THE INSIDER'S GUIDE

Making Learning Programs Stick:

Everything I Need to Know
I Learned in High School

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About the Author

Jennifer's career in learning and development spans over 20 years in the areas of design, development, implementation, management and measurement of learning and talent development solutions. She has provided strategic consulting for global customers across a myriad of industries with a focus on ensuring that learning and talent development are tied back to business goals and business impact. Jennifer also possesses broad experience in the areas of learning management system (LMS) implementations, migrations and administration while simultaneously providing project management, vendor management, facilitation and sales cycle support for all aspects of learning and talent development engagements.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Indulge me for a few minutes and take a trip in the Way Back Machine to high school. Don't worry, you won't be naked and there won't be any bullies, I promise.

I want you to think about that very first day when you arrived.

You knew that over the next four years your goal would be to work hard and graduate. Did you simply walk into the building and start dipping in and out of various classrooms, flipping through books and talking to random teachers? Of course not. More than likely you were already pre-assigned a room where you would go to receive an orientation.

During this orientation you learned some important things. You were given a schedule of your classes. You may have been provided with a map of the school and the location and combination of your locker where all your books, folders, papers and lunch would be stored. You might have even been assigned a buddy to help you through those tough first few days or weeks.
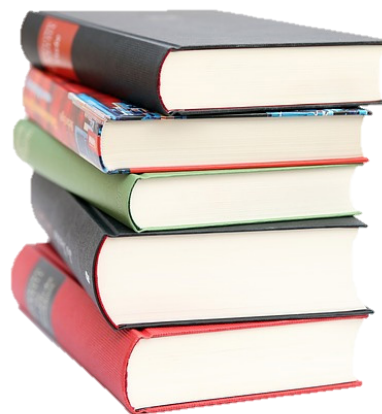
Once you got past the orientation and found your way to your first class, did the teacher hand you a whole bunch of books and materials and tell you "Good luck?" Nope. You probably got a syllabus which contained the entire semester's work in one document. You knew the chapters you were supposed to read, the assignments to complete, the due dates. Wow! You could actually plan out your entire schedule to make sure you got your work done on time. Pretty cool, huh?

The point of all this is that you weren't just thrown into the school and expected to know where and when to show up and what to do. You were provided with structure.

Ok… let's fast-forward a bit into the year. Perhaps you weren't doing so great in chemistry class and your grade started to slip. What are some of the things you might have done to get that grade back up? Aside from studying harder, if you just weren't grasping the concepts perhaps you could have asked your teacher for extra help after school. You might have been assigned a study buddy. Maybe you went to your guidance counselor and they assigned an upper classman as a tutor. The point is you had options to get help. You were provided with **support**.

Stay with me… Maybe you were one of those kids who were just bored in school or you didn't apply yourself. Don't worry over-achievers, I'm not directing this at you, but you all knew kids who could have been called "slackers." Let's pretend for a moment you might have been one of them. What would have happened when your grades started to take a nosedive? Your teacher may have pulled you aside and given you a stern lecture about applying yourself. Maybe you got called to your guidance counselor for a serious discussion about your performance. Perhaps there was a warning on your interim report. If you made no effort to improve, ultimately your report card would be your undoing and you'd have to face your parents. Uh oh…that could have all kinds of ugly consequences: long lectures, grounding, no more allowance, removal of privileges… In other words, you were held *accountable* for your performance, or lack thereof.

In thinking back over these glorious high school days, your main goal was to graduate. That's it. Did you have other responsibilities? Maybe you had a paper route. Or chores. Or you took care of a younger sibling. But for the most part there was nothing too burdensome and your sole responsibility was to get that diploma! And you were provided with the *structure*, the *support* and the *accountability* you needed to make it happen.

Let's think back to that first day of high school one more time. This time we are going to imagine that when the bus pulled up to the building the driver got on the intercom and said, "Hey kids! Your goal is to get your diploma. In that building we've got everything you need to make it happen. There are classrooms, teachers, books, movies and all kinds of cool stuff. Get in there and get it done. Have fun!" How many kids do you think would actually graduate? Sure some of the high-performers might have worked hard, figured it all out and made it. Most kids would probably have gone into the building, looked around and started studying, but ultimately they would give up when they got confused or it got too tough. The rest wouldn't have gone into the building at all.

