What makes bad e-learning? (Sep 10)

Robin Hoyle, head of learning at Infinity Learning, tells us that separating the wheat from the chaff when it comes to e-learning might be harder than you think.

The answer to this question is 'it depends.'

I know. Not that exciting is it, nor particularly helpful, but to a great extent context is all.

Let's define a few terms first of all, by e-learning I mean a packaged application (or linked series of applications) launched on a computer, either locally or from the network. I'm not distinguishing the myriad of technologies used because I've seen amazing e-learning content using technologies from the late 80s which blew my socks off prior to Windows being launched on the PC, and I've seen fantastic examples of e-learning using the very latest high-end technologies. I've also seen complete dross using terribly sophisticated technology.

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The other defining feature is that an individual can use it on their own; the training or instruction is embedded into the programme or application and the computer 'teaches' the user.

Now, right from the off there are a whole host of issues in that sentence alone. A computer 'teaching' someone something? Is this a weird dystopian vision of the future where, Matrix-like, we are all plugged into a network to have 'knowledge' piped into our memory banks? Are we to be reduced to walking memory sticks? No, but this whole area of self-managed learning is one of the most tricky areas when it comes to what makes a good or bad e-learning programme. The willingness or ability of the intended audience to learn independently of a trainer is fundamental to whether e-learning will work or not. And that is the crux of bad or good, surely? The worst e-learning is found in the programmes which sit unused on the organisational intranet. Bad e-learning doesn't get used. Often that is nothing to do with the design of the programme but the culture of the organisation where a desire to learn and an understanding that the individual needs to manage their own learning has not been established; if your learners only ever want to be taught by an 'expert' with PowerPoint slides and handouts and chocolate hobnobs at 11 o'clock, then you're probably on to a loser from the start.

Let's assume that you have sorted the cultural issue and people are prepared to complete some e-learning on their own. The easiest way to do this is to make the e-learning part of a blend of different interventions. Not because e-learning is intrinsically flawed, but because it is very good at some things and very poor at others (as are face-to-face courses).

I'm often invited to observe face-to-face courses on technical subjects prior to the conversion of some or all of the course content into an e-learning or a blended programme. Very often, what I witness is a pretty average presenter, displaying PowerPoint slide after PowerPoint slide with 12-point Arial text in bullet points which animate onto the screen one at a time before being read out to the assembled group – many of whom have been able to read independently since they were about five and some of whom can do so without moving their mouth at the same time.
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Bad e-learning in many contexts simply replicates this practice but at least does so without adding the myriad costs of taking people out of the workplace for the day - and for a group of 10 people on around average wage that equates to a whopping £960 per group per day! It also avoids the costs of catering, hotels, handouts, trainers and travel. I reckon that each time an organisation puts on a course, the real cost associated with every time the course is run is around £2,000 to £2,500. Run the course 10 times, £20,000+. If all you're going to do with this 20 grand is talk at people for a day, then not only will e-learning reduce the cost of repeating the exercise, but it will be quicker, more scalable and more effective. Even pretty rubbish e-learning is more effective as a learning tool – that is, more of the information will be retained by the audience – than the endless presentation model.

Just replicating a PowerPoint presentation does not make good e-learning. In fact, one of the real indicators of poor e-learning is the extent to which it is a passive medium where learners are expected to interact only with the next button while they read through text on screen. Even worse is the e-learning that requires the learner to go through it in a pre-prescribed path, using every screen in sequence, using each unit in a precise order. The ubiquitous 'screen 2 of 24' at the foot of the e-learning interface becomes less of a guide to where you are and more of a threat.

One-way presentations are one of the problems with e-learning, though they do have their place. The Army discovered some years ago that insurgents in Iraq were positioning dead camels across the road and booby trapping them. When moved to allow vehicles past they exploded, killing or maiming the people moving them. By creating a simple presentation, launching through a learning management system which tracked completion, the Army were able to get this information to the troops on the ground and monitor how many of them in each location had completed the five-minute programme. The presentation was 'fit for purpose'. Creating any other form of interaction would have lengthened the experience and created a barrier to its use.

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I call this kind of e-learning 'edu-comms'. It is essentially a communications piece and one which requires people to act differently having been informed. It has its place but for the most part it becomes the default mechanism for e-learning. The simple fact is that it's not learning. Where e-learning is reduced to simply telling you stuff, it gets a bad reputation and falls into disuse. Most organisations don't have to communicate urgent and potentially life-saving information to their frontline people and yet rely on mechanisms only fit for short, urgent messages.

Of course, the techies who build this long-winded presentation stuff know it's boring. They come up with ways of trying to spice it up and make it more interesting. My personal favourite is the talking owl, because as we all know, owls are wise! In fact the use of cartoon characters which talk to you was not only very fashionable but was a mainstay of programs which won awards. People were intensely proud of their ability to create a virtual manager who chatted away to you. The problem with this was that learners found it patronising. They found their managers were less on board with messages which could only be given using some kind of children's cartoon character from the early 90s and were therefore less likely to support their team members' use of these programs. There's a fine line between child-like, learning as a child does, the natural way we learn most stuff, and being childish. Most e-learning which adopts these techniques crosses that line.
Being patronising to learners is always a cardinal sin. The most regular transgression is the use of the pre-determined path. If you require a learner to visit every page in sequence and follow a prescribed, mandatory route you are not only saying to your audience "you are all the same and you know nothing", you are also using web technology, the most amazing communications aid since the invention of the printing press, in a way which is counter-intuitive. The web is about surfing. It's about you being in control. Microsoft's slogan a few years ago was "Where do you want to go today?". It still sums up how we use the web. Forcing people to click through in a defined order is not using the web's great strength nor treating people as adults. Good e-learning allows users to choose, gives them control of what, when and in what order they use online resources. The more mandatory the program the less popular it is and the less likely to be used.

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My final gripe about e-learning is the stuff which is hopelessly optimistic about users' desire and time to learn. I see many programs that use good techniques; meaningful interaction, appropriate audio, a range of different inputs including video, good graphics which serve a purpose and enhance rather than depress learning etc. The problem is they go on forever. About 20 minutes is the longest duration for e-learning which actually delivers the benefit of greater recall. That's not to say the course need only be 20 minutes long, but that it should be broken into 20 minute segments or units.

In a networked world we should be expecting our people to use the web to learn. We should be helping them by providing proper learning tools, not just pointing them to more and more information. But we should always remember that they are adults, that they will have different learning needs and different learning preferences. We should cater for the whole breadth of knowledge needs and learning styles as far as possible, and e-learning can do this. But one size does not fit all and your audiences need to know their needs have informed the development of the resources which are designed to support them. The alternative is money spent on developing tools and building programs which is essentially wasted. "If we build it will they come?" was the big e-learning question about a decade ago.

We built it. They didn't.

Let's learn and build it with them rather than for them next time around.

Robin oversees all learning design activities within Infinity Learning and was nominated for outstanding contribution to the training industry in successive years 2006 and 2007. Robin has been a key speaker at the European e-learning Conference in Monte Carlo, Learning Technologies, Word of Learning, CIPD's HRD conference, and the HR Forum.

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