



Authoring Tools: Friend or Foe?

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Think back to websites you've visited. You can probably re-call at least one example of a website that didn't conform to well-established design principles, theories and practices. Perhaps it was the garish colours, poor layout, gratuitous animation or even a technical glitch. Whatever the site's problem the most likely cause was insufficient web design skills. So while the creator had mastered the tools to build their website they hadn't mastered the principles of good web design.

Web designers are highly skilled individuals who understand things like balance, harmony and proportion – all critical elements of any screen layout. They know what mix of fonts and colours to use and when animation is critical to channel a user's attention. In short, web designers have the skills to use the available tools to design quality websites.

Given this lesson learnt in the web design arena, why then are instructional design skills often devalued in the e-Learning space as more authoring or content creation tools come onto the market? The templates, tools and wizards that come bundled with leading Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) have made it easier than ever before to assemble and deploy content but typically this hasn't meant better e-Learning. In fact just as we saw a proliferation of bad websites now we are seeing a proliferation of bad e-Learning.

What is bad e-Learning? Well for me and most of the learners I come into contact with, it is the equivalent of an e-book. Basically learners click 'Next' again and again and again through pages of text and images until eventually they are presented with a multi-choice quiz or drag and drop exercise.

The essential ingredients missing from the 'e-book model' are appropriate instructional methods. Instructional methods are the strategies and techniques used to assist learners to process new information in ways that lead to learning. Ideally a variety of instructional methods will be used to engage, energise and motivate learners. These methods must meet the learner's specific needs and explore the attitudes and behaviours that the e-Learning is aiming to address.

The importance of appropriate instructional methods cannot be underestimated. Most of us have experienced a poor training session (whether in the classroom or on a computer). In almost all cases it will not have been the content that led to our negative assessment. Rather it is the design of the session itself that made the difference. Failure to use the best instructional methods impacts on our ability to learn or obtain value from the training session.

For all their advantages, authoring tools are not yet advanced enough to determine the most appropriate instructional method for a particular piece of

content. What is needed are the skills to not only use the tools but also to design the learning content. So just as their web counterparts know which colours to select from the extensive colour palette, an experienced instructional designer knows which strategies and techniques will assist learners to process particular content in ways that lead to learning.

Given the importance of sound instructional design, why aren't organisations relying on a combination of tools and skill? More often than not it comes down to cost and time constraints. In today's "better, faster, cheaper" economy, organisations want content deployed and they want it deployed now. But what is the ultimate cost of this rapid deployment? Kruper (2002) estimates that 30 to 75% of learners fail to complete e-Learning courses. So while tools may allow organisations to dramatically lower the cost of e-Learning development, one has to question the actual savings if course quality is low and learning outcomes aren't being achieved.

Ultimately organisations need to apply the value equation to the whole project life cycle – looking beyond merely development costs. While an organisation may save money upfront on development, the organisation needs to ask itself if those savings come with significant productivity losses further down the line. Does the initial saving of X percent outweigh the cost of having a poorly trained workforce?

Lateral thinking about the possibilities of e-Learning is also critical. Organisations often assume a knowledge or skill gap needs to be filled by an online course and that this course presents a high cost (unless perhaps the "e-book" model is adopted). However, online courses are only one piece of the e-Learning puzzle. A whole range of solutions, at different prices and development timeframes, may be available to meet a particular organisational need. Again it comes back to skill. Someone with the required skill set needs to analyse the situation and identify the best approach given the organisation's needs.

If I've presented a convincing argument so far, right now you may well be asking "do the authoring tools that come with an LCMS offer any value"? In the right hands these tools offer many advantages. Some tools come with a great range of options for interactivity and I've seen skilled designers use authoring tools to build highly effective, engaging and interactive courses. Furthermore, an LCMS enables these courses to be quickly and easily deployed because it takes care of the technical aspects of course deployment by automating the communication protocols between the courseware and the organisation's Learning Management System (LMS). And if learning content becomes out-of-date, the tools can be easily used by internal staff to maintain the course with minimal effort or fuss.

Perhaps in the end it is like deciding between an architect / builder or a DIYer (Do it Yourselfer) to add that extension to your home. Do you want a custom

approach, designed to address your specific needs and in accordance with tried and tested design principles? Or are you comfortable sitting next to a load bearing wall that a DIYer (with limited relevant experience or training) has used all the right tools to construct?

The reality is that the tools are only as good as the tradesperson. So if you want quality e-Learning consider not only the tools but the experience and skills of the designers who are using them.

If your organisation would like to discuss authoring tools or instructional design in more detail, please feel free to contact us to share your experiences and learn more about ours.

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