



Exploring the tension between return on investment and pedagogical design

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In the current chaotic economic environment employers are seeking flexible ways to improve the skills of their workers and the productivity of their organisations. They are increasingly exploring Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to provide this flexibility in a cost effective way. There is a tension between keeping course design and development costs down, yet maximising learner impact. The case study presented in this poster demonstrates how a “wrap around blended learning” approach can be used to achieve both goals.

Keywords: Blended learning, e-learning, return on investment, learner impact, instructional design

Introduction

In practice, e-learning typically involves interactivity, such as student engagement with stand-alone digital content, virtual simulations and communication between learners, their peers and their instructors. In essence ‘e-learning is pedagogy that is empowered by digital technology’ (Nichols, 2008a). When exploring e-training options, employers want to be assured the money they spend on training leads to improved skills, retention of staff, increased productivity and quality of product produced or service provided. In other words they require a Return on Investment (ROI).

Industries, trades, businesses and professions increasingly require highly skilled workers (New Zealand Government, 2009). In providing the necessary training required to upskill their employees they are increasingly using “blended learning” as a training solution. Blended learning typically involves combining aspects of traditional face-to-face activity (such as block courses) with computer-mediated support, for example using the communication tools embedded in a learning management system to accomplish an educational goal (Driscoll, 2002). It is perceived that blended learning benefits employees, who are able to remain in paid employment while studying in a flexible way that fits the time they have available for study, and employers, who are able to schedule training during periods of low pressure and reduce employees’ time off task.

Pedagogically, industry trainers are aware that the individual needs and learning style of the learner must remain central to course design to ensure that the course is effective and that the impact of the training offered is maximised. To them blended learning is not merely a “Lego Build” where the combination of face-to-face and e-learning activities are “clicked” together because the “blocks just happen to fit” with little thought of integrating the learning experiences of participants (Clayton, Elliott & Saravani, 2008). There is an inherent tension between the trainer’s desire to maintain the pedagogical quality of the learning event and the organisation’s desire to obtain the optimum ROI.

Context

The fundamental goal of instructional design is to help the teaching and learning process by ensuring that education experiences are optimised for particular learning goals (Nichols, 2008b). However time and budget can constrain how a course is to be delivered. The tension that exists is between the creation of a course that will enable teachers and/or learners to meet learning goals established, and the limited funds industry and businesses have available for the training and development of staff. They cannot afford, and

do not want, a 'gold plated' course costing a great deal to produce that far exceeds the learning impact they want to achieve. But, the tension between these competing factors can be resolved.

Henry (1994) has outlined three basic approaches to the development of courses. These are:

- Originate: create an entirely new event
- Buy in: purchase readymade material and use this without modification
- Wrap around: base the learning event on existing resources such as text books and/or other existing learning material available.

To originate, or design a course from nothing, is very costly both in development time and financial resources. Buying in a readymade course is the cheapest solution, however readymade courses seldom match specific learners' needs exactly. The wrap around blended learning approach is a compromise between the two. With this approach, course development time is spent extracting key points from available resources such as text books and developing additional materials such as forums and activities to meet the needs of the learners in the organisation.

Case study

A course designed for a small polytechnic to train emergency managers will be used for the case study. The course, Introduction to Emergency Management is a Level 6, 15 credit course. The majority of learners who will take the course are employed full time. For many, this is their first experience of academic study. The course will be run for the first time from January 2010. Learners will attend a block course of one week at the beginning and then use the learning management system, Moodle, to study via e-learning for the remainder of the course. Study guides have been developed to guide learners through various readings, matched with activities that are either done on paper and reported in discussions in Moodle or done as online activities. These study guides are available as a printable PDF accessible via Moodle. The study guide acts as a link between the reading texts, useful websites, Moodle course, tutor and fellow learners. The following screenshot shows a page from the study guide that was developed.

The polytechnic had limited funds to develop this programme, so approached a larger organisation to design and develop the course. This was the first time a course at this level had been designed for Emergency Management in New Zealand. This means that there were limited paper-based and online resources available for use. The cost and resource constraints, combined with learners' needs provided a challenge in designing the course. This poster will graphically illustrate the tensions between ROI and course design to maximise learner impact.

It is anticipated that after the course has been run in January 2010, a study of the impact on learners will be undertaken. The study will involve questionnaires and interviews with both learners and those involved in the administration and teaching of the course at the polytechnic where it is offered.

Conclusion

Blended learning that incorporates e-learning is a very powerful way of creating flexibility in how trainers and educators train learners and how those learners study. There are three main ways to design blended learning courses; originate, buy in or wrap around. In this case study, the approach used was the wrap around blended learning approach. A study guide was created for the course that linked the various participants, resources and learning modes. This has proven to be a very cost effective method of course design.

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Figure 1: Sample page of a study guide

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