

Choosing the Best Authoring Tool (Feb 07)

By Patti Shank

What's the best authoring tool?

Because I'm very interested in instructional authoring, I get asked this question at least a few times a week. When asked the question in person, the asker inevitably looks at me like I must be stupid because I'm rarely, if ever, able to quickly answer this "simple" question without hesitation. Here's the problem: It's NOT a simple question!

One's choice of instructional authoring tools depends on many factors. A few of the biggies? Internal resources and current authoring skill level; tolerance and time for the inevitable learning curve (which never goes away because tools are updated and changed regularly); budget; the types of instruction that need to be built; standards (AICC, SCORM, PENS, etc.) with which one's content must comply; organizational IT constraints; other tools that your organization uses (or wants to use); and how well tools integrate with e-learning infrastructure (e.g., LMSs and LCMSs) that your organization has or intends to purchase. See? Not so simple.

Additionally, no one tool is likely to do everything you need it to do. You wouldn't want to force all instructional materials to fit within the constraints of what one tool is capable of building, would you? (I'm being sarcastic, in case that's not clear. Yet, too many people do just that, with less-than-acceptable results.)

For example, your company's product updates might be built with [Articulate Presenter](#) from Articulate Global Inc. in New York, N.Y. -- one of my favorite rapid e-learning tools. But that same tool is not likely to be the first choice (or only choice) for in-depth sales training that allows salespeople to realistically practice handling common objections. For that purpose, I'd recommend authoring software that facilitates complex branching scenarios; simulations utilizing Captivate or Flash; or classroom-based practice sessions. (People who build e-learning often have the mistaken notion that everything has to occur online. That's as shortsighted as thinking that everything must be done in a classroom, in my opinion.)

So, welcome to the "Buying-and-Learning-Authoring-Tools-is-a-Pain Club." I paid the first year's dues on your behalf!

The first criterion, when choosing an authoring tool, is to determine what kind of content you need to build. It helps to think of instructional content and activities on a continuum from information to instruction. Information is at the left end of the continuum and instruction is at the right end (with many shades of gray in between).

Information is designed to improve knowledge of events or situations. Instruction, on the other hand, is designed to help people gain and apply specific skills. Instruction should provide realistic practice activities and feedback.

Tools that allow you to build and deploy content very quickly by converting PowerPoint slides (with or without narration) -- such as [Articulate Presenter](#), [PresentationPro](#), and [Microsoft Producer](#) -- work extremely well at the information end of the continuum.

A few of the many tools that can be used for rapid development and deployment include applications that facilitate online Web- or audio-conferencing applications, such as [Elluminate](#), [Acrobat Connect](#), and [GoToMeeting](#). Microsoft Word documents can be "saved as" HTML pages (File> Save as> Web Page) or can be converted to Web pages using a tool such as [WordtoWeb](#). Quick interaction-building tools such as [Raptivity](#) also are extremely useful -- whether deployed alone or in conjunction with other tools.

These rapid development tools are generally best for instruction that is toward the information end of the continuum; is time-sensitive; and/or has a short shelf life or changes rapidly.

My only objection to rapid development tools (which has little to do with the tools themselves) is that users want to believe that they are "the answer" for all instructional authoring. Sorry, they aren't. When you need instruction to provide meaningful practice, you should either blend rapidly built content with other instructional elements (in person or online) or use more complex tools with more functionality.

Some of the tools that allow you to build higher-end, meaningful practice and feedback include [Lectora](#), [Firefly](#), [Flashform](#), [Captivate](#), and [Camtasia](#). I personally love Lectora because it is so full-featured, and I also regularly use Captivate to build applications and simple soft-skills simulations (and have heard great things about the other tools mentioned here, too).

These tools are harder to use and the development cycle is generally longer. They are truly beneficial for instruction that is toward the instructional end of the continuum, and/or situations in which skill acquisition is critical.

Not so long ago, I was openly critical of instructional authoring tools, preferring instead to use and recommend general Web development and programming tools because they provided maximum flexibility. In the last year or so, however, instructional authoring tools have become more full-featured, and I'm no longer advising that instructional designers and others who aren't primarily development geeks use general Web development tools. Why? Too much work for too little extra gain.

I am still advising that, before any tools are purchased, an analysis should be done to determine instructional needs. Remember that exercise bike in your basement that has turned into a clothes drying rack? You don't want to replicate that experience, right?

If you are getting started with instructional authoring, a good first step might be to purchase [Training Media Review's](#) newly updated authoring report and then download trial versions of the ones that seem most promising for your situation. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I wrote the introduction and write authoring tool reviews for them.)

Shank is an instructional designer, writer, and author who builds and helps others build online and blended courses.

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