

7 July 2005

A, B, C, D and then E-Learning!

The importance of building learning into e-learning initiatives

E-learning is a relatively new training technique. Still unsure about how to make optimum use of this sophisticated tool, learning executives continue to have negative experiences and harbor misconceptions. These misconceptions and negative experiences stem from the repeated failures of most e-courses to deliver 'learning'.

A major reason for failure to build 'learning' into e-learning modules is the skewed belief that they merely need to put content on a computer screen and make it attractive by adding interesting pictures, animation and music. Unfortunately, according to a recent study, "*migrating class-room based content to online formats generally degrades the quality of the learning*".

Basic facts

The fact is e-learning cannot be made effective by adding only the 'e' to it in the form of audio-video clips. Redesigning e-learning modules around learning strategies and principles and using e-learning technologies to improve the learning potential of modules are the best ways of improving online learning experiences. However, such redesigning is only possible when trainers and managers stop asking for online courses with pictures, animations and sound, and request 'learning' instead.

Expert opinion

Learning experts believe that learning and learning retention through online courses will occur when these courses provoke thinking, demonstrate skills and simulate real-world scenarios. Most online courses do not meet these requirements.

The culprit

The inability to deliver learning through an online medium is often attributed to the newness of the medium. Each time new technology emerges (virtual classrooms, video-conferencing, web-based learning) trainers become more comfortable reverting to the classroom format. This tendency to revert to more familiar teaching methods is because most trainers are uncomfortable making transitions or adopting the unfamiliar. To make the transition easy it is important to design and build e-learning around "*conversation, debate and application*". In addition, experts recommend the use of the '*constructivist approach*'.

What is the constructivist approach?

Most e-learning courses adopt a behaviorist approach where online lectures provide the simulation to provoke learner response. However, according to author John B. Watson, "We need to create a learning environment that helps the learner construct meaning from the material presented and apply it to the work world."

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Left to themselves, learners can make insignificant or incorrect meanings. The constructivist approach ensures that learners 'construct' meaning only from the content their trainers provide. Providing learning that occurs in a relevant context can also enhance meaning. Learning retention, and at times even learning, may not occur without a context that is both valuable and relevant to the learner.

A case in defense

While apprenticeships and on-the-job training are time-consuming and expensive, they are highly effective ways to learn. A key reason for this is that these methods provide the learner with real workplace contexts. This gives the learner the confidence to apply learning to new situations as well.

Online learning too can provide a learner real contexts. Developing virtual apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs with real work scenarios and problems, case studies and lab experiments place learners in virtual workplaces. The closer these contexts resemble real work scenarios, the more effective the workplace learning.

More on improving e-learning

Besides providing real contexts, what else must e-learning focus on to provide a robust learning environment? A cross section of adult learners responded thus:

- *"Provide learning that I can access when I need it, not just during the class"*
- *"Make learning available only when I am ready and able to learn"*
- *"Create learning that invites me to interact with the content and makes me think"*
- *"Develop to-the-point customized and easy to access and use learning"*

Their responses attempt to highlight the aspects of a positive e-learning experience. They actually describe the attributes of effective learning.

A revelation

These responses prove a significant point - because most e-learning is media-centric, an attempt is made to make it interesting and attractive. This may not necessarily result in learning. The use of multi-media technology definitely enhances the quality of learning content. However, the focus on audio-video clips alone may not cause learning.

For instance, during a sales training program a participant needs to listen to a customer's voice and tone to discern customer needs and formulate a customer-friendly response. If a trainer uses an audio clip to deliver different customer voices, it does not mean he is delivering learning. The learner must construct meaning from the real-world scenarios the audio clip helps simulate.

Short of learning

Increased media focus aside, another glaring shortcoming is that most e-learning courses are ridden with errors, including misspellings, misquotes, omission errors, and inaccurate or incorrect information. In an attempt to beat competitors and increase efficiency, most

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developers pay little attention to proof reading online courseware. Although not serious, such errors lessen e-learning appeal while damaging its effectiveness.

Another criticism is that often e-learning courses resemble PowerPoint presentations that include attractive features such as different sounds and colors for each slide, random transitions and interesting animations. At the end of such courses, most learners have a better recall of the slide transitions and pictures rather than of actual learning content! With e-learning dropout rates hovering at around 80 percent, these shortcomings need to be corrected to ensure that e-learning is less about the 'e' and more about learning.

The process of improvement continues

Besides adopting a constructivist approach and correcting courseware errors, there are other components that are equally critical to learning.

In an attempt to improve e-learning initiatives, the CLO (Chief Learning Officer) of a learning organization asked his program developers to think of their personal learning experiences, identify what resulted in powerful learning and then use the e-tools and techniques to convert them into e-learning programs.

