

## Electric kool and the online acid test

James Cory-Wright, Brightwave's Head of Learning Design says "Out with the old tutorial style of e-learning courses and in with tests, from exam style quizzes to problem solving simulations. Reconnect with the true virtues of the technology and give employers and employees alike what they really need - measurement and evidence of being up to the job."

As the credit crunch starts to crunch, training will inevitably feel the pinch. But this may be no bad thing as Charles Gould Brightwave's Managing Director suggests, "I believe these tough economic times will force us to focus on what's truly important and will have most lasting impact."

Let's explore what this could mean from a learning design perspective. Mission critical e-learning will mean a move away from the nice to have to the must have.

### The must have versus the nice to have

In the workplace the universal 'must have' is confirmation that an individual can do their job to the required standard. This is likely to include an amount of compliance with regulations and legislation. It could be changing to adapt to a new way of working. The bottom line is ensuring employees are competent and compliant. Boxes need to be ticked, exposure and risk reduced, evidence gathered and stored. This is the mission critical 'must have' content often delivered as a tutorial style e-learning course.

In conventional e-learning, the course test is usually a fraction of the total study time. If we're honest, the course test usually has too few questions to be meaningful and is little better than a superficial test of short term memory. The test has often been squeezed in order to cram more content in the rest of the course yet this content is often based on information available in some form or another on the intranet, Internet or a colleague's experience. To add insult to injury, many courses suffer from too much text which is more difficult to read off the screen than it is on paper.

### Formal testing, informal learning

So let's turn the whole thing on its head. Invest in online testing instead of tutorials and tap into the information and training already out there for learning. Apart from arguably making for a more thorough learning experience this is also more cost effective and plays to strengths of the technology with its ability to:

- Interrogate, record and store information.
- Present multimedia.
- Deliver content anytime anywhere.

Let's adopt a formal testing approach and an informal approach to the learning that plays to the strengths of the technology and makes best use of the unprecedented amounts of information and guidance already available. Like this:

1. **Take the test** and find out what you do and what you don't know
2. **Be guided** as to where you can find the information you need
3. **Do it yourself** - learn by reading up on the intranet, internet, print, courses, colleagues etc
4. **Re- take the test** and see if you've improved and achieved the required standard
5. **Keep taking the tests!**

The benefits of online testing are nowhere better expressed than on the website of sellers of online assessment self-authoring tools such as The Test Factory which says that online testing means:

- Significant saving in time and money.
- Efficient assessment of skills or knowledge.
- Analysing results, by test, question or individual.
- Identifying skills gaps.

### The shape of tests to come

So what form should the test take? It could be anything from a simple quiz to the most sophisticated simulations such as those described by Noel Vallego in Certification Magazine, July 2002:

"In the not-too-distant future, certification exams will do more than give a percentage or indicate "pass" or "fail" on a single vendor's technology. Certifications will present real-world, problem-based scenarios, measuring how many years of experience you have and testing the required skills in a heterogeneous environment. Current strides in simulation technology make all of this possible."

## **Why wait another 5 years! Here are some different styles of test to consider:**

### QUIZ

Multiple choice questions (or similar) using all the cunning permutations such as randomising questions, question options, questions banks etc.

These exam style assessments can range from the most basic to sophisticated game themed delivery such as 'Three strikes and you're out' or competitive leader boards. Or how about Zero to Hero for product knowledge? You take a 40 question test about a new product. Any score less than 100% and the test is automated so you're only allowed to re-take it 48 hours later giving you the chance to swot up before you try again. But second time round you are only presented with the questions you answered incorrectly first time round. All the correctly answered ones have been automatically stripped out. And so on. You keep taking the test until you've answered all the questions correctly so there are none left! The challenge between colleagues could be to see who can get it right first time and eliminate all the questions. This feat could only be achieved by considerable informal learning about the product using all the means at your disposal before taking the test.

### DIAGNOSTIC

Can be simple add-ons at the end of quizzes that, having tracked your answers, tell you in which areas you need to improve or self-contained diagnostic style quizzes specifically designed to identify gaps that need to be plugged.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Cosmopolitan magazine styling - more attitudinal, self analysing, and reflective with guidance as to what to do, where to go next.

## PSYCHOMETRIC

Psychological and personality orientated tests.

## TUTORIAL

Each question has remedial and informative feedback so you learn as you go.

## SCENARIO

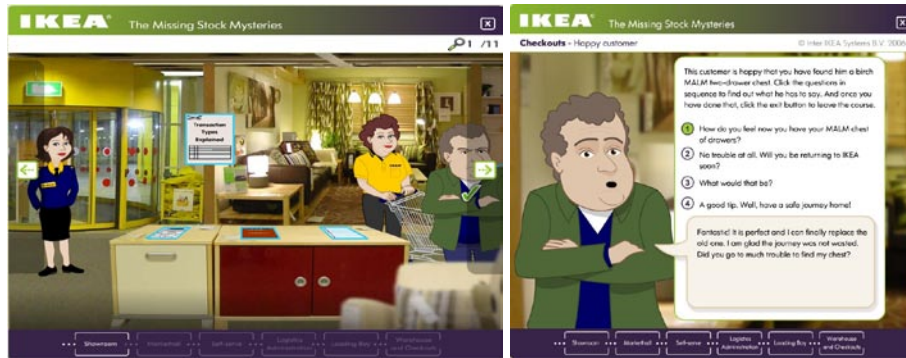
Where you're put in a situation in which you have to make judgments or decisions, this can range from the simple to the sophisticated...

