

## The Pros and Cons of Authoring e-Learning in the Cloud (Mar 10)

As SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) solutions become more widely adopted, movement to collaborative online course authoring is increasing. This review explores one example of these “always on” tools that are accessible from any Web browser. The authors identify some attractive advantages, as well as some potential reasons for staying with desktop authoring.

Some improvements are general to using any SaaS software, while others are directly related to specifically improving e-Learning development. In this article, we look at one of the first online collaborative course authoring solutions to come on the scene: [Rapid Intake® Unison™](#). We'll explore some of the pros and cons to this new way of building and reviewing e-Learning courses so you can decide if it makes sense for you to make the switch.

### Unison in a nutshell

Built on Flash and XML, Rapid Intake's collaborative e-Learning development platform, Unison, is a Web-based solution that lets designers and subject matter experts (SMEs) collaboratively capture, storyboard, develop, review, test, and publish Flash-based courses – without having to know Flash. Novice users and content owners simply fill out form-based templates to create interactive Flash-based courses, while advanced users and communities create reusable custom templates by accessing the Flash source code (.fla). Innovative licensing enables entire teams to work together at less cost. All output is SCORM compliant, rich-media compatible, and works on all major PC and Mac browsers.

### The people angle

Our clients often ask us to assist in finding the right e-Learning development solution, and we have frequently recommended Rapid Intake's Unison to meet the needs of clients looking for a cost-effective solution that allows for just-in-time learning development.

To prepare for this review, we interviewed several organizations already using Rapid Intake Unison. One large healthcare provider, Adventist Healthcare, gave us permission to use their experiences to illustrate how Rapid Intake Unison works for them. Amber Larson leads the learning technology team at the systems level, which includes instructional designers, e-Learning developers, and programmers. This team works with more than 75 Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to build courses for all areas in the organization.

“I have a team that is remote, and I also work remotely. My hospitals are all geographically dispersed, so it made sense to go to a Web-based tool to see if that would work,” says Larson.

### Unison's ground-breaking benefits: why you might want to make the switch

First, let's review the pros we found with Rapid Intake Unison. Here they are in summary. We'll look at each one in more depth later.

- Better workflow management with remote team members
- Centralized collaborative course development
- Better versioning control
- Centralized media asset management
- Collaborative course review and quality assurance testing
- Flexible licensing model that provides options for involving unlimited users for no additional costs
- Instant software and customization deployment
- Better SME oversight

## Better workflow management with remote team members

One of the challenges with desktop software for e-Learning development is that you often need to get more people involved than just the instructional designer or course developer. There are project managers, SMEs, graphic artists, programmers, and possibly contractors who contribute to the project. Beyond that you may also need to get input and feedback from Marketing, Legal, or other groups inside your organization. So how do you facilitate all of that with a desktop tool? Not easily. In fact, it can be downright frustrating.

This is one of the areas where we found Rapid Intake Unison shines. Once you create a project, you assign people to the project. (See Figure 1.) You can assign them either at the start or later.



*Figure 1: It's simple to assign people to a project in Unison.*

Each project team member in Unison has a user permissions level:

- Reviewer – can provide feedback on the course but cannot create, edit, or publish a project's content
- Developer – can create, edit, and publish course content, as well as review
- Manager – can create new projects, as well as create, edit, review, and publish course content
- Administrator – all of the above, plus the power to delete entire projects, set configuration settings, and so on