The developers realized that powerful learning experiences are based on emotions or feelings. They are strongly related to feelings of challenge, accomplishments, and respect for the instructor or coach. Therefore, the most effective way to ensure learning is to convert e-learning initiatives into feeling-based events. In other words, to build learning into e-learning it is important to create "*SEEEs*".

Does learning necessarily occur during a classroom session? Is the presence of an instructor or facilitator vital for learning? If the answers to the first two questions are in the affirmative, e-learning has a slim chance of survival!

"How do you build learning into e-learning?"

The Chief Learning Officer (CLO) of an organization conducted an exercise where he asked his trainers and managers to identify the critical components of learning. Each participant was asked to trace his own learning journeys and list their "*I got it*" moments.

On compiling these moments, the participants discovered that each time they had a powerful learning experience, it was linked to feelings: feelings of accomplishment, challenge, success, even those of respect for their instructors or facilitators. In other words, powerful learning is a feeling-based event. Each time a learner says, "*I got it*" he actually experiences a SEEE - a "*Significant Emotional Educational Event*".

What are SEEEs?

The primary attributes of SEEEs are:

- Creating inquisitiveness
- Stimulating engagement both in the context and content, forcing the learner to ask how and why
- Encouraging the learner to construct meaning to satisfy his inquisitiveness

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The SEEE attributes primarily address self-learning. Experts believe it is self-learning that creates most of the "I got it!" moments. Can e-learning mimic these attributes to create a powerful learning experience?

Deliverer

While offering self-learning opportunities causes learning, another equally important aspect is the role of an instructor. What does an instructor do to enable or facilitate learning?

A good instructor:

- Shows that he or she understands and cares about learner needs
- Challenges a learner to move out of his or her "*comfort learning zone*" using games, physical activities, role plays and case studies
- Encourages him or her to question, discuss and interact
- Provides meaningful and compact feedback

Can e-learning mimic an effective instructor's role?

The good news is that it can. By adopting the "*LEARN*" model e-learning can both mimic the role of an effective facilitator and offer the attributes of a powerful learning experience, both of which enable learning. The five key attributes "*Listen, Engage, Activate, Reflect and Nourish*" of the "*LEARN*" model help blend learning and e-learning.

The first attribute - listening

Listening is a vital component of all learning experiences. In the learning context, listening includes hearing, touching, reading and sensing. As a medium to receive information, listening ensures that a learner absorbs any new knowledge or skill. Ingeniously edited video clips and well-written books facilitate information gathering. Similarly, well-designed learning programs facilitate listening and in turn information gathering. Learning programs keep the learners glued to them through simple, error- and jargon- free well-designed language and information related to learning objectives!

The second attribute - engaging

Most training programs are based on manuals, books or some written material. However, no training department expects a learner to read books and manuals in order to learn because:

- Not all learners enjoy reading
- Learners have different learning styles
- Not all learners can read at the same pace. This creates a time management problem for the training coordinator.

To keep a learner focused and engaged on the source material, a facilitator 'engages' the learner in role plays, desk-top activities, and simple questions.

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In contrast, online courses focus on reading alone as a way to keep learners engaged. If engaging a learner increases knowledge and skills, e-learning must adopt ways that ensure transfer of information. A pure reading-based approach may not engage all learners at all times. The use of other media (games, problem-solving strategies and scenario-based learning) to engage other senses while simultaneously improving reading effectiveness ensures better learner engagement.

The third attribute - activate

Delivering information does not necessarily imply learning. The information must excite a learner to think. In other words, for information to result in learning it must "*activate and simulate learner intrigue*". When a learner is actively involved in a challenging or interesting learning initiative, he or she can continue working on it for hours while paying little attention to his or her surroundings. For e-learning to create a similar environment, it has to be action-based. The inclusion of online chat room discussions, problem-solving strategies, scenarios, case studies, competitions and puzzles keep a learner mentally active.

The fourth attribute - reflection

Learning is incomplete if the learner cannot reflect upon his learning experience. E-learning initiatives can provide a learner the time to capture thoughts and take stock of his or her learning by asking questions such as, "*How can you use this information in the future?*" or "*How can you apply this to your current job?*" during an online course. Known as "*reflective exercises*". These questions encourage a learner to think about his or her actions and their outcomes. This in turn ascertains better learning.

The fifth attribute - nourishing

Nourishing involves reinforcing the information transferred. Recent research reveals that e-learning suffers from poor transfer rates. To increase the rate of transference, e-learning must include regular action-reflection opportunities in the form of e-mails that update information, quick reference links that allow learning reuse, job aids and support tools.

The LEARN model ensures that learning is built into e-learning. However, to improve e-learning's learning potential, managers need to demand learning and not just the 'e' when they invest in e-learning initiatives.