

School's Out...Forever!

Kai Merriott, e-Learning Designer at Brightwave, argues that the classroom model has been the mainstay of e-learning design for far too long. The wider media world provides alternative models for us to consider.

- "All the benefits of the classroom on your PC!"
- Move away from the classroom
- Progress with technology
- Be bold

"All the benefits of the classroom on your PC!"

You can imagine how salespeople described early computer-based training: just like the classroom, but without the idle chat and toilet breaks.

And that's the snag. Even with all the technology now available, contemporary designers still tend to view e-learning as a way to recreate a classroom situation. Things may appear slicker, with high-res pictures and elaborate animation, but e-learning still tends to follow a pattern of a narrator talking over slides. If audio isn't present, it's the same model just with heavier text - the equivalent of how content is presented on a website.

The idea of being able to compact days of expensive training into a couple of hours with no travelling costs would have been too strong an argument to drop from those early-day pitches, particularly at a time when learning through your computer was not widespread. All companies need to train their staff, but - just like it is now - many would have been reluctant to release staff. Here was a solution that worked for both parties: employees are happy when they feel they are broadening their knowledge, and in turn they are more productive.

Move away from the classroom

However, in today's modern age, isn't it time to ditch classroom training as the model of most e-learning experienced today and present content in more engaging, fresh ways? We've never had it so good. Video is cheaper to produce and runs smoothly. Bandwidth restrictions are becoming less of an issue. Soundcards are the norm. But both clients and designers are having trouble

throwing off the old "Hey! It's like a classroom!" idea. It's safe. It's been around for years. And it seems to work. But does it?

e-Learning providers are still making comparisons between the electronic approach and the classroom. Microsoft says: "You save significant dollars because you don't need to hire experts, trainers or in-class instructors. You avoid the expense of employee travel or hotel stays". They go on: "unlike classroom settings, e-learning employees advance at an individual pace and can update or refresh lessons whenever they choose." Maltese developer AcrossLimits notes that with e-learning you can "build in tools that offer students resources they may never have seen in a traditional classroom." In other words, e-learning is classroom training but faster, cheaper and better.

So from those early days, e-learning bears hallmarks of its stand-up counterpart. Start with objectives. Click a button to work through screens that strongly resemble PowerPoint slides. Ask questions to engage the audience. Provide interactions to break the monotony. All this is in line with Gagné's nine steps of instruction - "inform learner of objective", "present the material", "elicit performance" (in other words, practice what they've learnt) and "provide feedback" (by asking questions). But how well does this sit with a media-savvy audience that is less and less likely to simply sit back and receive information? An audience that will want to feel involved from the outset?

Progress with technology

In July 2005 the number of people taking up broadband overtook dialup for the first time. Since then, bandwidths have broadened and video now runs smoothly on a high number of networks. The widespread use of Flash technology has helped: the later versions handle video with ease and is shipped with a number of browsers (negating the need to overcome firewall restrictions to download it). Most of us will have heard of YouTube, which just wouldn't be possible without these advances in video compression and bandwidth. So why is there still some hesitation with using a rich media approach?

We should be looking at other models and metaphors for inspiration on which to base our e-learning designs. We interact with TV, radio, newspapers and the Internet every day and consume vast quantities of information. We don't need to be "trained" to learn complex facts about new developments in employment law or the Iraq situation. Usually the information is presented so well it sinks in with little effort on the part of the audience. So why not follow the media's example?

Here are some alternative thoughts and models to shake up current e-learning conventions.

DOCUMENTARIES

The objectives of many documentary films - particularly those with a political or social edge - are no different to many training needs. There's a gap in the knowledge of the audience that the programme makers want to fill. Sussex University teaches students that "The best documentaries do not aspire to objectivity - a mythical concept - but have an individual style and point of view that encourage the audience to see their subject in a new light." They try to inspire a change (perhaps in behaviour or of legislation) by recording the issue first-hand. Think of the Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield movies. Ignore your reaction to their politics - think more about how they get the message across.

