


E-Learning Is Dead. Long Live E-Learning!

Sushant Buttan





E-learning has meant many things to many people over the past 15 years. There have been many versions, translations and interpretations, but has it really made an impact on learning effectiveness? From the “shovelware” days of the 1990s, when content was simply shoveled onto the Web and passed off as e-learning, to the current day, when there is an overdose of technology-laden course content, the e-learning industry has left many promises unfulfilled.

Today, corporate executives, training managers and HR professionals are resting on the success of e-learning. Some have even gone out and declared, “Innovation within e-learning is dead!” Paradoxically, there is a significant interest in what the future holds for e-learning with the advent of Web 2.0, a brand-new generation of the workforce and partial acknowledgment that something went wrong with the e-learning of the past.

One of the biggest challenges for most of this e-learning has been the lack of educational courseware that was designed on the basis of sound instructional-design principles. Massive numbers of e-learning courses were produced with technology-based “templates” for the Internet. “Efficiency” became the mantra. E-learning salespeople spoke of how to efficiently produce and distribute e-learning and train hundreds of thousands of employees.

Someone once explained a concept called “Fordism” to me — that is, the mass production of large numbers of inexpensive automobiles using an assembly line that can build a car in 98 minutes. To take classroom-based courses and simply reapply them to a technology-based delivery platform under the guise of efficiency was taking “Fordism” to a whole new level.

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in practice:

Applying CRM Concepts to E-Learning

As its usage has grown exponentially in the past decade and a half, the Internet has notably changed people's lives in at least two ways: in terms of how they learn and how they shop. In the latter instance, an entire industry — customer relationship management (CRM) — has sprung up around managing every aspect of customers' virtual interactions with businesses, from initial interest to point of sale.

Although learning leaders might not think CRM would apply to their own online development and performance support programs, the truth is that many of its concepts can work in these initiatives just as well. After all, in the parlance of corporate education, learners are considered to be "customers." Here are just a few ways in which CRM can and should align to e-learning.

- **User-Friendly:** Most CRM systems emphasize a very aesthetically pleasing and easy-to-comprehend interface. Things such as color scheme and dynamic pages take on new significance in this sphere.

Perhaps the most important aspect of being user-friendly, though, is accessibility. Quick navigability is the key here: Instructional designers with Web proficiency should build sites in such a way that the most essential data points should either be on the home page or have prominently displayed links or menu options there. Also, a search function can be very useful. The idea is to make data as easy to find as possible and keep the number of clicks needed to access information to a minimum.

- **Analytical:** Almost every touch point where there is interaction between learners and a development program represents some form of opportunity to gather data on their experience. By gathering information about their needs, wants, issues and complaints, you can make sure that e-learning is a conduit to critical information instead of a barrier to it.

Also, when tracking the user experience, many varieties of information are gathered. Skilled CRM professionals can perform customer data interchange (CDI) to blend these different streams of information. This allows them to better understand exactly what affects users' decisions and to make improvements to retain current customers as well as attract new ones.

- **Modular:** In online retail — especially in the current "long tail" market — there are more things to sell than ever before. These cover all kinds of categories, from old baseball cards to designer clothing and high-end electronics. And in some cases, the commercial activity involves millions of buyers and sellers. For these Web sites to work, each item bought and sold must have its own easy-to-find page that can be created and taken down in a timely fashion.

Similarly, there are so many things knowledge workers need to know within their area of expertise — as well as many areas of expertise — and the nature of these can change rapidly. Because of this, online offerings must be similarly modular in nature. This means having a dynamic e-learning system that can be quickly changed to roll out numerous amounts of new courses and discontinue outdated ones.

- **Integrated:** Despite CRM's extreme modularity in design, all of the elements should conform to certain standards to ensure consistent experiences for the user. Companies seek to integrate touch points, processes and any other forms of contact for the purposes of customer experience management (CEM), which is aimed at influencing their opinion of the system. That, in turn, affects their action and behavior in the marketplace.