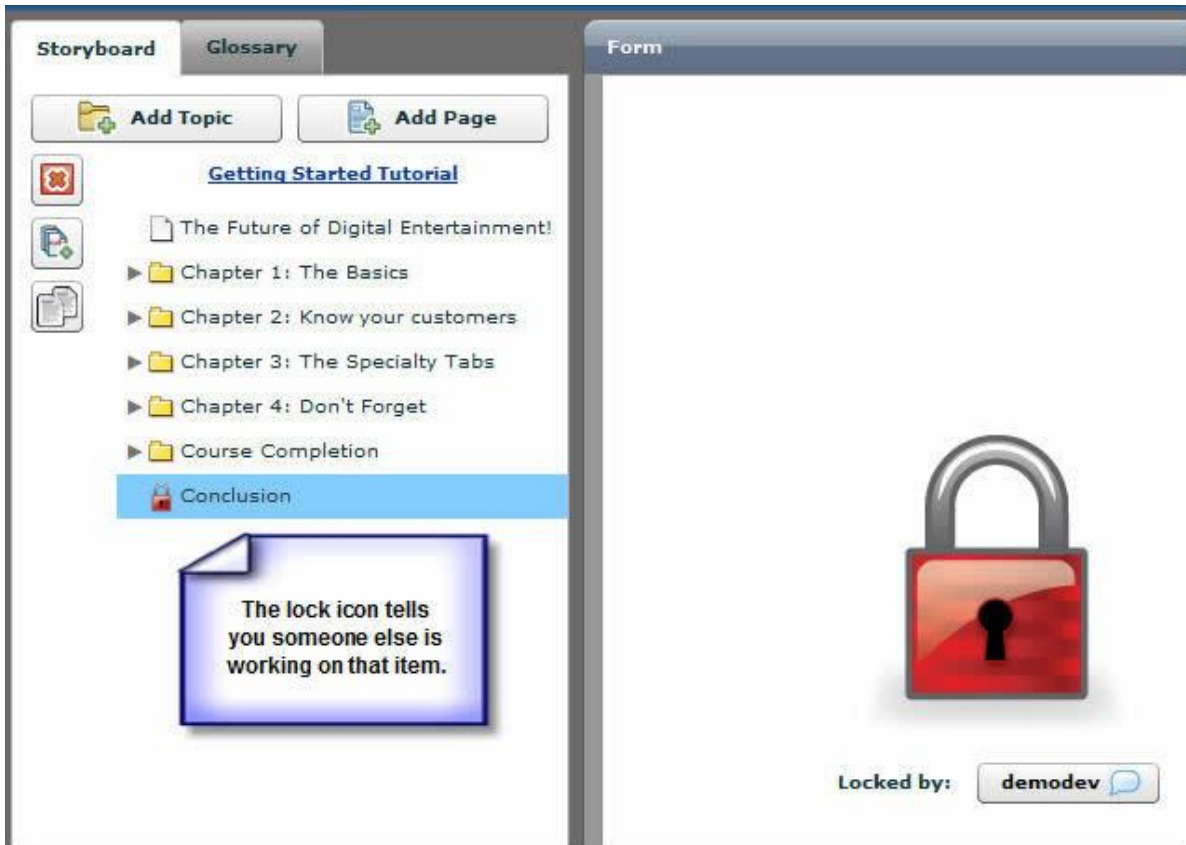
Team members only see projects they are assigned to, so they aren't accidentally editing courses they shouldn't.

## Centralized collaborative course development

Once assigned, team members can log into a centralized course repository from any location that has an Internet connection. Once logged in, they can build, edit, or review course content collaboratively. This means that you can have multiple people working in the same project at the same time.

You might be wondering, "How do we keep from stepping on each other's toes if we're all in there at once?" Unison makes it pretty simple. You click on the topic or page you want to work on and Unison automatically locks out other users until you are done. (See Figure 2.) If you see a lock icon, you know

someone is already editing that page and you work on something else until they are done, or you can send them a chat with the built-in chat tool. Some organizations using Unison that we interviewed have as many as 10 or 15 people working in the course at the same time.



**Figure 2:** Unison is designed to facilitate development by a team, without problems.

This centralized real-time collaborative development frees you up to think of new ways to work together as a team, potentially removing what used to be bottlenecks. For example, instead of having the graphic artist send you an image by e-mail so that you can insert it into the course, you can assign the artist to the project. Once that is done, the artist can put the image where it belongs. All you have to do is verify it was done (more on task verification later).

### Better versioning control

Versioning control means that you save versions of your course as you develop so that if you ever make a mistake you can go back to a previous version. Although versioning control is a longtime standard in software development, e-Learning developers can sometimes forget they are building software and neglect to manage the versions along the development path.

Unison manages this for you by automatically keeping track of versions of the course so an administrator can roll back to a previous version at any time in case something messes up.