A documentary technique could easily be applied to e-learning. Let's say you want the audience to change their ways and fill in their expense forms properly. It might feel like a trivial matter to the average person. But they are shown footage of a person in accounts who's upset about the sloppiness of the claims because it adds hours to their heavy workload. The effect is the culprit feels embarrassed about their actions, and is motivated to change their ways having seen the consequences and impact of their behaviour.

Isn't this a more powerful method than simply stating "Ensure you fill in your expense forms correctly"? It can be done quite cost effectively too - grab a camcorder and film the results.

GAMES

Games are sorely underused in e-learning. The principles of game design reflect our basic motivational patterns. Repetition, layered complexity within challenges, discovery-led information gathering, clear goals. These all create a more immersive experience that insists on action rather than passive consumption of content. And they don't even require anything as complex as 3D virtual environments.

At Brightwave we've used these techniques to train retail staff at IKEA and First Choice Holidays on work practices that may be too abstract to put into words. By simulating these practices, while setting challenges that reflect actual situations, the employee can transfer what they've learnt to the workplace.

NEWS

Audio-based courses once gestured towards the techniques used in news reports, with narrators talking over a summarised list of bullet points or graphics that appear as a point is being covered. But they now fall short.

That's because when we deliver e-learning to a wide variety of technical environments we still fear the end user won't have audio capability. So the convention is that the text on screen must work without audio and therefore be less summarised than we'd like (if at all). The end result is an awkward halfway-house where the narrator is simply reading the words on-screen. Users with audio will read the text faster than the narrator, rendering the voiceover pointless. Users without audio will snooze at the pages of lengthy text.

In the end, we provide a suboptimal experience for everyone. So in future when using audio in a course, be bold. Think news. When a faceless narrator is going into depth about that day's top story, using visuals to illustrate the point, very little - if any - text is used. For those without soundcards, we can offer optional subtitles or a transcript of the audio. It's better not to use audio at all than to use it badly.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Web 2.0 is the buzzword of the moment, referring to a supposed "second generation" of websites, including social networking sites like Facebook, Bebo and MySpace. In these examples, a person builds their own page and links with friends.

Technology such as this could be used as part of e-learning - not so much as a way of getting information across, but by connecting to other people within the company. This is particularly useful for large organisations providing induction courses.

Social networking could be encouraged as a post-induction activity - get the employee to find people directly affected by the work they do, and encourage them to keep in touch.

RADIO

Do you really need text to back up your argument? Your material could be entirely audio-based. Learning through a podcast is really starting to catch on, as many Universities have realised after releasing their own lectures in audio form - Oxford, for example, has a series on medieval literature. The University of Bath release their public lectures on all sorts of subjects, from creationism and evolution to ethnic conflicts.

If employees are busy or on the road for long periods, they could download podcasts from your website - or even iTunes, if you think the content is universal enough - and listen to it on-the-hop. It's also increasingly easy to develop and make available. All you need is a microphone, editing software and a confident

presenter. And if you're prepared to spend a bit of cash, you can get really professional results.

NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES

Screens don't have to follow the "text on one side, graphic on the other" approach traditionally used in PowerPoint slides. You could use some of the design techniques found in print, just to give it an interesting flavour. Why are magazines (and their online equivalents) so nice to look at? It's often down to simple tricks. For example, it's surprising how many e-learning courses stick to a "boxy" approach. Square images in a square interface - again, bringing to mind the unimaginative slides used in presentations. Imagine if every image in a magazine was square. It would look flat and lifeless. Use big, bold photos and cut them into exciting shapes. Don't confine them into boxes. And what about the tabloids? How do they get their audience to read? How are layouts used? Can these techniques be transferred to e-learning?

Be bold

Breaking free of the ingrained classroom model won't be easy. Fear of spiralling budgets and - the biggest demotivator - failure, may tempt you to return to tried and trusted techniques. And there'll be opposition. But it can be a gradual change. Nod to the techniques above. Test it with your audience. Once you feel comfortable a new technique has been mastered you'll eventually feel bold enough to create learning of a much more visual and interactive variety.

e-Learning can be enjoyable, engaging and highly effective. We shouldn't blindly stick to old educational conventions when other disciplines may be more relevant. Think more freely and the results will be much more enjoyable and memorable, as will the design process itself.

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