E-learning: a performance appraisal and some suggestions for improvement

Peter Honey

The author

Peter Honey is an author, management consultant and lifelong learner. He is the founder of Peter Honey Learning, Maidenhead, UK.

Keywords

Learning styles, Learning, World Wide Web, Electronic mail

Abstract

Reflects on e-learning with respect to other forms of learning and endeavours to put it into perspective given the extent to which it is currently being hyped. Appraises e-learning from the point of view of the learner given certain assumptions. Attempts to provide a balanced picture of the pros and cons of e-learning. Contends that the e-learning industry is overselling its merits and not focusing appropriately on the learner's needs. Concludes with some practical suggestions for improving e-learning performance and acceptance.

Electronic access

The research register for this journal is available at
http://www.mcbup.com/research_registers

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at **http://www.emerald-library.com/ft**

E-learning, in its current form, has been with us now for two or three years (preceded by CBT) and enthusiasm from government, organisations and providers shows no signs of abating. The hype is such that we could all be forgiven for thinking that e-learning is the equivalent of manna from heaven – a timely, life-saving miracle for which we should all be deferentially grateful. The claims made for the effectiveness of e-learning, in particular the sheer convenience of delivering it to where people are (as opposed to expecting them to come to it), make e-learning sound as if it is "The Answer" with other forms of learning suddenly being ridiculed as clumsy, old fashioned and expensive.

One of the problems with appraising e-learning is that it is eclectic (the "e" is not only for electronic!). You can, for example, learn from surfing the Web, learn by conducting a focused search on a particular topic, learn by sending and receiving e-mails, learn by dipping into an online course, learn from participating in an online discussion forum and learn by being coached or mentored via e-mail. The common thread running through all these forms of e-learning is that they offer the possibility of learning from information delivered to us electronically. The electronic technology makes more information more easily accessible more cheaply than ever before. It is the potential this has for boosting both the quantity and quality of learning in schools, workplaces and homes that has created an unprecedented groundswell of excitement and exhortation.

Amidst all this excitement we need to remember that e-learning is fundamentally another learning opportunity, the latest addition to what is already a long list of opportunities. For example, we can learn by:

- going at risk and experimenting;
- trying something new and different;
- reflecting on an experience;
- making mistakes or successes (or from anything in between);
- having interactions, exchanges and dialogues;
- participating in courses, seminars and conferences;
- making visits and benchmarking;
- giving and receiving feedback;
- reading books, journals, reports and newspapers;
- observing and then imitating skills displayed by other people;

© Peter Honey Learning

- watching TV or a video;
- listening to the radio; and
- being coached or mentored.

Now, despite many of these learning opportunities being grossly under-utilised, we need to add e-learning.

Certainly learning opportunities, besides being plentiful, are extraordinarily diverse. Some are relatively passive and others are more active. Some are proactive and others are reactive. Some are formal and some are informal. Some are nice and some are nasty. Some are planned and some are unplanned. Some are incremental and some are transformational. Some are off-the-job and some are work-based. And now some are virtual and some are real. When it comes to learning opportunities, we are spoilt for choice! Thinking about learning "in the round" like this helps to put e-learning into perspective and reminds us that it is not the panacea that some exaggerated claims might have us believe.

I want to appraise the performance of e-learning from the consumer's point of view – a sort of upward appraisal if you like. I fully appreciate the reasons why the government are keen, why organisations are keen and, of course, why providers are keen to promote e-learning. But the people who really matter in all this are the learners – the real customers for e-learning – the people who will vote with their feet if it fails to meet their needs.

In order to remain focused on e-learning's performance to date and not get side-tracked, we need to clear the decks by making some assumptions. There are eight of them.

(1) Let us assume that the technology works. It would be tempting but unfair to blame e-learning for computer crashes and the like.

(2) Let us assume that everyone has access to the Internet and/or an intranet. This, as we know, is not yet the case, but, vital though it is, the provision of the necessary equipment and resources is clearly beyond the remit of e-learning.

(3) Let us assume that everyone has basic IT skills and knows how to use the equipment. This is as much a pre-requisite for e-learning as being able to read and write is for producing an essay.

(4) Let us assume that lifelong learning is of the utmost importance for the wellbeing of the nation, communities, organisations and individuals. This assumption liberates us from the need to repeat all the reasons why learning is a priority. The arguments are well known – maintaining a competitive edge, adapting to unprecedented change, avoiding skill shortages, remaining employable, leading a fulfilled life – to mention but a few.

(5) Let us assume that everyone is learning all the time, mostly informally from life's rich tapestry with no conscious learning intent, and occasionally formally from activities, such as courses, that carry an explicit learning label. This assumption, incidentally, means that it is nonsense to describe anyone as a non-learner (government please note!).