## Centralized media asset management

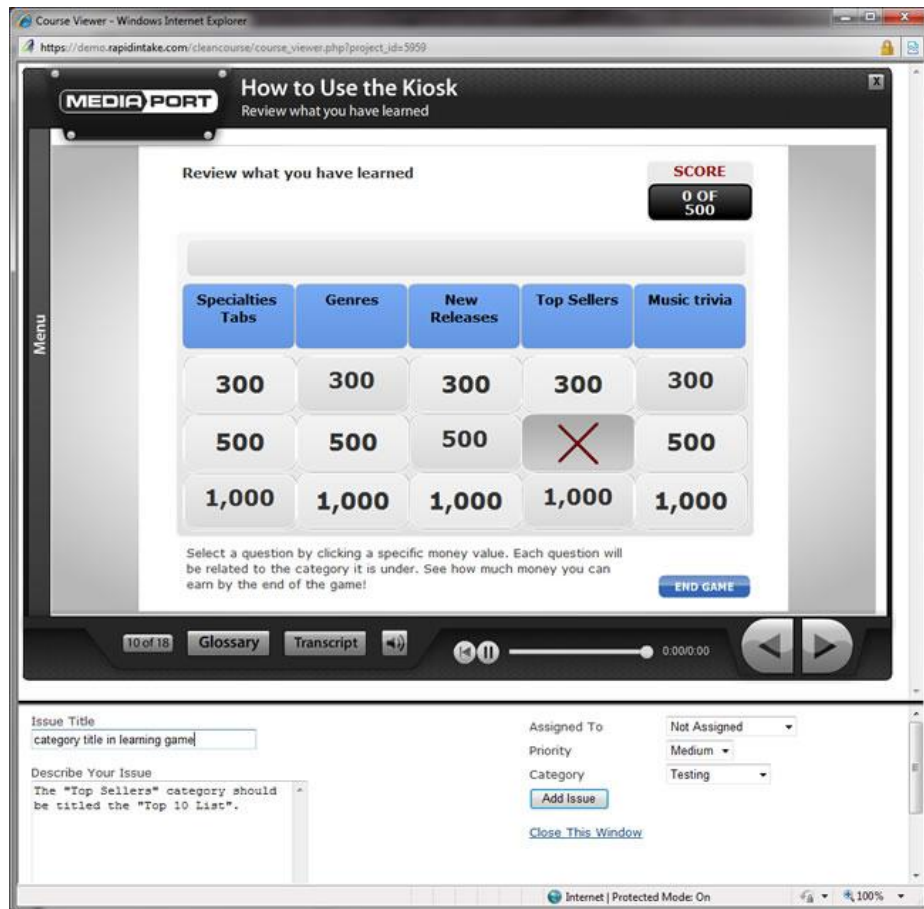
Not only does Unison provide centralized course development, it also provides centralized media asset management. This means that you can store images, audio, video, PowerPoint presentations, and external Flash movies in a media management repository. In addition to helping with media asset organization, this repository is immediately available to any course developer assigned to the project.

"I used to have art, animations, and stuff in files all over my computer and all over my developers' computers. And trying to find the picture you're looking for was impossible ... I heavily rely on that," Adventist Healthcare's Larson says.

When she first started, Larson had her team tag (organize by searchable keywords) over 3,000 media assets. Now she isn't sure how many there are in the repository, but they are accessible and organized, saving the company significant amounts of time.

## Collaborative course review and quality assurance testing

Unison's integrated course review and feedback collection management system can save a lot of headaches. At any time during the development process, reviewers can log in from any location, pull up the course in a special "review" window and log feedback. (See Figure 3.) Unison captures the feedback, along with the reviewer's location in the course, and other system information. (See Figure 4.)



**Figure 3:** Reviewers can log in feedback at any time during the development process.

**Figure 4:** Unison captures reviewer feedback, reviewer's location in the course, and other system information.

The project manager can then review all feedback notes and add additional information, assign them as tasks to other team members, attach files, send alerts to team members and more. This is not a basic or immature comment system, it is a full-blown issue-management system. It allows for status, priority levels, categories, searching, and quite a bit more – and amazingly, it's very easy to use.

Larson says, "We give all of our reviewers an account. Sometimes we'll have them log in and do it independently, and sometimes we'll do it concurrently. If there are major flow adjustments, we'll go ahead and make changes right then."

