Rapid E-Learning Revisited:
The Need for a Learning Architecture

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Some years ago (2003) we were doing some consulting with a major tools provider and first coined the term “rapid e-learning.” Yes, it was us. In fact, I first realized the market for this back in 2000 while I was working at DigitalThink, and we developed a product we called “e-briefings.”

The original concept behind rapid e-learning was to clearly delineate the difference between online “instructional content” and online “informational content.” As any training manager knows, there is a big difference. “Instructional content” strives to build skills and capabilities. “Informational content” attempts to deliver information. Job aids, reference manuals, books, conference calls, wallet cards, etc. are all “informational.” Exercises, simulations, on-the-job exercises, and games tend to be “instructional.” One could argue that traditional lectures may fall into either category.

The Four Types of E-Learning (Revisited)

Anyway, back in 2003 when we started this whole concept there was a tremendous need to discriminate between the two. The reason was that content development was expensive (many $10s of thousands per hour), so it was important to help buyers understand how their money was being spent. At that time we developed a very powerful taxonomy which we call “The Four Types of E-Learning,” which is still highly valuable today. Imagine the business problem of “training the sales force on a new pricing model for your products.” You really have four choices of content to develop:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>What the learner will do</th>
<th>Tracking Needed</th>
<th>Tools you should use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information Broadcast</td>
<td>&quot;There is a new pricing model being announced and here it is.&quot;</td>
<td>Read or Listen</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Email, Powerpoint, Rapid E-Learning Podcast, Videocast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Critical Information Transfer</td>
<td>&quot;Here is the new pricing model, how it works, and how it differs from the previous model.&quot;</td>
<td>Read, listen, and answer some questions.</td>
<td>Who took this? Did they get it?</td>
<td>Rapid E-Learning Webinar with tracking Podcast/Videocast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Developing New Skills</td>
<td>&quot;Learn how to price complex products so you can become a pricing guru.&quot;</td>
<td>Read, listen, and try out new skills.</td>
<td>Did they really learn? What score did they get?</td>
<td>Courseware, Simulations, Blended Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Creating Certified Competencies</td>
<td>&quot;Become a certified pricing expert in the regional sales office, with authority to give discounts.&quot;</td>
<td>Read, Listen, try new skills, and become certified.</td>
<td>Did they pass? Are they certified?</td>
<td>Courseware or simulations with assessments or certification exam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1: The Four Types of E-Learning (revisited)
As this table illustrates, depending on your business need, a single given problem “the problem of a new pricing model,” may be solved using one or more of these approaches. One of the most important jobs of a training manager is to decide which approach to use - because category 4 problems are 20-30X more expensive to build than category 1.

We defined (and continue to define) Rapid E-learning as category 1 and 2 solutions. These are approaches which are “informational” rather than “instructional” in nature. They typically use graphics, text, audio, animation, and a small amount of interactivity (i.e. matching boxes, selecting answers) to engage users. They may include a test and most now include completion tracking. But they are not designed with large amounts of branching, decision-making, or simulation - techniques which are very important in the development of “application skills.”

Over the last 4-5 years, there have been dozens of tools and technologies designed to enable designers and subject-matter-experts (SMEs) to build category 1 and 2 type of content. Many of these are PowerPoint plugins which enable the user to author content directly from their PowerPoint slide deck. Major players in this market include Articulate (www.articulateglobal.com) and Adobe Connect (which used to be called Macromedia Breeze). These tools (and there are many others) convert PowerPoint slides and animations to Flash movies.

**Applications of Rapid E-Learning Today**

Fast forward to today. Now, thanks to our research and innovations by many companies and tools providers, Rapid E-Learning is a huge market. In fact we estimate that as many as 30-40% of all “instructional” web-based content falls into this category. What we called “e-briefings” back in 2000 (static PowerPoint graphics with audio) have now been replaced with full animation, branching, and simulations — all authored from PowerPoint. We are rapidly reaching the time when video is as easy to publish as PowerPoint, so I would expect video to be part of the “rapid” category within the next year.

What makes rapid e-learning solutions unique? The single biggest difference in these types of programs is that SMEs can author them. With the help of templates and guidelines from training managers, rapid e-learning programs can be authored by anyone: sales managers, product managers, marketing managers, and engineers. We use these approaches to develop introductory material to all our research studies.

Some of the common applications include:

- **Sales:** New product introductions - where features, pricing, and configuration information must be well understood.
- **Channel Training:** Need to inform and train the channel in products and pricing, but not on basic selling skills. Rapid turnaround is key, as is an easy way to distribute anytime/anywhere.
- **Customer Service:** Changes in pricing, delivery, or other ways of doing business — where representatives must know the changes, but do not require new skills.
- **HR:** New processes and procedures - how to fill out a time card, how to submit expense reports, how to submit suggestions and why… but not necessarily how to be a better manager.
- **Corporate Wide:** Company initiatives, CEO and management changes. A new manager, a new leader, a new strategy — the message, the importance, the voice can be portrayed easily — and is scalable beyond a conference call.

Some of the exciting new options now available for rapid e-learning include embedded audio (very easy), podcasting (easy), online support tools (PDF, checklists - easy), and online video (getting easier every day). Tools providers are starting to recognize the "redefinition" of rapid e-learning and are adding features to make new media easier to author than ever.