(6) Let us assume that learning is a process (a *learnable* process) with many outcomes. It is the means whereby we acquire knowledge, skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings and self-awareness – a far from exhaustive list.

(7) Let us assume that there is no one right way to learn, that learners with different styles, aptitudes and backgrounds are diverse and that, as we have seen, learning opportunities are also diverse.

(8) Finally, let us assume that e-learning is the process of learning from information that is delivered electronically. It leaves us, the learners, to identify relevant information, convert it into something meaningful and apply it appropriately in ways that enhance our performance.

So, let us examine e-learning, at what might be considered to be the end of its probationary period, and appraise its performance.

We need to start by praising e-learning for the vast depository of information that has been amassed in a relatively short time. This is extraordinarily impressive. There are online courses on every subject under the sun and ready access to the Internet with its unimaginably large database. In fact, the database is growing so fast (it is estimated that the information on the Internet doubles every three months) as providers rush to offer what were previously classroom courses and paper-based materials online, that e-learning is becoming "obese". E-learning provides the equivalent of an Aladdin's cave stacked high with parcels of information and "learning objects". It is an electronic version of "Pile 'em high. Sell 'em cheap!" Of course locating relevant subject matter on such a vast

database is the modern day equivalent of searching for a needle in a haystack.

One of e-learning's strongest characteristics is its accessibility. Its "Anywhere, any time, any place" slogan is no exaggeration. It is just a click away whenever you need it, in sociable or unsociable hours, at work or at home. But, paradoxically, e-learning's high accessibility means that its supporters tend to be naïve about the learner's circumstances. They assume that learners are motivated and expect them to match this accessibility. They ignore other demands and pressures and the problems of finding the time and space for e-learning. A recent survey conducted by The Campaign for Learning (2000) found that 58 per cent of people attempt to e-learn at their desks and 29 per cent do it at home. Expecting busy people to have the self-discipline to concentrate on e-learning in what amounts to discretionary time is unrealistic and naïve. Even people who "rate" learning and consider it important, are likely to find that "Any time" too easily becomes "Not now ... maybe later". A clear case of the spirit being willing, but the flesh being weak.

E-learning certainly does make it easy for you to network, and learn from, people you would never otherwise reach. It can put you in touch with people all over the world. You can quiz Harvard professors by e-mail, join an online discussion forum, find yourself an e-coach or mentor, receive electronic newsletters from fellow professionals in far-flung parts of the globe.

Although e-learning offers a multi-media approach, blending text with graphics, video clips and music to make it more appealing and entertaining, unfortunately this versatility is not always practical because of bandwidth constraints and complaints about unacceptably long download times. These restrictions on e-learning versatility inevitably mean that it tends to be boring. Too often e-learning simply regurgitates pages of text culled from books and classroom courses. E-learning more often than not amounts to e-reading.

Unfortunately, all these potential benefits are going to the collective heads of the e-learning industry's developers and vendors who are alike becoming increasingly arrogant. The industry behaves as if it "knows best" and is dismissive of other forms of learning. It has made the mistake of falling for its own PR and has become convinced that single-handedly its members will transform the world of learning. Despite claims to the contrary, there is a tendency to be didactic rather than involving, preferring to tell rather than ask. This stems from the conviction that information is king and that learning is achieved by dispensing large quantities of it. This conveniently ignores the yawning gap between knowing and doing.

Finally e-learning developers are too engrossed in pushing information at the student to care about the individual's needs as a learner. No interest is shown in learning style preferences or in helping the person to improve his/her skills as a learner. Despite the fact that one of the strengths of electronic technology is its ability to customise, e-learning continues to assume that one-size-fits-all. In The Campaign for Learning's survey (The Campaign for Learning, 2000), 43 per cent of employers claimed that the e-learning they offered was tailored to individual needs but only 7 per cent of learners agreed.

Suggestions for improvement

E-learning is like a curate's egg – good in parts! It clearly has plenty of potential and is a welcome addition to a long and varied list of learning opportunities. However, there is certainly room for improvement – here are four suggestions:
(1) Stop pushing text down a telephone line and calling it learning.
(2) Have more sympathy for the learner's situation. It is unrealistic to expect busy people to be sufficiently motivated and disciplined to learn at their desks in what is effectively discretionary time. Learning has always flourished when it has been actively encouraged and supported.
(3) Stop behaving as if e-learning is "The Answer", a panacea. Work out the distinctive competence of the e-learning approach (the sort of learning that e-learning is uniquely equipped to help with) and how best to complement other forms of learning.
(4) Show far more interest in learning as a process and in how to tailor information to meet the needs of learners with different learning styles. Ask questions to establish the learning preferences of students and use the e-technology to customise offerings accordingly.

Reference

The Campaign for Learning (2000), *Attitudes to E-learning: A National Survey 2000*, Southgate Publishers, Sandford.