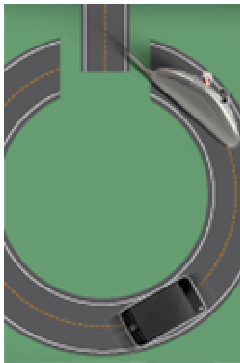


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E-Learning: What's Old Is New Again

By Allison Rossett and James Marshall

New data on e-learning usage do not signal the death of the classroom. And despite some of the buzz, the direction of e-learning has not shifted much over the past several years.



It sounds simple: e-learning. That is, learning with an “e,” for electronic. Every study reveals more about it, including ASTD’s 2008 State of the Industry Report, which found that nearly one-third of training content is now delivered electronically.

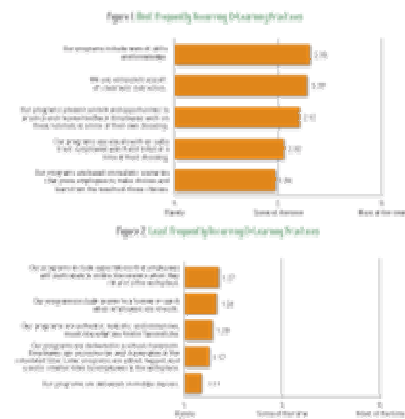
But what is e-learning? Is it lessons shared in a virtual classroom? PowerPoint slides with an audio track? Online discussion boards that advance classroom teaching? Scenario-based e-programs? Tutorials available online, as needed? Podcasts? What about 2.0 strategies, such as user-generated content and social networks?

In mid 2009, we decided to find out what e-learning really looks like currently. We reached out to practitioners and asked them to tell us what they are doing and when they are using e-learning, and 968 responded to our survey, which asked them to share current practices, hopes for the future, and barriers to their efforts. Most responses (605) came from corporations, with 13 percent working in higher education and 8 percent in the government and military sectors. A few chose not to identify an affiliation. Nearly 60 percent of those who responded had been in the field for 10 or more years, and 66 percent were women.

We collected practices associated with e-learning, from the most familiar, such as computers supporting face-to-face instruction inside classrooms, to more emergent modes that take learning and support into the workplace, encourage collaboration, and deliver using mobile devices. We then crafted 26 diverse e-learning “snapshots,” piloted and edited them, and then made them widely available using SurveyMonkey.com, an online survey system. Five professional groups, including ASTD’s *Learning Circuits* and the eLearning Guild, invited their members to weigh in on the snapshots. The sidebar provides several examples.

Optimistic views

At a government conference in 2009, Marc Rosenberg, author of *Beyond e-Learning*, said, “Web 2.0 is changing everything we do.” Ellen Wagner, recently Adobe’s e-learning manager, applauded the movement of e-learning from the web to the cloud, pointing to the power of virtualized software services to route learning to the right person at the right time. Consultant Josh Bersin has emphasized the emergence of on-demand resources that are accessible in the workplace and set within a larger talent management strategy. And blogger Jay Cross has urged nothing short of a revolution, noting a steep reduction in formal, scheduled classroom events, and parallel



Sample E-Learning Snapshots

- Our programs are delivered in a virtual classroom. Employees join an instructor and classmates at a scheduled time.
- Our programs are based on realistic scenarios that press employees to make choices and learn from the results of those choices.
- Our programs provide guidance systems that help employees know what to do next and how much progress they have made.
- Our programs are customized, personalized learning experiences matched to individual employee needs, strengths, and preferences.
- Our programs are delivered on mobile devices.
- Our programs include efforts to collect, distribute, and update best practices and great ideas.
- Our programs include employee-generated content, with employees asked to contribute their thoughts and opinions so that others, no matter their location, can benefit and respond.

increases in self-service learning.

If your view of e-learning hails from conferences, blogs, and magazines, you would think that the classroom is near death and that the web is the beating heart of training and development. Messages have gone mobile. Employees are empowered. Instructors are vestigial. Learning is blended, regularly occurring in classrooms and beyond, even in the workplace. And content flows from experts and users, too, in tasty, bite-sized morsels.

But is that how it is?

How it is

Responding professionals rated their current practices on a three-point scale, ranging from “most of the time” to “some of the time” to “rarely or never.” The resulting mean scores for these items allowed us to compare frequency of practice for the 26 e-learning snapshots. When asked about e-learning practices, professionals most often pointed to activities associated with instructional design. E-learning, from their reports, is mostly about measuring and delivering through familiar instructional strategies such as tutorials and scenarios.

It is not what we expected, but the most frequently occurring e-learning practice is the testing of skills and knowledge. Interestingly, testing even surpassed classroom use of computers, though by a very narrow margin. Instructional design practices that represent pedagogy options made a strong showing. Tutorials, scenario-based learning, and problem-solving strategies were persistent.

