ASTD Roadmap for E-learning

The State of the E-Nation

By Martyn Sloman

A U.K. trainer makes some observations about U.S. e-learning.

Three years ago, I had the good fortune to visit the United States at the beginning of what we now call the e-learning revolution. What I saw had an enormous impact.

The U.S. arm of my employer at the time, Ernst & Young, had developed software and systems that could achieve a transformation in training and that demanded a whole new way of thinking. Industry experts were talking confidently about delivering training anywhere and anytime at the user's desktop, customized to meet his or her needs. As William Gibson said, "The future has arrived; it's just not evenly distributed yet."

Much activity has taken place over the ensuing years. A huge amount of money and intellectual energy has been invested in heavily marketed competing systems. A lot of analysis and argument has taken place; articles and books have been written. We also witnessed the collapse of the value of dot.com shares, which in some quarters has raised doubts about the depth and permanence of the Internet phenomenon. Perhaps more significantly, successive ASTD State of the Industry Reports posed questions about the extent to which e-learning has become accepted and embedded in organizations.

So, against that background, how does e-learning in the United States appear to a European observer? The most powerful impression from my time spent in June at ASTD's International Conference and Exposition in Orlando, Florida, is that there's still enormous confidence that e-learning *is* the future—though not everyone (or perhaps no one) would agree with conference speaker Tom Peters that the goal should be 90 percent of training delivered via e-learning by 2003. A more realistic assessment, implied by ASTD reports, is in the range of 20 to 25 percent.

Market turbulence and learner or organizational resistance of new technology are viewed as short-term problems. The advance of e-learning continues. Judging by the number of new suppliers in the industry, there's no shortage of venture capital to support good ideas. Connectivity of computers, databases, and networks is the future for learners. A lot of first-rate minds are working to overcome problems and develop new processes. Some of those experts are suppliers of learning systems; others are training managers or chief learning officers. But technology has thus far run ahead of learners: It is still the age of learning technology, not the age of technology for learning.

The ambition and sophistication of learning technologies have improved enormously, and there's evidence of massive progress still to come. Almost anything that a thoughtful trainer can ask of technology to assist in learning is either in embryonic form or at least the subject of purposeful discussion. Current activity and improvements seem to focus on two areas—both delivered at a learner's desktop. One focus is on reusable Web-based training modules, which can be purchased from any source or generated within an organization. The second focus is on synchronous, real-time lessons delivered by subject matter experts using visual and audio links that give learners the opportunity to ask questions via audio or email messaging. A plenary speaker at the ASTD conference, Allison Rossett, referred to those two categories as "the stuff and the stir."

Development of the stuff, the learning modules or objects, will be given a huge and helpful impetus by the progress on new industry standards for e-learning. The detail is unbelievably complex; the principle is straightforward. The intention is to set protocols so that e-learning technologies can work together regardless of who built them. Email, for instance, wouldn't work without such standards.

In e-learning, the standards will allow learning objects (items defined as entities, digital or nondigital that can be used for learning education or training) to be developed by a company, an educational institute, or an individual trainer and accessed by users in other organizations. The U.S. government provided the first impetus for the development of e-learning standards, which has gained momentum through the support of

providers of e-learning systems. The committees working on the development of SCORM (an ugly acronym for "shareable content object reference model") deserve our thanks—though, if successful, the greatest tribute to their work will be that no one will remember that it was necessary. We'll take the movement of e-learning across systems for granted.

Beyond those areas, there's less evidence of progress or interest. Learning using satellite transmission, for example, seems to have totally disappeared. Learning via unmoderated chatrooms or communities attract limited interest. That could well be a mistake because peer-to-peer learning may prove in the long run to be the biggest gain from learning technologies.

Another powerful impression of mine from the ASTD conference is the way *blended learning* has become accepted as the term to describe the most desired solution of the future. (The term *learning organization* seems to have disappeared.) Blended learning reflects a healthy (and overdue?) recognition that e-learning is most effective when it's part of a considered strategy involving all aspects of learning, including classroom and on-the-job. Technology should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. We must concentrate on learners and not be seduced by technology.

" Why Blended Learning Will Win" on page 54 of this issue.

In that regard, we have a long way to go. I've argued that we're still in the age of learning technology not in the age of technology for learning. Our pedagogy hasn't developed as it should. We do know enough about when, where, and how people learn in this new world. ASTD research, undertaken with the Masie Center, provides some valuable information on the barriers to and enablers for the greater acceptance of and satisfaction with e-learning. It contains sound advice: Make the first experience as positive as possible, and make sure adequate systems are in place. Most important, employees generally prefer to undertake learning at or near their workplaces. Those findings mark only the beginning of an important investigation. Everyone—whether training manager, supplier, academic, or learner—who wants to see the effective implementation of e-learning must recognize the need to acquire and share hard information on learner styles and preferences—and on cultural and cultural acceptance issues. A special plea from across the Atlantic is in order. So far, the e-learning debate has been U.S.-centric. Other countries must be prepared to get involved and make their voices heard.

In Europe, there's a strong tradition in the so-called softer areas of learning support and research. Two areas likely to prove critical in determining learner acceptance of e-learning are the extent to which the e-learning experience can be customized or personalized and the acceptability of e-learning across different cultures. The first issue is the subject of a lot of interest but little progress; the second has hardly appeared on the radar. Tailoring delivery of e-learning to individual learner requirements or preferences may have to wait until e-learning is more mature and learners are more conscious of the possible and different ways e-learning can assist. Nancy Lewis of IBM, whose Big Blue initiative won an ASTD Excellence-in-Practice award says, "People can't prefer what they don't know. At this stage, e-learning is a change initiative." Effective personalization or customization may require everyone involved in the learning process to revisit our pedagogical base: We must assemble and reassess what we know about how people learn and work.

Personalization or customization of e-learning to date consists mainly of what may be described as "learner tracking." That involves creating a syllabus and guiding learners in a way that reflects their base knowledge and rate of progress. Some of these e-learning systems use inference engines—intelligent agents that record learner activity and use that information to provide future signposts.

What of the second main issue: the acceptability of e-learning across different cultures? There's a huge agenda to address. What would happen, for example, if Mandarin were to become the language of the Internet? I can't believe that someone somewhere isn't working on such issues. Exciting, but demanding, times lie ahead. TD

Martyn Sloman *is CIPD advisor, training and development, with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, London; m.sloman@cipd.co.uk. He's the author of* The E-Learning Revolution: From Proposition to Action *(CIPD, April 2001).*