**Pricing and Outsourcing Issues in Rapid E-Learning**

One of the interesting changes in this market over the last few years has been the changes in pricing and increase in functionality in these solutions. Back in 2003, Rapid E-Learning programs would cost $3,000-5,000 per instructional hour to build, vs. $20,000-30,000 for traditional web-based courseware and as much as $50,000 and more per hour for highly branching, simulation-based programs.
Today, the scale has shifted down. Most companies now build Rapid E-Learning programs internally and if they do outsource them, they expect pricing at $3,000 per hour or lower (unless there is video or other complex media required). In fact, in a recent comprehensive study we just completed on trends in content development, we found that most large organizations do not even want to outsource this content - they prefer external providers to focus on high-end instructional content, and they build informational content internally.

The exception to this is when the informational content is specifically designed to serve as supporting materials or performance support for a more complex training program. In these cases (e.g. an SAP training program, call center training program), these informational modules are highly customized to fit hand-in-glove with the high-end instructional parts of the program.

**New Tools Lead to Increased Focus on Fidelity**

In addition to the reduction in prices, the number of new tools which support the “rapid publishing model” is exploding. Today you can find rapid publishing tools from Adobe, Articulate, Lectora, and dozens of other companies. Many of these tools have now “grown up” to include branching, various simple interactivities (i.e. matching boxes, multiple choice assessments), and easy import and editing of audio and video. As a result, we now have a plethora of options to build these “rapid training” programs.

The result is a new focus on “fidelity” - or content richness. Many of the clients we now talk with no longer consider PowerPoint authored content sufficiently “sexy” for their informational content. In fact, graphic design, color schemes, fonts, and other forms of context have become more important than the content itself. We are all so attuned to using the web that we seek out “attractive” and “compelling” content, not just “rich and valuable” content.

Look, for example, at the Scottrade customer service and sales training simulation shown below. It includes full motion video, timed assessments, game-like scoring, audio, performance support, feedback, and a community site. This program was one of the winners in our Learning Leaders program (you can read the entire report of winners at no charge). Only a few years ago this would have cost $100,000+ per hour to build. Today it is available at 1/4 this cost or lower. Consider the following course developed by Scottrade.
Is this increased focus on fidelity good? Not necessarily. The best instructional content (and informational content) is easy to read, fast and easy to digest, and targeted toward the needs of the reader. I think today, with the focus on video, i-phones, and other new devices, we are overly focused on form over content - but as corporate training and HR managers we cannot afford to ignore this. Any rapid e-learning developed today must be seamless, graphically elegant, easy-to-use, and media-rich. When we asked the training managers and executives in our research to “rate” various forms of content, they found that much of the “well-designed” content from 2-3 years ago was considered an “embarrassment” today.

Where is Rapid E-Learning Going?

Ultimately, as we discuss throughout our research, whenever a new technology becomes available, one of the first places it will appear is in training and education. Instructional technologists are some of the most fervent early-adopters in the world. And this means that corporate e-learning is always trying to “stay current” with new media, delivery options, and instructional approaches. Today the term “rapid e-learning” has been co-opted to refer to any type of informational content. It is no longer just “subject-matter authored” content published through PowerPoint.

The positive aspect this trend is that training organizations and designers have many new options to consider. Today e-learning programs can be far more rich and exciting than ever. The negative side to this trend is that there are far too many options available. Many training managers and designers are baffled - leaving important decisions about media and instructional approach to their vendors.

The Importance of a Learning Architecture

The most important thing we believe training organizations should do today is establish what we call a “learning architecture.” A “learning architecture” is a framework you develop which gives your organization guidelines for the use of different types of media and delivery options for different problems. In your organization, for example, all new product launches may require a 5 minute video from the product manager. All annual sales certification programs may mandate a 5-day in-person workshop. And all new customer service updates may mandate an online web-page which is fully searchable within the customer service portal.

This architecture (we can help you establish this) will serve as your guidepost for content development and delivery. It should help you decide when to build a job aid, when to build PowerPoint-based content, and when to build a simulation using tools like Captivate, InfoPak, Firefly or others. If you carefully develop this architecture as a training and development team, it will also help you design better leadership development programs and executive education - because once your audience is trained to expect content in certain ways, they will more quickly move beyond the “context” and into the “content.” Why is Google and Amazon.com so easy to use? Because it is very very consistent - you know what to expect. Your e-learning programs should be similarly structured.

It is ok to take some advanced technologies and consider them “experimental” for a year or two, and focus your production content on the basics: informational content using graphics and audio, application simulations using Captivate, product updates via well scripted webinars, and executive and senior manager updates via audio or podcasts. Remember to include live events, job aids, webcasting, and instructor-led training in your “architecture.” These are all important learning mechanisms and they should be considered along with any type of web-based self-study content. And consider whether blogs/wikis and communities of practice should be included as well… these self-published content types can greatly facilitate learning, especially among GenX and Millenium workers.

One thing you can count on: these technologies will continue to change. What we called Rapid E-learning 5 years ago may not exist at all in only a few more years. If you remember to focus on business objectives, audience, and ease of use your content strategies will succeed - and if you take the time to build yourself a learning architecture, everyone in your organization will be more organized and focused.

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