### Example

For EDF Energy, Brightwave designed a test about filling in your expenses form correctly and accurately. All the necessary information and guidance on how to do this exists on the intranet and you're told up front that the test assumes you've read this material and is partly about ensuring you get in the habit of using these resources.

The test is as follows: you're going to check a claim and judge whether it's been correctly filled in so it can be sent to Finance for processing. At the start of the test (and throughout) there's a link to a pdf with a brief description of a typical claim, all the receipts scanned and the completed form. A series of deceptively simple questions winkle out whether you have understood the rules and the process. The Yes/No questions are the sort of self-checking questions you should be asking yourself in real-life like "Are the receipts attached to the claim numbered correctly?", "Has the form been used for all the correct items?" or "Does the claim cover the correct period of time?". Although these are simple questions, they require substantial knowledge and understanding to answer correctly.

### Example



A more sophisticated scenario-led approach was developed for IKEA about tracking down missing stock in the retail store. In the virtual environment you can move freely around the store gathering clues such as interviewing sales staff, checking the computer inventory system, observation etc. The test comes when you're asked a series of questions to establish whether you've solved the mystery as to where all the missing stock has gone.

In keeping with the approach of getting people to make more and better use of materials that already exist, tests can be designed that are based on actual use of the resource in question.

#### Example

For the Office for National Statistics, the challenge was to get people used to using a manual which would become their 'bible' once they started the job proper - conducting a pilot for the next National Census.

The test comprises a series of questions each with a link to a particular section of the manual which can only be answered by reading that part of the manual.

### SIMULATIONS

If we recreate work environments we can challenge people to solve problems or complete troubleshooting assignments. Virtual worlds, virtual jobs involving challenges, tasks, these could involve tests akin to video and console gaming with levels and so on.

Simulations are still highly effective for training new IT systems especially when they are of the Test Me variety, as opposed to the Show me/Try me modes.

#### Example

When Bupa rolled out part of a major new IT system they needed to know that employees were safe on the system before going live with it. To assess the training a large number of Test Me simulations were developed. As well as testing being able to use the system screens, these would be a test of the process i.e. working with a sequence of system screens. Just as in real-life there was little margin for error. Despite being really tough to complete these tests proved massively popular, not only as tests, but also as an opportunity to practise in a safe environment.

## VIDEO

Video is making yet another comeback and will have an increasing part to play in simulations as it becomes more commonplace online. As Fiona Nunn, an experienced Brightwave learning professional suggests, "It's video, going to get back to the 'discover this world' style of video - like with the laser disks including branching and experiencing the outcomes of your decisions."

So we can expect tests that feature video whether acted simulations or perhaps clips you have to watch before answering questions on what you've just seen.

## ROLE PLAYING

Capitalising on the popularity of social networks and online worlds, role playing online is surely one for future real-time assessments with a moderator or adjudicator involved. People can role play using an avatar to ensure anonymity. But the moderator could still assess and give feedback and intervene at critical stages.

What all these variants demonstrate is that tests are the way to go, not e-reading courses. They play to the strengths of the technology. They can be imaginatively designed and executed. Immersive and utterly interactive; often built as shells or engines that are quickly and easily re-usable with questions that can be written relatively quickly and just in time.

But best of all, tests provide measurement. They are benchmarks for the organisation and individual alike. They provide real proof of achievement and can point the way to opportunities for people to learn using existing resources in ways that suit their preferred style of learning.

### Positioning the tests with communications pieces

A final word...tests need not sit in isolation. As we mentioned earlier, one of the major strengths of the technology is in delivering multimedia (not e-reading). Tests benefit from being positioned, put into context. In other words why is what the test is about, so important? What are the key messages? What are the

reasons for change and what are the changes about? What is the impact, what's in it for me?

Much of these sorts of issues can be covered quickly and intensively with short (1-2 mins) high impact multimedia 'communications pieces' presenting key messages persuasively and clearly presented with animations, audio and video.

So let's suppose I receive a high importance e-mail telling me I have to pass a knowledge test in a particular area of regulations; this could be on money laundering, fraud awareness, safe handling of medical equipment, manual handling, ramp safety, competition law and so on.

To see why this is relevant and important to me I click a link in the e-mail that runs a 90-second communications piece that runs like a film trailer. It's a hard hitting highly visual piece that graphically shows the consequences and impact on other people's lives if the regulations are not adhered to. At the end it explains what I need to do next to take and pass the knowledge test.

I'm now motivated and well informed. I may not be Electric Kool but as for the online acid test - bring it on.

Call us on 01273 827676 or email us at [enquiries@brightwave.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@brightwave.co.uk) to find out more about our corporate learning solutions and how we can help your business.