By positively influencing learners' interactions with online systems, you can get them engaged with the content and encourage them to return frequently for important information and performance support. In this way, the solution will be set up to have a real impact.

— Brian Sumnerfield, bsummerfield@clomedia.com

While the courses may have been cheap and fast from a development standpoint, they wound up costing the company much more due to their poor adoption by employees and millions of dollars in opportunity costs lost for the company.

As the industry struggled with learner retention, new terms like "course stickiness" and "butts in seats" became popular. Questions such as "If you build it, will they come?" and "If they come, will they stay?" became common. The e-learning industry found solutions to knowledge retention by openly discussing topics like better interactivity and user interface. Meanwhile, companies relied on flashy graphics, and seminars and conferences were filled with breakout sessions on what needed to be done to improve e-learning effectiveness.

Sadly, most companies missed the point. Instead of focusing on the real problem — the need for a new model of learning design effectiveness — the industry spent most of its time on how much more Las Vegas-like the courses could become, with neon lights and razzle-dazzle to suck in the unsuspecting learner.

Let's shift the focus momentarily from e-learning vendors to the buyers of e-learning design in corporations. Training managers invested millions in e-learning content and infrastructure because they saw everyone else doing the same thing. It was a gold rush of learning, and the Web was the promised land.

The sheer excitement of all the new technology could make one shiver. Catch-phrase abbreviations became the language of communications. If you were a training professional and wanted to be perceived as competent, you needed to know what LMS, LCMS, CMS, WBT, CBT, TBT, VCT, ILT and KMS meant. Unfortunately, all the focus remained on the software and technology, and little was directed toward real learner outcomes. E-learning strategies were largely based on cost-driven ROI models, and this was frequently the core reason for implementing e-learning in a corporation. Comparisons were made endlessly to the cost of classroom training, with its hotel room, travel, trainer, meal and a host of other expenses.

Furthermore, e-learning infrastructure was purchased by IT personnel who had little to no understanding of learner needs from an instructional perspective. When learning management systems did not work for the learner, blame games often started between the training departments and the IT staff within companies. Executives who made the

decision to buy millions of dollars worth of e-learning found themselves in challenging positions and conveniently chose to ignore the true evaluation of ROI. They did not want the spotlight put on them for having made these investment decisions in the first place. In all of this chaos, the person who suffered the most was the employee, the learner who had been promised a dream that was rarely fulfilled.

As science fiction writer Robert Heinlein once said, "A generation that ignores history has no past and no future." Today, a plethora of new technologies continue to entice the e-learning industry. To be a training professional who's "with it," you need to have a new vocabulary. Past educational buzzwords have been taken over by newer ones, such as blog, wiki, avatar, intelligent agent, interactive animated pedagogical agent, role-playing, simulation, MUD, MOO, MUVEE and multi-player gaming environment. The learning design focuses on anchored instruction, contextual learning, online apprenticeships, problem-based learning, scaffolding, situational cognition, tele-apprenticeships, distributed problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, brain-based learning, critical-thinking skills, metalearning and reflective practice. The learning environment has moved away from the traditional course structure to cooperative learning, communities of practice, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) and groupware.

The question on every mind is this: Will e-learning 2.0 deliver on the new promises? While a great deal of Web 2.0 and e-learning 2.0 that is being discussed is still dominated by technology-related innovations, a fair amount of thought is finally being given to more effective instructional design. The learner is becoming more important, and the term "learner-centric," which was largely given lip service in the past, is becoming a true focus area for the industry.

Becoming learner-centric for all future e-learning design is almost a compulsion rather than a choice today. Gone are the days when you could force employees to go through large, unwieldy e-learning courses amid a heap of course libraries and directories that would take forever to finally get to, due to poorly designed learning management systems.

