



Online Learning
AUSTRALIA

Online Learning or Shovelware?

By Cedric Richardson

Instructional design is the most important skill needed to ensure effective online learning. Well, we've all heard statements like this repeated over and over again. And never has it been more true than now as the Australian e-learning market begins to heat up, technological advances continue to challenge our notions of what constitutes e-learning and the shortage of suitably qualified instructional designers reaches crisis point.

The past year has seen a dramatic increase in interest in e-learning by large corporations. This is most noticeable in the financial services sector, where the Financial Services Reform Act has placed e-learning squarely on the agenda by requiring financial institutions to track the completion of training by all customer service staff. But even outside of the financial services sector, many large organisations are seeing system rollouts or other change projects as an opportunity to fund an e-learning implementation. The interest has been helped by more competitive pricing options and start-up packages being offered by Learning Management System (LMS) vendors and also by an apparent renewed interest in training in general within organisations.

At the same time, more and more gadgets come within our economic and technological reach. Virtual classrooms allow us to mimic the interactions of traditional classrooms from desktops across the globe. SCORM-compliant Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) claim to provide the capability for subject matter experts to load content into templates to create reusable learning objects. And streaming technologies and higher bandwidth connections enable us to include video footage in our courseware.

But how do we resist the temptation to use existing facilitator-led courses in a virtual classroom, when common sense tells us that a virtual classroom requires a different level of facilitation and interaction to a normal classroom? And how do we avoid producing page after page of template-induced read-and-click shovelware that dulls out even the most ardent of online learners? Or worse still, repurpose those eighties team-building videos to save money on our flashy new online learning program?

The answer lies in the instructional design input. Top-caliber instructional designers know how best to incorporate a virtual classroom discussion into a blended learning course to maximise the benefit of the online interactions. They also know how to work within the limitations of existing LCMS technology to build and reuse templates that provide truly engaging learning interactions. And they can make informed decisions about when video is possible within bandwidth constraints and when it will enhance the learning experience rather than simply increase the WOW factor.

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These top-caliber instructional designers know about adult learning theory, because e-learning is primarily about autonomous learning. They also explain key concepts clearly and succinctly because they know about instructional design principles. And they are comfortable working across multiple Web technologies. Oh, and by the way, they appear to be in short supply.

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