> In high school, you were provided with structure, support and accountability to help you succeed.

Now let's fast forward to present day. What kind of responsibilities do you have now? I bet you're rolling your eyes and thinking, "A lot!" You have your job. Maybe you have a spouse and a family. You might be a caregiver for aging parents. Maybe you do a lot of volunteer work or you are actively involved in your community. The point is you DO have a lot of responsibilities! Adults in general have a lot of responsibilities.

Companies invest significantly in employee learning and development. They spend vast sums putting together training and rolling out blended learning programs. But why is it that now, with all the other responsibilities adults have on their plates, when it comes to learning most organizations do not provide employees with what they need most: *structure*, *support* and *accountability*?

In this eBook, we are going to explore this in more depth and discuss what goes into these three critical elements for blended learning success.

Structuring Programs for Success

Now that we know the three critical elements for blended learning success – structure, support and accountability – we will start by focussing on the first of those three elements: structure.

When we took our trip together in the Way Back Machine to our glorious high school days, we were reminded of our structured overall learning experience. We were provided with a schedule of our classes and each class had its own unique syllabus that laid out the schedule of assignments and deliverables for the entire semester. We knew in advance what chapters we had to read, when we would have quizzes and tests and when assignments such as research papers and reports were due. This allowed us to plan in advance and better manage our time to ensure we were able to meet goals and complete our assignments on schedule.

I realize that not all of us were consistently diligent and that sometimes we might have checked a syllabus and thought, "Oh no! I completely forgot about that assignment!" (and then tried to complete it on the bus ride to school). But the point is that we were told what to expect and when to expect it, so that we were able to plan accordingly and we could be held accountable.

In high school, we know that this approach worked because it gave us the information we needed to plan our time, stay on track and complete our goals. So why do a lot of learning programs implemented today leave out the critical element of structure? In my career as a consultant, when I've recommended a structured approach, most often the reaction is extremely positive.

> Structure helps us plan our time, stay on track and complete our goals.

But I have sometimes been met with resistance in the form of, "These employees are adults. We should treat them like adults and they should take responsibility for getting this done."
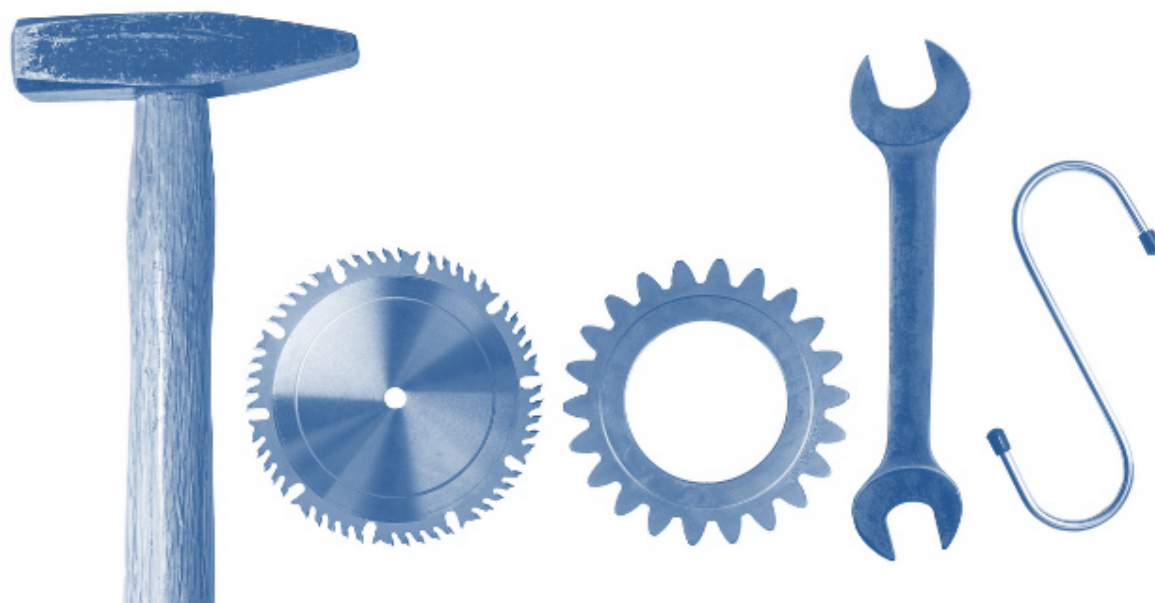
When did providing structure around a learning program become spoon-feeding? Yes, we are adults but we are busy adults with busy lives and most of us are running around at a million miles per minute trying to get things done and not drop any balls. We need help! And that's ok!

