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Too much e-learning is bland, dull and adheres to standardised structures that fail to connect with the learner. James Cory-Wright gets on his soap-box and proclaims it doesn't have to be this way...

- Expediency
- Hype
- Fear
- How do we change?

e-Learning has come a long way since the early days of Computer Based Training (CBT) in the eighties. Long enough to have evolved into a "standard" or "traditional" approach to instructional design – sometimes even referred to as a "straight" treatment. Unfortunately, this has become synonymous with a "templated" or "page- turning" approach. You know what I mean - screen after screen of text and graphics punctuated by a few simple interactive questions. Read on. Click Next to continue.

So in all this time, we don't appear to have come very far. If anything, from the viewpoint of a designer who's been in the industry since its early days, we've probably gone backwards from the "good old days" of interactive video and multimedia where the model was the high production values of television and video, often with budgets and a sense of ambition to match!

The standardisation of e-learning into something unloved and unread does seem to suggest we've all gone wrong somewhere. By "we" I mean developers, e-learning production houses and those who commission e-learning. Only by accepting joint responsibility can we hope to design and develop e-learning that genuinely engages our long suffering audience and produces something of which we can be proud.

At the heart of this call for action is an assumption that we can do better. We can achieve better results for businesses, large and small, by developing more imaginative and effective approaches to learning. For example, we can tap into the popularity and power of games to enable people to learn in an immersive way. We can develop virtual worlds of work, job simulations, and online role plays - even catch people on the move with location-sensitive mobile learning.

However there's a further assumption that this can only happen when the conditions are right – which I'll come to in a moment. But first we need to face up to some uncomfortable truths that pervade the production of too many e-learning projects across the globe: expediency, hype and fear.

Expediency

The notion that training courses, manuals, workbooks, Powerpoints or subject matter expertise can simply be boiled down and re-presented as hours and hours of online reading. The fact that we can access this type of content anytime anywhere is no guarantee that it will have a positive effect on an individual's performance.

In procurement terms, good value is too often measured in extracting the maximum number of learning hours for the lowest possible cost. The herd mentality means that too many suppliers feel forced to deliver more for less, focusing on hard quantity than the softer achievements of creative approaches and effective learning design.

Hype

The e-learning industry, led mainly by software vendors rather than content creators, has endlessly hyped the impact that it will have on business performance and cost of training delivery.

Too much learning material fails to focus on the messages that matter, on the detailed skills and behaviours that will make a difference in the day-to-day working. This is typified by learning objectives that boast of achieving behavioural change to a level and on a scale that can never realistically be achieved.

Fear

Fear is often a cynical paymaster. Fear takes precedence over the real needs of learners, over the real needs of the business. Those higher up in organisations fail to see that the projects they sponsor are often developed in a climate of fear, rather than the bold desire for success. Fear of stakeholders. Fear of 'superiors'. Fear of admitting ignorance. These are the hallmarks of wider corporate cultures and by no means restricted to e-learning projects. However, there is a more fundamental lack of confidence residing within the training and development community which unfortunately translates into deliverables that appease everyone while pleasing no-one.

In e-learning design, a common (and seemingly endless) debate centres on what freedoms to allow the user when moving through a learning programme. There is

a fear that users will "cheat", skip pages (screens), share answers with colleagues, learn answers, jump to the end. There is a fear that the learner will not complete the training and so they must be forced to work through every single bit of it. Strangely these fears are not matched by a commitment to developing learning experiences that are inherently compelling and useful to the learner and to be used by them as they see fit. That is the inherent flexibility of e-learning yet the fear factor drives us to lock it down.

How do we change?

OK, that's enough of the negative stuff. By acknowledging the skeletons in the cupboard we can move towards a much healthier, more positive approach. By adopting some of the following we can create the conditions for delivering far better e-learning and put an end to the 'Click Next to continue' malaise.

BE HONEST with each other right from the start. It helps an e-learning developer to help the client if they know where the land lies politically, culturally and personally. It's not uncommon for there to be resistance to e-learning within an organisation. This can be caused by a simple lack of understanding as to what it is in the first place. The developer can build in workshops or internal presentations as part of the project, open up internal communication and defuse resistance/misunderstanding from stakeholders. So, openly share assumptions going into the project.

RESPECT MUTUAL EXPERTISE AND PROFESSIONALISM. Play to each others strengths and respect each other's judgements and recommendations. e-Learning design best practices should not be overly challenged (as long as they are defensible by the developer). Equally, a client's understanding of what will work within their organisational culture and particular target audience will help accelerate and guide agreement on a design treatment that will be acceptable and effective.

MAKE LESS AND ACHIEVE A LOT MORE. In the spirit of honesty and trust it should be possible to agree realistic goals for the e-learning. Don't insist on everything and the kitchen sink to be included, as this will harm learning effectiveness. Spending more time on the core design concepts that will engage and hold attention will yield far better results than treating volumes of content in a consistent, undifferentiated manner.

SCRAP LEARNING OBJECTIVES. Agree key messages. Think of the learning content in terms of what are the key messages that need to be communicated. When people really get the message they will be cognitively ready for any training they are given and/or will be motivated to learn on their own. So prioritise the most important 20% of the key messages and make that the main content of the e-learning, perhaps even the recipient of 80% of the budget and 100% of the imagination and visual creativity.

THINK MEDIA. Set sights high to be like console games, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the web, movies etc. These media channels have evolved effective ways to attract and hold attention. We should use these more freely in the designs of our learning programmes. Put aside personal preference and prejudice. This includes rigid adherence to archaic instructional models. We live in an attention economy now which means the art of persuasion is a prerequisite to any successful learning design.

BUILD REAL ASSESSMENT. Measure what matters to the business and the learner. Testing understanding immediately after training has limited meaning in terms of performance back in the job. Instead, evaluate behaviour in the workplace, look for changes that exhibit better adherence to best practices. Regularly test understanding and follow through training to increase recall and raise the probability of the learner applying new knowledge and skills in a live context.

'Click Next to continue' is what you get when expediency reigns and fear prevails. If e-learning has a future it'll be where designs are originated in a spirit of true collaboration between those who commission and those who develop. Successful projects are those where there is mutual respect for each other's expertise, trust that there is a shared desire to achieve a common goal - underpinned by respect for the learner as an adult co-worker. And last but not least, a more assertive and confident approach towards stakeholders fuelled by a shared ambition to develop something of which we can all be more than a little proud.

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