

Read all about it: online learning facing 80% attrition rates

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Try entering 'e-learning high attrition rates' into an appropriate search engine and you will not be short of hits that offer a variety of perceptions on the effectiveness of e-learning - and many that claim the attrition rate is as high as 80%. Can it be true that as many as eight out of ten people who begin an e-learning course fail to complete it? The answer is 'yes', and there is evidence that some kinds of e-learning are not very successful; however, it depends on what is meant by 'e' and what is meant by 'learning'. What follows is an attempt to explain the story behind the headline. It is a story that covers the last ten years and has all of the wonderful benefits of hindsight.

WHERE DID E-LEARNING BEGIN?

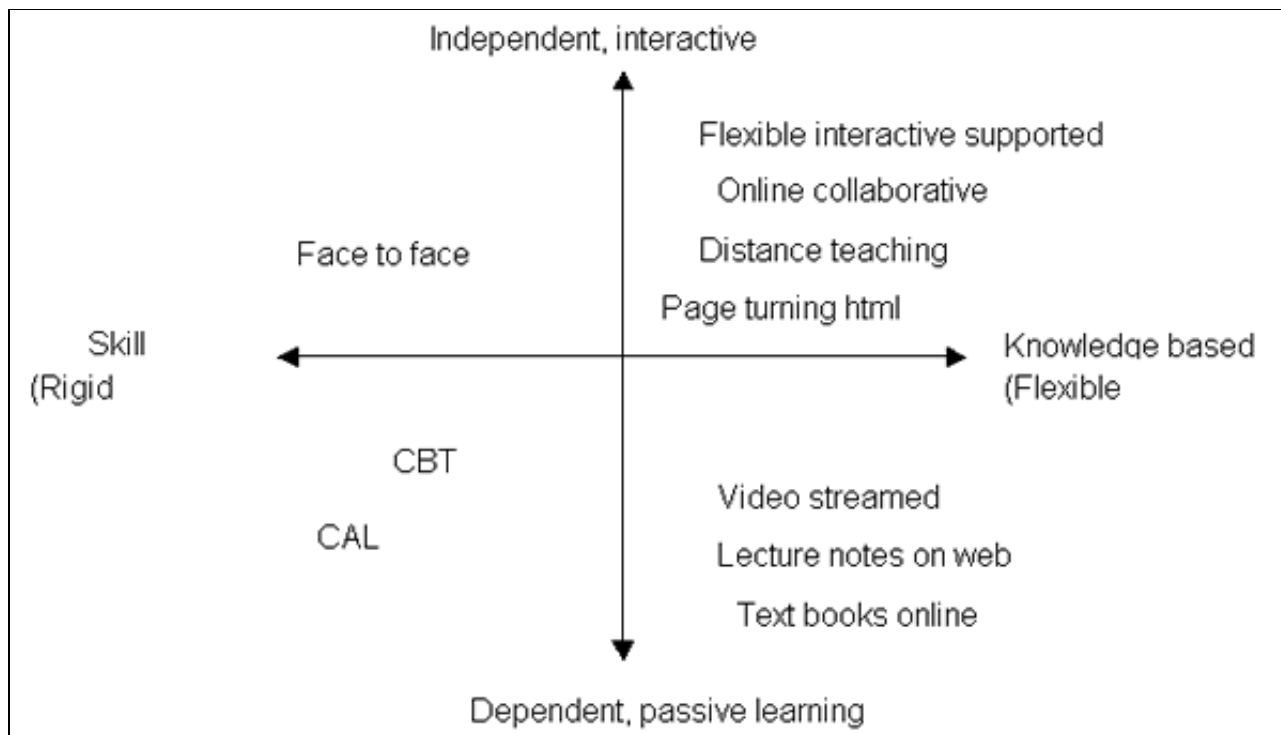
Computer Aided Learning (CAL) and Computer Based Training (CBT) were developments of Programmed Learning, a highly structured approach to teaching skills that had its roots in the training programmes designed to address skill shortages in the armed services in the Second World War. Because of this pedigree both CAL and CBT, either software or CD ROM based, have been highly successful at teaching skills that can be easily measured. They provide individually paced repetition and feedback that helps to develop an unselfconscious approach to doing things well in a particular context. It is form of learning that is done to the learner and tends to rely on extrinsic motivation in the form of short-term rewards. The fact that it works well is rarely disputed and much of this style of learning has been re-vamped for the web, and because of the new mode of delivery, is now one sub-set of e-learning. It is however a limited sub-set and has caused much confusion when conflated with a more learner focussed environment.

