

Here's Why Rapid E-Learning is so Darn Cool (Jun 08)

If you listen to the pundits and some e-learning experts, you'd think that only those expensive e-learning courses custom built in Flash have any value. While these people pay lip service to rapid e-learning, they usually relegate it to low-level e-learning. This is really code for ineffective or boring, "click and read" e-learning. Some of them even look at rapid e-learning with disdain. And believe it or not, they think that many of you aren't capable of building effective e-learning courses.



As my daughter would say, "That's stinkin' thinkin'!" If you're a regular reader of this blog, then you know that's flat out wrong. Of course, there are some poorly designed rapid e-learning courses which appear to give credence to that argument. But it won't take much of a search to find just as many examples of poorly designed e-learning built the non-rapid way. In fact, poorly designed e-learning was an art form years before the first rapid e-learning course came to market.

Let me tell you why rapid e-learning's not only cool but here to stay. In fact, it's the future.

It's easy to lose sight of the fact that most people who build e-learning aren't the high profile vendors talking about \$100,000 courses. At the recent ASTD conference in San Diego, I got to meet many of you and hear some of your stories. Talking to you and getting your emails helps me keep my perspective real and focused on what's practical for most people. Here are three examples from conversations I had with some rapid e-learning developers. I think they represent many of the uses of rapid e-learning software and demonstrate the value the tools bring to their organizations.

Subject Matter Experts Are Empowered

One training manager told me that they used to send their staff out to learn Flash programming. However, they found that it just wasn't effective because of Flash's learning curve and their production needs. So, they opted for a rapid e-learning strategy instead.

He told me that it's been highly successful. In fact, they now train their subject matter experts (SME) to use the tools. The SME are highly skilled and work in a very fast-paced environment. Now that they know how to use the rapid e-learning software, it's routine for them to quickly build or modify their e-learning courses with up-to-date information and have it ready for the following shifts. By putting it online, they also are able to quickly develop and maintain their standard operating procedures.

What's really cool is that these aren't just bullet point slide shows converted to Flash. Instead, they're media rich e-learning with video and audio that trains people on very complex machinery and procedures.

Blended E-learning that Meets Real Needs

A different manager said they combined rapid e-learning modules with their facilitated sessions. They use e-learning to expedite the information sharing and some self-paced case studies. Then, they have breakout sessions where the learners are able to discuss what they learned and work through case studies.

Using rapid e-learning proves effective on a number of levels. First, they're able to produce them in-house and save about \$15,000 per course (as compared to when a vendor was building them). Because they control the production process, they can make changes on the fly. In fact, they can make same day changes. They'll get feedback from class participants and during a break make changes to better reflect the needs of the learners.

Changing the World One Course at a Time

Another person I talked to was a one-person shop who is responsible for building e-learning courses for a company that serves a number of organizations in developing nations. They have a limited budget and few e-learning resources. Without rapid e-learning tools, he'd be slow to build and deliver courses. And in his case, there would literally be thousands of people in other countries who would not have access to the valuable information to help improve their communities.

These are three examples from the dozens of people I talked to. They're a good reflection of how many organizations are leveraging e-learning. And they really speak to the power of the rapid e-learning tools and how they bring real value.



Just a few years ago you couldn't put a video in your e-learning course without having a programmer build a player and the functionality. As an instructional designer, you were always held hostage by your lack of programming resources or the complexity of attempting to add multimedia. That's not the case today. You can easily drop in all sorts of multimedia. Now, instead of being held back by

your programming limitations, the rapid e-learning software opens the door to all sorts of possibilities.

In the same sense, you weren't able to quickly make edits to a Flash authored course. Typically, you'd have to get a programmer and then put the project in a queue hoping that your project would get priority. Not so any more.

In the example above, the trainer was able to quickly modify the e-learning scenarios and case studies to build courses that better reflected the learner's needs right at the point of contact. Talk about just in time.

The last example is probably most typical of those who build rapid e-learning. It's all about making the best of limited resources. There'll always be a place for the high profile \$100,000 courses, but the reality is that those are in the minority.

The Future's So Bright I Gotta Wear Shades

Here's the deal. Rapid e-learning is all about automating the e-learning production process. Once the process is automated, it puts more capability into the hands of creative people. They don't have to worry about programming constraints and can spend their efforts building better learning.

Today, the rapid e-learning software has removed the barriers to incorporating multimedia. However, now the issue for instructional designers is adding advanced interactivity and building more engaging learning environments. For many, it still costs a lot or takes too much time to build the right type of interactivity. Well, that's changing, too.

In the next generation e-learning tools, you'll be able to build Flash animations in what I like to call "PowerPoint comfort." This is the first step. Soon all of the complex steps to building interactivity will be automated and for most, this will remove many of the technical barriers. You'll eliminate the need for to have Flash programmers build even your most complex courses.

What you see in some of those \$100,000 courses today, you'll be able to build yourself without the need for advanced programming skills. Once those constraints are removed, you'll be empowered to build the types of e-learning courses you want and not be held back by expense or lack of capability. And that's the way it should be. If I'm an instructional designer, I shouldn't have to be a programmer to build a highly interactive e-learning course.

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