Just like when we take on a project at work, having the right tools makes all the difference; we use project plans, we create milestones, we allocate resources, we schedule regular meetings, and we create status reports to keep everyone on track. This structured approach works just as well for learning programs and can result in higher completion rates, a more effective learning experience and ultimately a bigger organizational impact.

One way to provide learners with the structure they need is to create a comprehensive Program Guide that includes a detailed schedule along with all the additional information they need to participate – right at their fingertips. You might be thinking…how do I build a Program Guide? What goes into it?

Below is a list of recommendations that you should strive to incorporate into any Program Guide.

What Goes Into a Successful Program Guide?

✓   A link to the recorded Program Kick-Off (every learning program should have a kick-off!)

✓   Program objectives

- Include the WIIFM (What's in it for me?)
- Include how their participation will benefit or impact the organization

✓   Expectations for participation

- Include a high-level timeline for the program with milestones
- Note the approximate time commitment for the program on a weekly/monthly basis
- Include recommendations for finding the time they need to participate; i.e., speaking to their manager, avoiding distractions, carving out time over lunch, etc.
- Mention the consequences of not participating; i.e., if the program is a performance goal or if it will impact their performance review or eligibility for promotion, bonus, etc.

✓   A detailed, week-by-week schedule

- Include any/all activities such as reading assignments, watching videos, completing an e-learning course, performing a task, etc.
- Provide due dates for when assignments and activities should be complete
- Provide the approximate duration of the assignments and activities, so participants can allocate adequate time to get them done
- When possible, include hyperlinks directly to the documents, videos, courses, and even the LMS, so that participants can click and go

✓   How to get help

- Include contact information for technical support
- Include contact information for questions about the content of the program

✓   Detailed, step-by-step instructions for accessing the learning resources

- If using an LMS, walk participants through the process of signing in and navigating to the materials

- If the materials are hosted on another platform, such as a SharePoint site or intranet site, provide step-by-step guidance, with hyperlinks when possible, for accessing what they need

By providing your learning program participants with a "one-stop-shop" document containing all the program information, tools and resources, you're giving them the *structure* they need to succeed!

Supporting Learners for Success

Now we will dive deeper into how to build ongoing support for learners into your blended learning programs.

In revisiting our high school experience, we revealed how it demonstrated best practices for blended learning. From the moment we began that four-year journey, we were provided with ongoing support and a multitude of options for getting help when we needed it. Without this support, it is doubtful we would have successfully completed our studies and graduated.

As adults, we sometimes do not finish what we start. Whether it's a new diet and exercise program, an art class, a DIY project or a book club… We begin with energy and enthusiasm, but we have a bad habit of eventually fizzling out.

Why is this?

I bet the first thought that jumped into your mind was, "I'm just too busy!"

Indeed you are. When was the last time you heard an adult say, "I've got plenty of time on my hands. I need more to do." If you do know any of these mythical beings, please send me their contact info, because I'd like to meet them…or at least take a blurry photo.

> Without support, students get frustrated, lose momentum, and quit the program.

So we all agree that adults are busy. But when it comes to corporate learning we are too often left on our own. While this may work from some, the vast majority of adult learners do need some elements of ongoing support as well as options for getting help when needed, and getting it quickly.

Without this, frustration ensues, momentum is lost and often programs are abandoned – just like our book clubs. Ask any learning and development professional in charge of rolling out programs and they will tell you one of the biggest challenges is getting learners to actually finish. Lack of critical support directly contributes to high drop-out rates.

Yup, that's a bold statement.

But after 20+ years in corporate learning, I am pretty darn confident in its accuracy.

Now we get to the good stuff.

How do you incorporate support into your learning programs? To get you started, below is a list of recommendations for best practices that I have personally implemented with great success.

