The Role of E-Learning in the Future

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Technology and the web seem to be one in the same in todays fast pace world of innovation and change. From the boardroom to the campus, learning is changing in an effort to keep pace with technology. Online learning is taking on new forms of development and delivery. It is serving a wider variety of audiences and is implemented in many different types of organizations to meet the ever-increasing needs of learners across the globe. What will elearning look like in the future? This paper will look at predictions and observations of the future of elearning. It will review what elearning might be called in the future. It will explore the different forms of elearning used to day and how it will change as a result of user comfort and acceptance of elearning. From the developer to the user elearning is changing. The tools used to develop the learning solution to the tools used to deliver it have made it easier for uses everywhere to leverage elearning in whatever form best fits their needs at the time.

Predictions and Observations

Even as far back as 2006, Gleasen (2006) stated, "The acquisition of knowledge, the collection of experiences and the processing of information will be the biggest challenges facing academia, business and government over the next three to ten years" (p. 1). John Naisbitt identified a trend in communications in the 1980's that would be defining the future of the workforce as an information society. He envisioned by 2000, an environment in which information would be shared electronically, allowing workers to collaborate from remote locations and participate as outside consultants (cited in Gleasen 2006).

What is the future of e-learning, Michael Harrison claims, "E-learning will no longer be a term used in the future because by 2012 it will not even exist claims a partner at learning consultancy, Kineo" (Anonymous, 2006). This is a bold prediction but should not be dismissed

so easily. Names ands terms related to technology have a way of creeping into our daily lives. For example the name Google and now been transformed into a verb, *Just Google it, is* a common phrase today. Harrison also speculated where e-learning is likely to be in six years time when he asked,

> How many hours do you spend at your computer in a day? More than eight? Do you call it e-working? Or ereport writing? Of course not. So why use the term e-learning? "We need to move away from viewing e-learning as a discrete task, and see it as what it is: something that we just do on a day-to-day basis without differentiating it from the rest of our activities." Harrison went on to explain that if e-learning is to have a permanent place in the future it needs to be based on the appropriate technology. He said: "You have to focus on sustainable technologies. Some of them won't make it. Remember the laser disc? I personally don't believe wikis and blogs will survive." (Anonymous, 2006)

The eLearning Guild, a global Community of Practice for e-Learning professionals provides learning opportunities, networking services, resources, and publications for over 20,800 members. The eLearning Guild community suggested, "the industry will experience significant increases in many areas including rapid e-Learning design and development, e-Learning programs for customers and business partners, measurement of business results effected by e-Learning, and e-Learning designed to support informal learning." (Pulichino, 2006)

Forms of E-learning

New and innovative types of learning are being sought after to increase the effectiveness of the learning as well as reduce the cost of producing it. This is driving many companies and

educational institutions to explore different ways of delivering leaning. Pulichino said, "Of particular interest to the eLearning Guild is the continuing emergence of new delivery modalities such as mobile learning, blogging, podcasting, and games -- all of which are beginning to show signs that they are ready to move past the early adoption phase and into mainstream e-Learning," (Pulichino, 2006).

So what is driving these institutions to look for new ways to deliver learning? Larry Banas of Educational Services, Emerson Climate Services LLC, Sidney, Ohio said, "Some of the driving forces behind the trends, so to speak, are attrition of the work force, new entrants to the field, new technology, and the time commodity" (Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 2). Kent Peterson the 2007-08 president of ASHRAE and vice president of P2S Engineering Inc., Long Beach, California said, "Industry professionals want information that they can apply immediately to real-life situations," (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 3). Peterson went on to talk about how it is not just the employee that wants this timely information but also the customers. Peterson stated, "Customers want the information they need in a timely fashion," he said. "More and more building owners are requesting green, high-performing buildings, which is increasing the demand for more education in available technologies, integrated building design, and operations and maintenance training" (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 3).

Innovations in online learning will continue for the foreseeable future. But what are the key elements required to facilitate changes in online learning? For changes to happen in the online learning world there has to be a level of acceptance by the user, the sponsor, the developer of learning solutions. As Bradshaw stated, "In our experience, eLearning is becoming more accepted than in past years as our dealers, and people in general, have greater access to broadband Internet access" (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 5). The speed and capacity of

internet connections have been limiting factors in the past but today "high-speed access allows the programs to load and play smoothly without the nonproductive delays that beset online users in the early years of the Internet" (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 5).

