

# What works, what doesn't

Find out how to deliver fault-free e-learning

By Robin Hoyle

When I'm running workshops or events about e-learning there's always at

least one person in the audience who lists their objectives for the session as "To find out what works and what doesn't work in e-learning". I'm never sure if I have addressed this need by the end of whatever event I'm involved in – so, by way of apology and recompense here's (this week's) top 5 in each category.

## What doesn't work (or the really easy bit to write)

### 1. next, next, test

Every time I review a piece of e-learning where the interaction by the user is limited to clicking on next and the "interactive bit" is a series of poorly written multiple choice questions at the end, I despair.

For one thing, the questions are usually so simple that the smart learner quickly realises that if you click through the page after page of information really quickly you can complete the test without ever having to engage with the content.

Here's a hint next time you have to do one of those – always select the longest answer from the three or four options in the quiz. The chances are it's the right one as the wrong options have all been written by omitting some crucial fact from the correct solution.

This "click and fall asleep" e-learning gives us all a bad name.

### 2. Some one reads the onscreen text to me

The idea that having a voice over which repeats tranches of text on screen is somehow multi-media is someone's idea of a bad joke! Think about this analogy: next time you go to a presentation, watch how quickly you become bored by the presenter who reads out his or her slides. Not only is this bum-achingly boring, after a while it becomes extraordinarily irritating. Audio does help e-learning – but not if it merely repeats what the learner can read far more quickly themselves. Use the audio option to

reduce the amount of text on screen – and use models, diagrams and imagery to enhance your learner's understanding of the key messages.

### 3. A cartoon character speaks to you

I'm all for fun in e-learning – in fact if it's not enjoyable, e-learning is quickly dropped by most learners. But fun does not equal frivolous. The idea that a serious message about health and safety or legislation or product knowledge will in some way be enhanced by having a talking squirrel explain the problem is staggeringly daft! (Think I'm joking – I wish!) If your learning is directed at adults, place the learning in an adult environment, using imagery and graphics to enhance the learning experience. In his research at the University of Santa Barbara, Richard Meyer found that inappropriate imagery actually depressed learning. I'm struggling to think of situations where cartoons are ever appropriate. In fact they are a poor substitute for properly executed learning methodology and interaction – giving the semblance of excitement and engagement with none of the long term benefits which truly engaging programmes can deliver.



#### 4. e-learning as a course

In the bad old days (about 12 months ago) we were told by many e-learning vendors that the web would make classrooms redundant – and indeed a lot of the projects that I get involved in start from the principle of “putting our course online”. If you can put your entire course online and deliver a similar experience to your learners, you probably shouldn’t have been dragging them away from much more important things to attend the course in the first place. Whilst knowledge acquisition can be delivered across the corporate intranet, the skills, behaviours and attitudes will still require alternative delivery methods. In fact, even if the programme is entirely knowledge based, I still believe that long term retention will only come from a blend of formal techniques (classroom events, coaching, action learning sets) and informal techniques (projects, reference material) into which e-learning is woven. Rather than a stand alone entity, lets think more about e-learning as the glue within a series of coherent and related activities which help people learn and help them do different things.

#### 5. Content is King!

Putting this one in the “what doesn’t work” category will be seen as heresy by some. The reality is that too much e-learning focuses on trying to teach people stuff, rather than creating a learning environment. If we call it e-teaching it might be even less attractive to our users who are finding e-learning a bit of a turn off already. Being content centric often blinds learning designers and project managers to the really important stuff – which is learners. A recent survey of HR Directors found that

the complexity of jobs is “leading towards the recognition that individuals cannot be expected to carry the necessary skills and knowledge in their

undertaking an MSc programme it was the chance to pick the brains of one’s peers which really drove the use of the online resources. Those of you who have

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heads. Just-in-time learning has become an important tool.”

My response to this is to focus on context rather than content. In the world of corporate intranets growing exponentially, the information is out there – we need to give people a reason to consult the information and help them find it quickly and easily.