Program Launch

- Launch programs with an orientation session, and schedule multiple sessions if possible to give learners with busy schedules some flexibility regarding when they attend

- Walk participants through the program structure and schedule, and set expectations for participation

- When possible, have program sponsor(s) attend and speak about why the program is important and about the anticipated impact of the program

- If the program has been deployed previously, ask former participants to speak briefly to the value of the program and give their personal tips for successfully completing it

- Review with participants to whom they can reach out for help

- If you have created a Program Guide, which you should (see Blended Learning: Structuring Programs for Success), provide an overview of the Guide

Documentation

- It may sound like I'm repeating myself (and I am), but a comprehensive Program Guide can be one of the most useful tools in your arsenal

- The Program Guide serves as a continuous performance support resource that participants can turn to time and again

- The key to an effective Program Guide is for it to be as comprehensive as possible, containing anything and everything that participants may need to know

- The Program Guide should be the first line of support for learners, and then if needed they can escalate to peers, the program manager or the single point of contact (SPOC)

Single Point of Contact

- If at all possible, establish a single point of contact for the program so that all participant inquiries are funneled through one person, who then will either direct participants to the appropriate resource or who will engage the right people to help the participants

- This will help eliminate frustration for the participants

- Using a SPOC also allows for tracking of frequently asked questions and recurring issues for trending purposes, so that documentation can be updated (like the Program Guide!) and programs can be modified and improved

Program Management

- When feasible, leveraging a program manager (PM) can significantly improve program success

- The PM oversees all aspects of the program, from launch through completion, ensuring consistency and quality

- The PM can serve as the SPOC and build a trusted relationship with the participants so they feel comfortable asking for help when needed

- Regular milestone reminders and ongoing encouragement from the PM throughout the program can help keep learners on track

- The PM can track ongoing progress and provide reports to key stakeholders, so they can remain involved and help to address participation issues if needed

- Logistics of classroom sessions, virtual sessions and accessing program materials can often get confusing for participants. A PM can manage all program logistics and communicate information to participants as needed to reduce confusion and frustration

- If participants are struggling, a PM can work with individual learners to create a personalized plan to help them complete the program
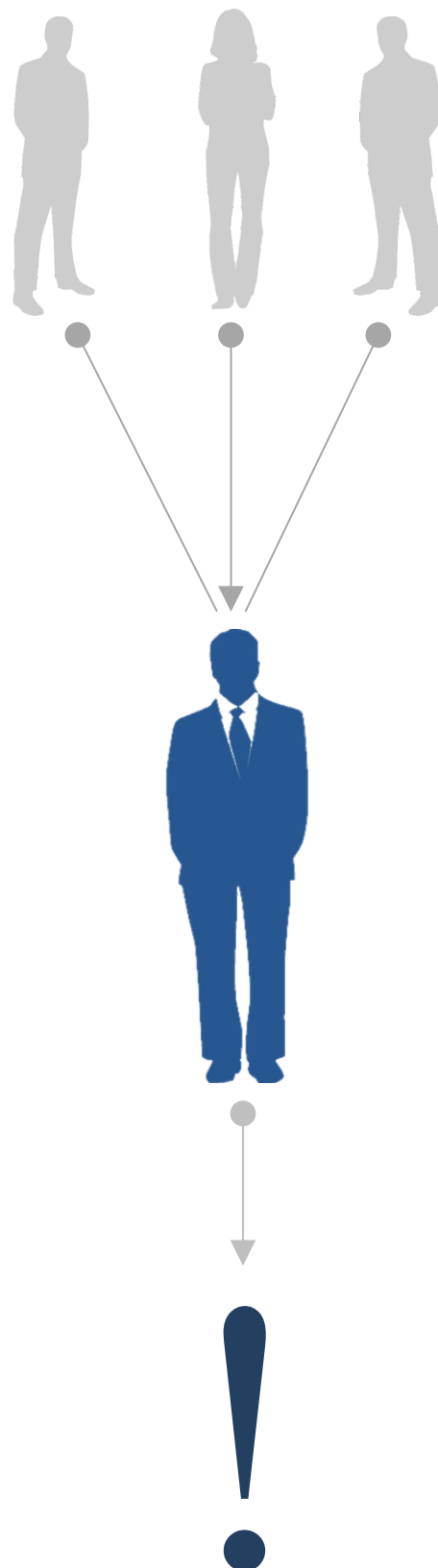
Peer Collaboration

- The buddy system works, so team up participants so that they can support one another throughout the program

- Incorporate regular collaboration sessions, either face-to-face or virtual, that allow the participants to ask questions and share experiences

- Ask participants who have previously completed the program to act as coaches and mentors

By providing your learning program participants with ongoing *support*, they are more inclined to stick with it and finish what they started.

