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eLearning The Hype and The Reality

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*"It is not necessary to change.
Survival is not mandatory."
- W. Edwards Deming*

Over the past 10 weeks I have been fortunate to participate in 4 conferences, 2 trade shows, 3 seminars and one workshop on eLearning that took place in eight cities in four countries across three continents. There is a great deal of interest in eLearning to say the least, but what is more intriguing is the different and sometimes conflicting ways in which eLearning is interpreted.

In our last newsletter, I referred to ASTD's definition of eLearning as "anything delivered, enabled, or mediated by electronic technology for the explicit purpose of learning." Although it seems reasonable, it is by no means a widely accepted definition. Elliot Masie at the recent TechLean conference in Orlando, Florida suggested that the "e" should stand for experience rather than "electronic", and as such Elliot argued that instructor-led training should also be included in the eLearning strategy. Learning Management System (LMS) vendors argue that eLearning is not limited to content but should also include the system used to administer and manage the learning process. The confusion is not limited to North America. At the Corporate eLearning conference in Melbourne, Australia, at least five different interpretations for eLearning were presented over a two-day span.

So what does eLearning mean? At the present time, eLearning is anything you want it to be. By including an "e" in front of learning, we elevate the expectations of our audience and capture the attention of senior managers. This is the hype - what we deliver is the reality. It is fairly simple to predict the consequences of unfulfilled expectations - which were graphically depicted by the Gartner Group "eLearning Hype Cycle" (appeared in September 2000 issue of Training and Development magazine). As you may expect, hype generates great visibility. When deliverables do not meet expectations reality will sink in and the interest in eLearning will sharply decline. Eventually, expectations will fall in line with reality and once again interest in eLearning will rebound at a steady rate - referred to as "slope of enlightenment" - until we reach a level of stability referred to as "plateau of productivity".

The bad news is that we are heading towards the peak of inflated expectations. Does this mean that eLearning is all hype? Not exactly, a wide range of developments are presently underway that are expected to have a significant impact on learning. These include:

* Standards, such as SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) are gaining widespread acceptance (<http://www.adlnet.org>). The primary objective of the standard is to solve courseware reuse problem. In other words, allow users to track and manage courseware developed by various authoring tools using a single system. Standards are critical to the acceptance and wide spread use of eLearning. Imagine our frustrations if each house had a different set of electric outlets and each appliance manufacturer developed a

unique electric plug.

* Learning Management Systems (LMS) an enabling technology for managing the delivery of learning - the main thread that links all the pieces. A wide range of LMSs is presently available. Although the functionality varies from one system to the other, in general LMSs can manage the delivery of synchronous and asynchronous learning, register trainees and track performance, develop competency profiles and learning plans as well as manage resources. LMSs enable individuals to take control of their learning while providing the organization with a single system for managing the entire training program.

In many cases, however, technology is not the issue. In his keynote speech at TechLearn, Tom Peters stressed that the problem is not how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get the old ones out. Tom predicted that in the next 10 years 90% of white-collar jobs will be destroyed or reconfigured beyond recognition. Although this is great news for the training industry, we have to realize that 90% of our jobs and the way we do business will also be affected by this revolution. Another prediction that appears to be fairly relevant to the training industry is that "the most profitable businesses in the future will act as knowledge brokers, linking insights into what is available with insights into the customer's individual needs and preferences".

What does this mean? It means that although we do not agree what eLearning is all about, and a sharp decrease in hype and visibility is expected in the short term - do not be fooled - change is unavoidable. This does not imply that instructor-led training will disappear - in fact I believe that it will continue to play a key role - however, I also believe that technology will become more and more integrated in the instructor-led approach that the line between eLearning and Learning will disappear. We are still in an evolving stage and no one can predict with any degree of certainty what the future will hold - however my advice is to keep an open mind, experiment with new technologies and initiatives, and continually challenge your assumptions - and who knows, the next breakthrough may be coming from you.

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