#### So, what does work?

The easy option here would be to write the opposite of the previous five no-nos, but I think you’re intelligent people and you can work that out for yourselves, so here’s a range of alternatives.

##### 1. Create a learning community

Learning is a social act and we need other people to check our understanding and to help us articulate what we have learned. The effective learning community fulfils a function which isn’t met elsewhere – giving 24-hour access to ideas, discussions and a source of support. When we created a learning community for senior staff

kids at school will be aware that these days teachers and children talk about information and communication technology – using the web to enable the sharing of ideas about new concepts is a natural extension of ringing a man (or woman) who knows – one of the best ways of learning anything.

##### 2. Link e-learning to business problems and priorities

Lots of people bang on about the importance of tying learning and development into the agenda of the organisation – but the reality is that this is important not just in terms of gaining organisational buy-in, but also for the sake of learners. If someone is facing a challenging task or struggling to address a new set of business priorities, having somewhere to turn which might help them find advice or support they require – without having to own up to any gaps in the knowledge – is a real boon. Without a clear link between the learning created and the role which people perform this opportunity is lost.

If you can’t think how to do this – start with the annual report. The stuff which keeps your CEO



awake at night is included in there – and there are already measures and metrics in place to help you

can outline all the different features but not have the emotional intelligence to tailor their presentation to a

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identify where the priorities may lie. If an annual report says that the organisation is below target somewhere, perhaps that’s where a smart learning and development department will focus its energies.

### 3. Focusing on the right medium for the message

Let’s think about an example. Suppose you are introducing a new product to a range of customer service staff or sales people. The learning included here might include:

Product features = knowledge

Customer expectations = knowledge

Competitor products = knowledge

Questioning techniques = knowledge and skills

Handling customer queries and objections = skills and behaviours

Negotiation = knowledge and skills

Once you break down the learning into those areas, you can be clear about what part e-learning will play (knowledge) and what part face to face learning (including coaching, courses etc) will play (skills and behaviours).

Of course, your e-learning on product features might encourage “feature bashing” where the learner

customer’s identified needs. So when you produce the product knowledge module you might want to reflect your customer focus priorities by categorising different features by the different customer needs and wants that they are designed to satisfy. This can confuse people who think that creating a customer scenario is the same as producing a customer skills programme. It’s not! This approach produces a learning piece which helps people understand the product. The customer service bit still needs practice – using role plays, feedback and coaching to confirm best practice behaviours.

### 4. e-learning which is hard

Too much e-learning is too simple! The provision of challenge and positive learning guidance is much better than giving simplistic instruction. The temptation is to include all the information in your e-learning screens – often leaving too little time and budget for the interesting scenario or interactive exercises which will help people make sense of the content you create. Spend the effort on creating difficult problems and dilemmas and signposting the information which will help the learner resolve the problems you have posed. The

chances are that having created the exercises and challenges you’ll find that the answers already exist on your corporate intranet – simply point people to where they can find the solution. This will not only save you reading some pretty dull storyboards, it’ll help people become skilled information seekers. Of course, some people will need help and encouragement with difficult learning – good! This gives you a chance to get your line managers involved in coaching and supporting! Which brings me nicely to....

### 5. e-learning which is supported by line managers

Without line management support e-learning is extremely difficult to get established. Think about it. If you have an e-learning module to complete before attending a course, but your boss is telling you you’ve got to get 20 things sorted out before disappearing off on your residential – what’s going to give! Explain that the single biggest cost of organisational training (paying people whilst they are on courses) may be reduced if the manager embraces e-learning and what’s more – that cost comes from their budget not yours! You have to sell the benefits to gain this support – it really is no good rolling your eyes and waiting for the training and development fairy to grasp the horns of this dilemma. Involve, consult, explain and sell! If your project’s worth creating, it’s worth fighting for!

If you follow these ten principles you won’t necessarily deliver fault-free e-learning, but you should avoid embarrassment! Good luck!

**Robin Hoyle is chief learning architect for e-learning producer ebc**