Sharing Accountability for Success

So far we have explored how our high school experience demonstrated best practices for blended learning in terms of structure and support. Ensuring that structure, support and accountability are built into blended programs is critical for the programs' overall success. In this fourth and final article, we'll discuss what accountability means in terms of blended learning and how to build it into your programs.

When you think back to high school...

There may have been lots of reasons why you made the effort to do your work, complete your assignments and get good grades. Maybe you were driven by a reward system and good grades meant privileges – like getting to drive Dad's car on your Friday night date. You may have had your eye on a college scholarship. Perhaps you were a sports star who needed to maintain a minimum GPA. Or maybe you were motivated by not wanting to disappoint your parents and face the consequences of punishment if you slacked off (which is the category I fell into).

> *Regardless of your specific motivation, the consequences of not doing the work kept you going. You were held accountable.*

But were you the only one being held accountable for your learning success? What about your parents? What about your teachers? What about your principal? They too had a significant stake in your success. This shared accountability ensured that your progress was continually monitored and evaluated. If you started to slip, it was pretty much guaranteed that some sort of intervention would occur to get you back on track.

> *Notice the emphasis on the word "shared."*

When we become adults, the emphasis on accountability for learning is diminished. We know we need to learn. We know we should learn. And we understand how learning can help our performance and our careers. We make goals, we join programs and we start out with the best of intentions…

> **Shared accountability boosts completion rates**

> *Then life just gets in the way.*

Unfortunately, more often than not, there is no intervention to get us back on track. Everyone else is just as busy as we are, and our lack of participation and completion in learning initiatives fades into the background.

Sure it may rear its ugly head during the occasional one-on-one with our manager, or get mentioned in passing during a performance review, but rarely does it result in a consequence significant enough to spur us into action.

Now please don't think I'm suggesting you start threatening to fire people who don't complete learning programs. Requiring the completion of learning initiatives as a condition of employment is a human resource Pandora's Box, and motivating by fear creates an uncomfortable working environment.

For our purposes, we are going to focus on best practices for shared accountability that will not cause human resource anxiety attacks or drive employees away.

Learner Accountability

We already discussed how structure and support can be provided through a schedule and syllabus. These can also be leveraged to monitor and track ongoing learner progress.

Whether using an LMS or manually tracking progress, you can incorporate "triggers" for completions or learning activities, such as:

- Successfully completing a test or knowledge check

- Turning in an individual assignment or group activity

- Reporting completion of activities to the program manager

- Sign-off or approval by a manager who has reviewed assignments or verified completion of activities
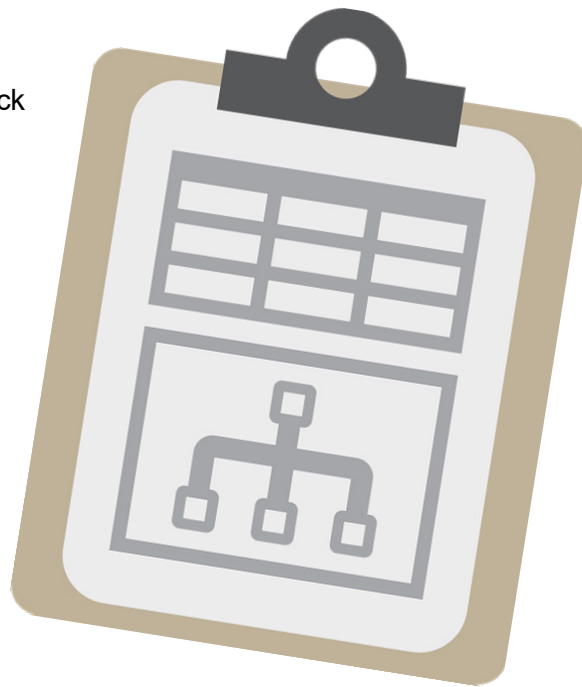
Producing frequent and regular progress reports will show if there are learners who are falling behind and allow actions to be taken to confront these learners – in a supportive way – and discuss what is causing their progress issues and how they can get back on track.