As users have become more comfortable with online learning and technology both in the workplace and in higher education become more commonplace, Massy stated the use of "online training is becoming more common especially when focused on products, processes, and manufacturers' program training" (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 5). The use of online sources as an educational delivery tool "is getting more attention from our customer base," said Banas (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 5). Finally, one of the major reasons online learning is becoming more commonplace is the fact that,

> Personal computers and other industry uses of these have paved the way for greater acceptance. The younger technicians have grown up with PCs and Xbox. I believe this form of learning is a good thing for technical training. Many prerequisite topics can be covered very economically and to large audiences, paving the way for more thorough and focused instructor-led courses (cited in Checket-Hanks, 2008. p. 5).

With the ever-increasing pace of change in today's world the integration of technology, computers and work makes thinking about the learning and work as one. Gleasen (2006) said, "Both Gates and Naisbitt predicted a future for computing in organizations that allows for a fast-paced change in job descriptions and employee bases" (p.1). This reinforces the need for employees at any level to pursue new knowledge and skills. Gleasen (2006) stated that "to effectively meet these demands, instructional opportunities must be provided to employees, in real time, to promote day one performance and reduce the cost of training" (p. 2). The reality is

that today's workers must adopt a mindset of life long learning. It is no longer good enough to go to school in ones youth and learn all there is to learn and then stop. This is a golden opportunity for higher education to capitalize on the learning needs of not just the undergraduate student but the mature professional as well.

According to Gleasen (2006), "since 1999, the trend in business has been to bring training back in house" (p. 3). At Bank of America we use a blend on internal and external resources to provide the training and education our associates need. This includes academic partnerships with prominent institutions of higher education as well as elearning vendors in the industry. Gleasen (2006) stated, "Management realizes that by offering instructional material to employees, on demand and in real time, they can eliminate the fixed costs associated with off-site conferences and seminars" (p. 3).

The keys question on educators and managers minds alike are does elearning work and are it better or worse than traditional learning delivery methods? Littig (2006) stated,

This new thinking about eLearning implies, in this sense, a demand for a solid, objective-driven and methodologically sound foundation as well as a learner-centric approach. These ideas have led to a more critical thinking on learning as a process which helps to define and to determine the success of eLearning processes. This means that the definition of the success of any learning has to be built on a solid decision regarding which category of learning the learner should be addressing when executing an eLearning process (p. 6).

The new thinking around elearning also leads to innovative ideas and solutions for new delivery methods. Some would argue that the future of elearning is in the form of interactive digital media or video game simulations. According to Squire (2008) these

types of learning solutions "offer immersive experiences in which players solve problems. Players learn more than just facts - ways of seeing and understanding problems so that they become different kinds of people" (p. 7). Where these types of solutions really start to make a difference is in the area of business strategy games, advergaming, and entertainment gaming which embody these features and point to a future paradigm for eLearning (Squire, 2008).

The World Wide Web

Finally the use of web is not limited to just delivering online learning. The emerging use of the web as a social networking tool provides the basis for what Chen, Wu, and Yang (2008) call an alternative medium to deliver the case-based method of learning business concepts. The social nature of this technology can potentially promote active learning and enhance analytical ability of students" (p. 331). Weblogs allow users to read posted information and write new information in reverse chronological journal form (Barger, 1999). Chen et al. (2008) describes new web technologies and there uses in the following,

> The user-centered and interactive features of Web 2.0 technologies, such as Weblogs, Wikis, and instant messaging (IM), enable people to collaborate and share information in virtual space. Weblog's asynchronous collaborative nature transcends the limitation of time, facility, and location. Weblogs allow webloggers to link to relevant information in a timely manger and to access temporal information (current and historical) (p. 331).

Conclusion

As has been discussed it seems like technology and the world wide web seem to be one in the same in today's fast pace world of innovation and changing. We have seen that from the boardroom to the campus learning is changing and needs to keep pace with other technological advancements. On line learning is taking on new forms of development and delivery. It is serving a wider array of audiences and is be implemented in many different types of organizations to meet there ever increasing needs of learners across the globe. What will elearning look like in the future? This paper examined predictions and observations of the future of elearning. It reviewed what elearning might be called in the future. It explored the different forms of elearning used today and how it has changed as a result of greater user comfort and acceptance. From the developer to the end user, elearning is changing. From the tools used to develop elearning solutions to the tools used to deliver it have made it easier for users everywhere to leverage elearning in whatever form best fits their needs at the time.

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