### Flexible licensing model fits how you work

Rapid Intake Unison removes one of the barriers to collaboration: user licensing. First, unlimited *reviewer* licenses are included with any account, so you never have to worry about paying for an additional license for course reviewers. *Course developer* licenses work in one of two ways: "traditional user" licensing, or "active project" licensing.

Traditional user licensing works as you would imagine – you pay for each course-developer user. If you know exactly how many course developers you have, and that number isn't going to change a lot over time, this is the way to go.

Active project licensing is where the real innovation is – you get unlimited course developer users and only pay for the number of projects you actively work on at any given time. This really helps facilitate collaboration, because, with this model, you can add course developers as you need to without incurring additional costs for each one.

A large pharmaceutical company uses Unison with this model, and has hundreds of course developers on the system located in the U.S. and overseas. They pay one annual fee, and don't have to go through a purchase process when they need to add users.

Most Rapid Intake users purchase annual subscriptions, but you can purchase monthly subscriptions (they are more expensive) if you'd rather not have the annual commitment.

## Instant software availability and Flash e-Learning SDK

One benefit of the online software is instant availability, putting fewer burdens on IT. Deploying a new user is as simple as completing a form, which takes about 30 seconds. There is no software to install as Unison works in any major Internet browser.

Related to this benefit is the ability to get instant updates from the software provider. As soon as new features or bug fixes are rolled out they are immediately available.

Unison's Flash e-Learning SDK allows any Flash developer to create custom add-ons, such as completely custom course interfaces or reusable form-based interactive templates. The SaaS model allows you to distribute these to team members instantly as well.

## Better SME oversight

If you've tried to involve SMEs in the development process (not just for review) as a way to scale the e-Learning organization, you know that quality control is the number one challenge. Helping SMEs create effective and well-structured courses can be problematic. Unison can really help out here. Instructional designers or other course developers, acting as facilitators, can monitor and adjust course content in real-time from any location.

## The cons: when you might want to choose a desktop solution

While using online software is becoming more and more common, here are a few things you may want to think about before signing up for Unison:

- **Because it is Web-based software, you need an Internet connection.** This means potential downtime during flights, for example. You can mitigate this somewhat by purchasing Rapid Intake's desktop solution, ProForm™ Rapid eLearning Studio. ProForm and Unison are compatible, and one solution is to download the course before you need to work offline, use ProForm to make the updates, and then upload the revised version when you are back online.
- **You have to upload media assets to work with them.** While centralized media asset management is a plus for most, you may find it easier to work with media on your own computer rather than having to upload them into the repository.
- **Customization in Flash requires additional downloading and uploading.** Using Rapid Intake's Flash eLearning SDK (included in both their online and desktop-based software) requires additional downloading and uploading. We recommend purchasing the desktop software (ProForm) to make and test the customizations, and then upload them to instantly deploy them to your team.
- **You need to consider security.** When purchasing a license to any hosted online software, you need to adequately investigate your security needs. Rapid Intake has jumped through the appropriate hoops by having their software certified by an external penetration testing firm, SecureWorks®. Still, if your security requirements are extremely tight, you may want to either purchase a server-install version or just go with a desktop solution.

## The learning experience: where the rubber meets the road

Rapid Intake Unison is a powerful collaborative solution that facilitates centralized course development, course review, and media asset management. Still, what matters the most is the learner experience. Unison not only delivers process and project management advantages, but also features that allow for excellent course creation as well (though we aren't going into detail in this review).

Larson says that at Adventist Healthcare, they were struggling with their required HIPPA course.

“We had a lot of complaints about the course being too technical, facts and data ... people saying, ‘We can’t remember all of this!’ ... people failing the tests. So we did a major modification, using some of the interactive games, and you know, I haven’t heard one peep about anything negative. I’ve heard a bunch from people really liking it, finding it enjoyable. And they are passing right away! It had a significant impact.”

In summary, we found that Rapid Intake’s Unison addresses all the critical areas of building rapid interactive Flash-based e-Learning as an online collaborative course-authoring solution. Organizations, such as Adventist Healthcare and others, continue to meet and exceed their learning goals and improve results.

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