So, companies are now paying attention to the new learner. However, e-learning

design often continues to ape the old classroom model: Bring them in for two days, cram in eight hours of training a day, give them good meals, doughnuts and endless coffee, and certificates of participation. Obviously, this frequently didn't achieve the desired result. But, if classroom training did not always work in the past, and we don't change anything about the training except the fact that it is now electronic, how are we

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expecting to change the outcome? To quote Albert Einstein, "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

The learner today is being afforded newer models such as "workflow-based e-learning," which is being implemented to bridge the gap between the learner and what the learner needs to know to do his or her job well. This is done by building and embedding learning in the dynamics of the real-time workflow. Performance intervention and remediation is the new form of electronic performance-support systems.

I am reminded of an old Chinese proverb, which says, "If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people."

The success and the future of e-learning hang on a thin thread — the thread of truly educating the learner. This involves an understanding that the learner is no longer interested in a traditional course and that an adaptation to becoming truly learner-centric is the only hope for this business. Many companies have made huge strides in these areas.

A large financial services firm, having invested in a voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) phone system, faced challenges in getting its employees to start using the new phones. On realizing that being user-centric was the solution, the firm built an internal Web site that was user-friendly and allowed employees to instantly access small nuggets of VoIP information that averaged one minute each.

The users were now able to solve problems as needed, by themselves, during their workday. Something as simple as understanding how to redial from a list of previously dialed numbers can be fairly complex to the new VoIP phone user. However, once the firm dropped the idea of building a course and simply created instantly accessible learning nuggets, the usability of the phones increased significantly. As a result, the firm is witnessing millions of dollars in savings over traditional telecom costs.

Here is another example to consider. A large insurance firm with call centers shifted the traditional course structure to an embedded-workflow model. Call-center employees handling insurance quotes or claim calls do not go through days of instruction. Instead, they train on the job through enhanced learning chunks tied in to the software tools that are being used. The philosophy changed from measuring course completion rates to measuring the direct impact in terms of call times and issue resolution. This insurance firm has seen a dramatic increase in call-center agent productivity and has almost abandoned the traditional LMS-based model.

Additionally, a global consulting firm modified its approach to delivering e-learning by migrating from a "push" mindset to a "pull" mindset. The training department focused on teaching its employees how to get access easily to a learning nugget when they need it, rather than force-feeding them hundreds of courses with completion deadlines. Empowering its learners and teaching them "how to fish" has been a highly rewarding experience for the firm.

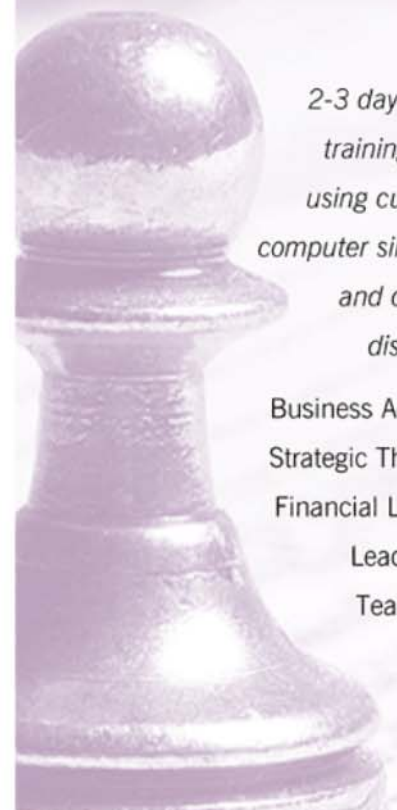
Organizations and vendors in the e-learning business should realize the importance of learners moving forward. In a time of drastic change, learners inherit the future. I have worked with organizations that have acknowledged almost 35 percent of their content was out of date or had to be modified by the time their e-learning course was completed. Through traditional e-learning course models, learners usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

If W. Edwards Deming had been an e-learning industry professional, he could not have said it better: "It is important that an aim never be defined in terms of activity or methods. It must always relate directly to how life is better for everyone. ... The aim of the system must be clear to everyone in the system." ■



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