This may include:

Email reminders

Personal phone calls

Group "check-in" sessions

At the beginning of the program, ask learners to sign a Commitment Letter that outlines the program benefits, program requirements, expectations and consequences of non-participation or non-completion.

Some of the consequences could be:

- Charge back for the cost of the program to their business unit

- Charge back for the cost of the program to the individual learner

- Ineligibility for awards, such as a club trip

- Establish program completion as a goal for a performance review or contingency to qualify for a bonus

- Use the buddy system to provide learners with support and also help keep them accountable to one another

- Distribute cumulative progress reports to all participants, which can often spur friendly competition (but first, be sure to check with your human resources (HR) department for any privacy restrictions that may prohibit information from being shared)

Accountability

Manager Accountability

- Have managers attend program kick-off meetings so they know what is expected of their employees

- Ask managers to co-sign the Commitment Letters with their employees

- Distribute program progress reports to managers on a regular and frequent basis (but again, be sure to check with HR for any privacy restrictions that may prohibit information from being shared)

- Include managers on email reminders to their employees

- Include managers in conversations with employees who are falling behind or not participating

- Include managers in group check-in sessions so they can hear if employees are having any difficulties

- Host group calls with participants' managers at intervals throughout the program and review employee progress (this can sometimes spur friendly competition!)

- Charge back the cost of the program to the manager's budget for employees who do not complete the program

- Establish employee program completion as a manager performance goal or contingency for bonus

Executive Accountability

- Ask an executive(s) to "sponsor" the program and include them in the program kick-off so they can speak to the benefits that the program will have for the employees and the organization

- Have executives send emails to participant group at regular intervals to encourage and motivate them (this also demonstrates to participants that executives are keeping an eye on their progress)

- Distribute program progress reports to executives on a regular and frequent basis. Executives typically have a lower tolerance for frequent emails so establish up front what will be acceptable. (Be sure to check with HR for any privacy restrictions that may prohibit information from being shared.)

- For employees who do not complete the program, charge back the cost of the program to the executive's business unit

Building shared accountability into your learning programs can significantly improve program participation and completions, thereby maximizing the impact of the organization's investment in learning.

Conclusion

When it comes to a blended learning program, which can have a hugely beneficial impact on the organization, the program's success depends on employee participation and successful completion. It is management's responsibility to help busy employees understand the importance of these programs and to give program participants the tools they need to complete the program.

This means providing a clear structure, ongoing support, and motivation in the form of accountability.

When designing and maintaining your blended learning program, here are a few key things to remember:

✓ **Assign a single point of contact (SPOC)** who can support the program's participants and also make note of FAQs or problem areas so that the program can be continuously improved

✓ **Schedule frequent assignments and reminders** to help keep everyone on track

✓ **Involve managers and/or executives** to demonstrate the benefits of the program, the importance of the program, and to provide support and accountability

✓ **Use the buddy system** so that learners can help each other and boost accountability

✓ Last but definitely not least…**create a Program Guide!**

Remember that the Program Guide is a very important tool for learners. On the following page is a cheat sheet for what goes into a successful program guide.

We hope you enjoyed this eBook, and good luck with your blended learning programs!

Program Guide: Cheat Sheet

Benefit	Things to Include
Program Objectives & Kick-Off	✓ A link to the program kick-off ✓ "What's in it for me?" ✓ The benefit/impact on the organization of their participation
Expectations	✓ High-level timeline and milestones ✓ Time commitment on a weekly/monthly basis ✓ Recommendations for time management ✓ Consequences of not participating
Detailed Schedule	✓ Due dates ✓ Approximate duration of assignments and activities (for time management purposes) ✓ Provide hyperlinks where possible
How to Get Help	✓ Contact information for technical support ✓ Contact information for questions about program content
How to Access Learning Resources	✓ Detailed, step-by-step instructions ✓ If using an LMS, walk participants through how to sign in and navigate to the materials ✓ If materials are hosted elsewhere, provide step-by-step guidance and hyperlinks where possible