Why embrace it

Given decades of informative research on instructional paradigms, human learning, and performance measurement, it seems the burgeoning e-learning industry would have achieved enormous success in bringing each learner to a state of performance mastery economically and as quickly as possible. Instead, however, it seems the industry continually degrades its offerings — relying on technology for learner engagement and focusing more on content presentation than on learner needs and performance improvement.

In disappointment and frustration and as an attempt to disrupt the current, discouraging trends that have diminished prospects of beneficial impact, the Serious eLearning Manifesto has been put forth to bring attention to the foundations of effective e-learning. Here, I’d like to review the eight values and characteristics of Serious eLearning. Although each topic is worthy of a focused treatise, let’s step through the comparison briefly.

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1. Content vs. Performance Focus

Perhaps most detrimental to achieving both individual and organizational goals is drowning learners in quickly forgotten content presentations. Typical e-learning does exactly that. Subject matters experts and designers concentrate on presenting exhaustive volumes of information. With development time and resources constrained, learning activities that lead to skill development are given short shrift.

This approach leads to minimal outcomes. A better alternative is to narrow content scope and provide carefully selected and sequenced situational practice based on identified, high value performance skills.

2. Authoring Efficiency vs. Meaningful Learning

Because positive impact is so often assumed and not measured, project managers respond to what is measured; and that’s usually production cost and speed. In a truly odd and iron twist of logic, authoring time has become treated as a more precious commodity than learning time. Yet, a few more authoring hours can result in many less training hours and significantly lowered training costs.

In any case, the focus needs to be on providing learning experiences that are meaningful and helpful to each learner; that is, we need to produce effective learning. If it takes more authoring time to do that, it remains a wise investment rather than wasting huge volumes of expensive learner time.

3. Driving Attendance vs. Attracting Learners

With inefficient and boring e-learning, organizations must often mandate learners wade through their e-learning. The assumption is that if people attend, the goal has been achieved. If they can, learners will obviously opt out of boring experiences, often preferring instead to interrupt another person to get direction — direction that may need to be offered hastily and may be far from the best advice. In serious e-learning, designers work to engage learners who may, because they benefitted so much, become promoters of the training and encourage their peers to give it a try.

4. Delivering Information vs. Emersion in Authentic Contexts

Serious e-learning focuses on the learner and the learning experience rather than on content presentation (which is really more of a publishing activity than instruction anyway). Effective experiences take into account helping learners to identify when certain behaviors are appropriate as well as to perform those behaviors.

Beginning with an authentic context helps learners determine the relevance of the instruction. If they can imagine themselves being in such a situation and needing to decide what to do, their motivation to take advantage of e-learning rises and it becomes more effective.

5. Fact Testing vs. Observing Realistic Decisions

A valuable outcome is rarely having learners simply remember facts; it’s usually more important to ensure learners can make effective decisions and perform important tasks correctly. While typical e-learning is often satisfied with outcomes through the convenience of multiple-choice questions that generally assess only fact recognition, serious e-learning, with its performance orientation, looks to having learners doing things while they are learning to do them and to measuring outcomes by assessing authentic performance.

Fact testing is an insufficient and nearly irrelevant measure of progress. Learners need to be challenged to make realistic decisions and measured by their ability to do so.

6. One Size Fits All vs. Individual Challenges

From the origins of e-learning, the primary benefit sought from technology delivery was the ability to adapt the learning experience to each individual in real-time — a powerful technique used by mentors, but one that’s very difficult to achieve in a classroom environment. Typical e-learning has a single path, tends to give the same corrective feedback to everyone — sometimes regardless of the learner’s response, and offers no option for accelerating the pace for some learners while providing remediation or extended practice for those who need it.

Individualized instruction has not only the advantages of minimizing learning time, but also elevating interest because challenges are interesting, being neither too great or too simple.

7. One-time Events vs. Spaced Practice

It’s an optimistic wish to think a single touch — a couple of hours, or even a couple of days — will result in significant behavior change, especially when learners have little opportunity to practice. Multiple events with performance opportunities sprinkled through maximize retention and synthesis of new understandings and skills. Ideally, practice sessions are resumed after increasing spans of time.

8. Didactic Feedback vs. Real-world Consequences

Most of us become used to didactic feedback in school where we are told when we are correct or not. We may not understand on
what basis a judgment is made and therefore gain only superficial knowledge. Far more effective from many perspectives is witnessing the consequences of actions. It’s best when learners can determine for themselves what is effective behavior and what isn’t by observing the consequences of alternate choices.

While the gap between what’s being practiced today and serious e-learning is wide, it’s important to point out that serious e-learning is achievable and more practical than it may appear. The Manifesto goes beyond listing values to identify research-based principles that offer critical guidance to the use of e-learning as a means to better performance, so please read those too.

We know that there is more effort to building an individualized experience than just passing through a deck of slides, perhaps with narration and quizzes added. However, making the transition to serious e-learning is mostly a matter of using resources differently and making better design decisions. We’re already seeing workshops, webinars, and other initiatives to identify practical means of implementation. These are much needed.

We hope that soon we will see serious discussions and serious action to revive e-learning back into the powerful learning tool it once was. TEL

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