

Can e-Learning be Effective Learning?

By Tara Denton, Life Cycle Institute

A quote by John Chambers, CEO of Cisco systems sums up the promise of the Internet:

"I truly believe that the Internet and education are the two great equalizers in life, leveling the playing field for people, companies and countries worldwide. By providing greater access to educational opportunities through the Internet, students are able to learn more. Workers have greater access to e-Learning opportunities to enhance and increase their skills. And companies and schools can decrease costs by utilizing technology for greater productivity (Chambers, 2002)."

Do you agree with John? Tons of articles have been written on e-Learning and its capabilities. There are numerous websites dedicated to the growth and success of e-Learning. The economic downturn has brought e-Learning to the forefront because, as many web advertisements state, "you can save money on travel and learn at your own pace!"

In a slower economy, saving money becomes King; however, the commitment to invest in online learning introduces other questions, like: will online learning be effective? Will I get results from an online class?

This article argues that e-Learning can be effective if the course design positively answers two questions:

Do the learning objectives meet the training needs of your company?

Is the course design participant-centered? Meaning, are the principles of adult learning threaded throughout the course?

In their new book, Tailored Learning, Miner and Hofmann insist "good instructional design is good instructional design. The modality is adaptable" (140). I agree. Questioning the effectiveness of a training event is necessary; however, the focus should not be on the training delivery vehicle (online or classroom), but on the training need, management support, course objectives and course design. Training effectiveness is maximized when learning is treated as a process: a mixture of design, delivery, and engagement by the manager pre- and post-training (for more info about training as a process, see Bill Wilder's article "Learning as a Process" http://www.lce.com/Learning_is_a_Process_164-item.html).

As a quick primer, a summary of the four principles of adult learning (androgogy) postulated by Malcolm Knowles:

- 1) Relevancy – training content must be relevant or meaningful to the participant. This could be described as the "what's in it for me?" principle
- 2) Honors prior experience – training should connect to what participants already know or have experienced (including mistakes)
- 3) Self-directed – participants need autonomy: the ability to choose and take control of learning
- 4) Active – engaging the body and the mind. Working through problems and activities versus passively absorbing content.

We have been conditioned since the age of five to believe that learning only happens in a classroom. The reality is that we are continuously learning in all situations (McIntosh, 2007).

I have heard three chief arguments against e-Learning:

- 1) e-Learning is “course in a can” format
- 2) e-Learning doesn’t allow interaction or integration of adult learning principles in the class
- 3) e-Learning doesn’t allow for informal or social learning

Let’s take a closer look at each of these arguments.

Argument 1: e-Learning is “course in a can” format

There are two types of e-Learning: synchronous (at the same time, “live”) and asynchronous (not at the same time, not live). Synchronous online classes are normally delivered via a virtual classroom with a live instructor. During the class, the learners can talk and interact with each other and the instructor. Asynchronous classes are self-paced, sometimes called “on demand” classes without an instructor present. Asynchronous environments can be on a CD, delivered electronically, downloaded or posted in a virtual classroom. Unless designed into the program, the learner moves through the materials with little live interaction or feedback. Traditionally, the asynchronous environment has strongly delivered the “self-direction” principle of adult learning. More recently, e-Learning pros have made enormous progress in terms of integrating the principles of learning in its design (more on these advancements in the next section).

There are no formal guidelines on what is “best” taught in synchronous or asynchronous environments; however, some people in the learning profession have expressed the opinion that an asynchronous environment is more apt when learning focuses on the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, just-in-time learning and/or reinforcing previous learning. Synchronous environments are more appropriate for Bloom’s higher levels, new concepts and skill-building.

Argument 2: e-Learning doesn’t allow interaction or incorporation of adult learning principles

On the contrary! If designed properly, both synchronous and asynchronous environments allow for rich integration of all four adult learning principles:

	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Relevant	Clear learning objectives and real-world examples and activities ensure the learners immediately see how the new knowledge and skills will positively impact their work and lives.	Clear learning objectives and real-world examples and activities ensure the learners immediately see how the new knowledge and skills will positively impact their work and lives.
Prior Experience	Class enrollment questions and pre-class outreach can help determine learner experience level and adjust accordingly in content	Simulations, models and quizzes can be programmed to respond to different experience levels
Active	Virtual classroom has multiple online tools for interaction: chat, whiteboard, group projects, breakout rooms, polls, quizzes, emoticons, status tools	Simulations and dynamic models require the learner to interact, make decisions, create scenarios, etc. Can also use discussion groups, blogs, social media, virtual office hours, etc.
Self-	Group activities and interaction tools	Simulations and activities ask for

directed	available in virtual classroom provide learners with a choice in their learning	learner to make decisions. Assignments are monitored by learner.
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The online medium provides the potential to deliver effective learning. It is the responsibility of those designing and delivering the course to integrate the principles of learning into their product.

e-Learning doesn't allow informal learning

Informal learning, jokingly called “water cooler learning,” can be defined as “a learning activity not easily recognizable as formal training and performance support...taking place without a conventional instructor and ...employee-controlled in terms of breadth, depth and timing” (Nancherla, 56).

Jay Cross, informal learning guru, estimates that only 10-20% of what people learn at work is through formal training. A fun simile Cross uses to compare the two learning methods: “formal learning is like taking the bus whereas informal learning is like riding a bike” (Nancherla, 56).

Informal learning is part of what makes going to a class so rewarding. In a class you can share experiences with other learners and discover how others approach success and challenges.

Informal learning can happen anywhere at any time...especially online! The virtual classroom offers staggering opportunities to make training more effective through informal learning.

Below is a brief list of ways learners can share information with each other in synchronous or asynchronous environments.

- Wikis
- Blogs
- Live/Offline chats
- Twitter
- Facebook/LinkedIn/MySpace
- Discussion groups/forums
- Podcasts
- Webcasts
- Videocasts
- Web meetings/conferences
- Instant messages
- Online communities
- Posted articles
- Collaboration sites (Sharepoint, etc)

Technological advancements like those listed above allow the learner to find what she needs when she needs it and contribute to the knowledge base. I venture to say these informal learning tools reinforce the four principles of adult learning: they provide room to honor prior experience, self-direction, activity, and if used to reinforce learning objectives, relevancy.

With the power of online sharing tools comes responsibility. It is the class facilitator's responsibility to moderate web postings, and the responsibility of the learner to validate information found online.

Closing

e-Learning effectiveness depends on the course design and delivery. Without strong objectives and a dedication to adult learning principles, the class will be a sorrowful deck of slides and recorded voice that drive learners to boredom instead of motivating them to learn new skills or behaviors. Online environments offer a wealth of tools and methods to design and deliver effective learning, but they need to be harnessed and deliberately planned into the course design.

Companies looking for a training solution should perform a needs analysis to determine learning needs and objectives (step 1), then tailor the program to find the right mix of classroom, e-Learning and/or blended solution (step 2). Many companies offer these services, each with a different approach. Fewer companies, like LCE, will tailor online learning to meet an organization's specific objectives. LCE's approach has taken years to refine and is founded upon a strong dedication to the principles of adult learning and well-defined learning objectives that are tied to the organization's business goals.

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