What, then, was not typical of contemporary e-learning practice? E-coaching and the use of mobile devices were rare. A long-favored strategy, online discussions to support knowledge transfer from the classroom to the workplace amazed us by being not at all typical of the practices reported by respondents.

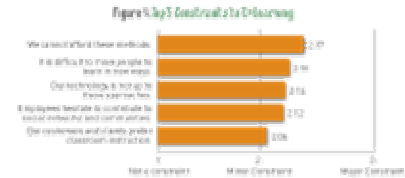
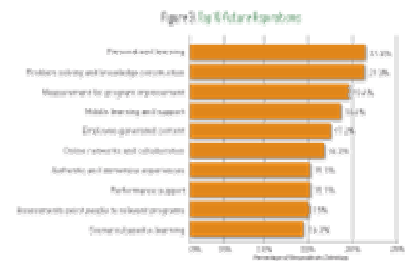
Web 2.0 activities involving user-generated content and collaboration were also scarce, except in academia. Academics differed significantly from their corporate and government peers in their reported use of Web 2.0 practices. Perhaps it is academic freedom that allows professors to experiment with online networks such as NING, to more faithfully include online discussions and to involve students in group activities and exercises. Or perhaps it is less intensity about rock-solid, authoritative content. Without a doubt, there is more room for discussion about religions of the world and art history than for topics such as safety or insurance contracts.

The way it ought to be

When asked to reconsider the 26 snapshots for those approaches with the most promise for enhancing services in the future, opinions were all over the map. No single option attracted even a fourth of the responders, as you can see in Figure 3, which presents those aspirations that attracted the most favor.

Instructional design also led the field into the future, with 21 percent choosing to move toward customized, personalized learning experiences, problem-based learning, and more measurement for program improvement.

The much-acclaimed emergent approaches finally got the nod. The fourth most chosen direction for the future was mobile devices, and the fifth was employee-generated content. Networks, immersive



experiences, and performance support were also acknowledged as colleagues look toward the future.

Barriers to e-learning

We challenged practitioners to identify the barriers to their e-learning efforts. Here, too, ratings occurred on a three-point scale, from a high rating of “major constraint” to “minor constraint,” and low rating of “not a constraint.” Figure 4 presents the barriers they identified.

Money mattered most. And not surprising at all, especially in the current economic environment, was that lack of financial resources was identified as the most urgent impediment. Other familiar concerns included resistance to change, technology shortcomings, and a client preference for the familiar—the classroom.

More surprising was what did not show up as a barrier. Employee resistance and inability to learn independently were not top-of-mind; neither was the ability for employees to handle the technology. We also expected lawyers to feature prominently, given anecdotal concerns expressed about user- and community-generated content. Lawyers were not cited as a top barrier to the advancement of e-learning. And most surprising of all, incentives that favor the classroom were not the impediments we expected them to be.

What about your e-learning?

Our respondents were volunteers, not random sources at all. Of course, that makes it hard to generalize these findings to your situation. We invite you to do that for yourself.

As we stated earlier, current e-learning practice is characterized by instructional design, enabling professionals to do the things that we surmise they have always wanted to do, such as measuring and communicating results, and personalizing programs. We also found that instructional design was most favored going forward, though mobile devices, collaboration, and performance support were not far behind.

What about you? If you embrace e-learning, how grand is your grasp? How do you and your organization compare to what we found to be typical of current practice and aspirations for the future?

The survey we used, with small tweaks, is available at <http://tinyurl.com/elearningpractice>. We invite you to visit the site and report and reflect on your practices.

Take some time with the 26 snapshots. Compare your practices with those of others who have taken the survey. Bring along your colleagues and perhaps your manager. How do they respond? Are you where you want to be? Are your customers and clients where they want to be? Can you use the snapshots to structure conversations about the possibilities? Are you comfortable with the strategy that drives choices today and moving forward? Do you know how to get from where you are to where you want to be?

Our study focused on current and future practices. By design, we did not inquire about effectiveness or efficiency. How will you weave those priorities into your conversations? How will you assure that they drive your programs?

Back to the future

Opportunities are being left on the table. Today, there is little evidence of collaborative and user-centered approaches in

corporate and government settings, though there are suggestions of influence to come in the future. It is the same for mobile devices, ranked last in reported current practice, and jumping closer to the top of the list as practitioners look forward. The virtual classroom and blended learning were also less prevalent in reported practice than anticipated.

Old favorites dominated in our study. E-learning today appears to be mostly about delivering assessments and designs, testing, personalization, scenarios, and tutorials. All these are familiar, and they all have deep roots in the training and development community. Should we lament that the habits identified in this study are not much different in 2009 than they were in 1989 (although, of course, enabled by technology)? Is this good news or bad? And most important, what do you intend to do about it? **T+D**

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