Chapter 8.4
Rapid E–Learning in the University

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DEFINITIONS OF RAPID E-LEARNING

Rapid e-learning (REL) is a phrase in common use since 2003. This article defines REL, describes types of REL authoring tools, discusses management and instructional issues surrounding REL in corporate and academic settings, and summarizes the experience of the National University of Singapore (NUS), an early adopter of the concept of REL since 2004.

Almost all current literature on the topic focuses on REL applications in corporate e-learning. There is very little academic research into issues surrounding REL because this is a recent development. At this stage of implementation of REL, the literature on the topic is limited. The following three definitions are commonly used:

1. Josh Bersin defined REL as a category of on-line training content, which can be developed in weeks, can be authored by subject matter experts (SMEs), and maintains instructional focus and quality (Bersin & De Vries, 2004). REL tools leverage on common software such as PowerPoint and then convert that to Flash or other formats for Web delivery with options to add audio and simple quiz. Content is published, edited, and republished by the SMEs with little or no assistance.

2. Patti Shank, President of Learning Peaks, broadened the definition to include rapid instructional design, development, deployment, and evaluation (Shank, 2006). REL is no longer just synonymous to the rapid authoring and development of content, but also to the streamlining of the entire project management process and production cycle.

3. Another possible definition of Rapid E-learning is when the phrase is used to indicate how rapidly e-learning is being adopted or embraced by an organization. (Tan, Lee & Goh, 2004).

The definitions by Bersin & Associates and Patti Shank, which include process and product, are widely accepted as the main definitions of REL.

TOOLS FOR CONTENT AUTHORING

Rapid e-learning tools can be classified into two types of applications: synchronous, real time, and asynchronous, any time software. Synchronous applications include virtual classroom tools like WebEx, Centra, Elluminate, Breeze Live, Interwise, and other software in this category. Presentations recorded during live lectures are reused in an asynchronous setting.

Examples of asynchronous applications include Breeze Presenter and Articulate, which convert PowerPoint slides with audio narration into Flash animations with options to include videos, animations, progress tracking, and assessment quizzes. Software such as Camtasia, Captivate, and Qarbon Viewlets capture screens along with mouse movements and clicks.

Contribute, a scaled down version of Dreamweaver, allows SMEs to author and edit HTML pages in an interface that resembles Microsoft Word. Wikis and blogs can also be classified as REL tools because they enable SMEs to publish and edit content in asynchronous mode.

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

In Spring of 2004, Josh Bersin & Associates surveyed 228 e-learning developers, mostly from the corporate sector in the United States, concerning challenges faced. Results showed that the greatest challenge was limited financial resources, followed by tight deadlines. Time and cost savings are main reasons why organizations embrace REL. According to Bersin and De Vries (2004), a course developed under the traditional production cycle with a timeframe of 3-11 weeks costing between $5,000 to $30,000 per instructional hour to produce with a team consisting of the SME, instructional designer, programmer, graphic artist, video and sound editors, and so forth, can be produced in less than 3 weeks with little or no budget and developed by the SME with professional guidance and templates.

The traditional production cycle:

Needs Analysis → Instructional Design → Development with technical team → Deployment → Evaluation

The REL production cycle:

Needs Analysis → Rapid Instructional Design and Development → Rapid Deployment → Rapid Evaluation

The main difference between the two production cycles is that the instructional design and development phases in the traditional cycle are being combined. The SME is responsible for hands on development of the final e-learning product with little or no help from the programmer and graphic artist. The final product can be rapidly published with the click of a mouse button. Questionnaires with predefined categories are used to ensure that evaluations are carried out rapidly and efficiently. From a management perspective, REL frees up developers' time and they can be assigned to projects that require their skills. It also solves the problem of instructional designers needing access to SME time.

INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES

The instructional issues discussed here encompass type, or level of learning, content change, instructor control, and quality.

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