphasis on time and place shifting, as well as budget pressures, would also seem to open doors for shorter, more focused bits of learning. That’s why organizations are increasingly looking to provide video-based instruction, simulations, and performance support. For some time, there’s also been a shift toward social learning, microlearning, and mobile learning.

SAP Education offers solutions to help you deliver these types of focused learning, including:

SuccessFactors Learning. A cloud-based learning management system that extends the learning platform to support “formal” learning, and can leverage the extensive content in SAP Learning Hub. Collaboration rooms provide an easy way to build informal networks.

SAP Workforce Performance Builder. Enables individuals within organizations to transfer knowledge and create content that can be published to the informal and formal learning platforms quickly and easily. It also offers strong on-the-job performance support.

SAP Communication Center by ANCILE. Pushes microlearning and other important communications to employees, and tracks consumption across any device with specific job-related information.
Back to Class, continued

Good news for learners

The more we explore how people learn, the more it becomes clear that students need options. Given the choice, some will stick with classroom training. Others will go virtual, look for on-the-job support, or jump into cloud learning.

Still more might decide that different training modes actually complement each other. They’ll create their own hybrid learning programs where classroom learning integrates seamlessly with e-learning, online collaboration, and training in the cloud.

Good learning options will help learners find the best path to meet their objectives.

To read more…

Learning - I’m doing it my way, by Colleen Lee
E-learning Reaches a Milestone, by Cushing Anderson

Collaboration and camaraderie

Students share ideas during a group exercise on the third day of their BW310 class at SAP’s training center in Newtown Square, PA. From left are Ravin Jani, Bill Canfield, Justin Grimme, and Patrick Banks.