

The future of rapid e-learning tools (Apr 07)

A major area of debate at the Elearning Guild conference this year was the future of e-learning tools. In this article we look at the key themes and where we think the tools are headed.

Three themes came stood out for us:

- To collaborate or not?
- How to improve instructional design
- Should learning and development professionals control the development of rapid e-learning in their organisations?

Collaboration: to serve or not to serve?

The fundamental split in rapid e-learning authoring tools is between collaborative server based approaches such as Atlantic-link or Mohive and desk top tools like Articulate and Raptivity.

On the one hand, developers are attracted by the simplicity of desktop authoring and its easy integration with the ubiquitous PowerPoint. On the other hand, the workflow management, asset management, versioning and more sophisticated design of collaborative tools tantalises those working on a larger scale.

There is no middle ground at the moment, though Articulate are working on a new tool to be released later this year which they say will bring some of these advantages together.

What people want is a hybrid – the simplicity of desktop authoring with the support and rigour that server based tools offer. Any tool developers want to take up the challenge?

Instructional design: half-baked or baked-in?

Another emerging theme is one that we are passionate about at Kineo. Having a tool far from guarantees the development of effective learning experiences. Indeed, the relative simplicity of some of the tools means that there's a great opportunity to empower many pututative e-learning developers to get content out there. One interesting area of discussion was whether instructional design approaches should be embedded into the tools. Raptivity already does that to a degree through its templates, but of course it is focused on single interactions rather than sequences. So another good challenge for the tool developers – can instructional frameworks be built into the tools? Kineo already offers learning design templates for use with PowerPoint based tools but this would be a step further.

Access to tools: Chosen few or free for all?

One of the big selling points when people talk about rapid e-learning is that it gives a

route for organisations to tap into their subject matter experts and capitalise on their knowledge and expertise by making it reusable through e-learning. At the Elearning Guild conference there was a split in the room about whether this was an opportunity or a threat. In the pro-corner, advocates pushed the opportunity for extending content authoring to anyone willing and able to contribute to the organisational body of knowledge. In the against-corner, concerns were expressed about devaluing the learning experience and overwhelming consumers with poor quality learning.

Kineo's view

So where do we stand on this? Well, we are all for the democratisation of learning content creation. Just look at the popularity of content creation through social networking software, blogs and Wikis to know that there is an appetite, at least in the non-work environment, for content creation. Put simply, you dampen people's enthusiasm at your peril.

Over the issue of quality, our view is to give potential authors some easy to use but well structured templates which will give instructional integrity to how they develop their learning. Ultimately, this may mean losing some control of quality and managing the volume of development could also be challenging.

We've made this work in several organisations already – ensuring there's resource to moderate and validate is critical.

It's great to see rapid approaches to e-learning and the supporting tools start to reshape how people are thinking about developing learning in organisations. There are challenges to be met, but there are plenty of people keen to get stuck in and address them– not least us, of course....

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