THE SHIFT OF FOCUS FROM TEACHING TO LEARNING

Making the learner central to the teaching process has been long established history - which includes being pilloried under the heading of 'progressive education' by many pundits and politicians. What it implies is a respect for the learner as an individual who has different needs and expectations - and what it has taught us is that there are emotional barriers to learning that must be addressed as part of the learning environment. For example, the need to feel included in the learning process and empowered by the ideas developed. It is a process that aims to facilitate intrinsic motivation in which the learning itself is the main reward. One way of the key differences is the extent to which learners are dependent on the tutor or the learning materials - and there can be good reasons for both approaches.

A MAP OF THE AREA

The matrix below is an attempt to map out the relative positions of some of the claimants for e-learning status. It is not intended to suggest a hierarchy but to suggest the territory that they best operate in - and to explain why some might be misplaced.



WHERE IS E-LEARNING?

Fuelled by the dot com phenomenon e-learning has developed in quantity, but not in terms of a coherent model of learning. As interest fades in the money making potential of internet-anything companies, e-learning is taking over as the hot topic for those whose business it is to advise on how to improve the performance of investments. One prediction is that the world-wide market for e-learning will double every year to reach \$11.5 billion by 2003. The lure of such a huge market is attracting interest from a wide spectrum of organisations that includes software companies, large corporates and universities. It is perhaps not surprising that in this rush to cash in on the market, little thought is being given to quality of experience provided to the learner.

SO WHAT IS GOING WRONG?

Many aid agencies working to improve the technology in poor countries recognise that aid needs to be appropriate; to be sustainable it needs to use local materials, draw on local skills and to be in tune with the environment. In terms of e-learning much of the technology currently used is unnecessarily specialised and tends to alienate rather than include people. Some of the complex learning management systems could be seen as the aid equivalent to the \$50,000 tractor in Ethiopia. The cost of failures in these over-complicated systems is high in terms of the negative attitudes engendered in participants who are unable to access or operate the system. Common sense (which is short supply in the e-world) would suggest that good change management is the key to success. E-learning does not magically attract people as some of the sales people involved would have us believe. There needs to be an appropriate selection of technology and learning modes - and a clear vision communicated (and even marketed) to the participants about what it will achieve. Failure to do so produces the results headlined in this article.

LEARNING LANDSPACES

What kind of learning landscape might be appropriate for e-learning? Most of us a familiar with the traditional landscape pictured below.



The lecturer/teacher/trainer stands on the peak and passes the knowledge down. People who are further up the hill find it easier to catch what is being passed down - but those lower down find it more difficult, they catch the wrong things or simply get buried. It is however a familiar learning environment for most people.

E-learning does provide us with the opportunity to revisit what the landscape and ecology of a learning environment could and should be. The landscape pictured below is one possible scenario.



Here people learn in different ways, such as individually and collaboratively in small groups - but always on the move in the direction that best suits them. Within this landscape, the 'hills' are much smaller and not dominated by experts. Because this scenario requires people to take on personal responsibility for their own learning, it can be a more daunting experience for those whose experience of learning is limited to the expert on the mountain - and they need help and support to make the change.

SO WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW TO BECOME AN LEARNING CONSULTANT?

Well, not much really. The following checklist will put you ahead of many individuals and agencies currently offering their services.

- **E-learning is a generic term that covers a variety of forms of electronic mediated learning.**
- **The learning modes vary and need to be selected on the basis of what is appropriate.**
- **Blended learning is the appropriate mix of e-learning and face to face learning.**
- **E-learners are not born, they need to be inducted and supported through what could be an uncomfortable transitional stage.**
- **The technologies that underpin e-learning need to be robust and work first time, every time.**
- **People who manage and support e-learners also need training - and particularly if they are moderating online collaborative learning.**
- **Begin with small-scale e-learning project in order to find out what works in your target organisation.**
- **The main driver for e-learning is enthusiasm; if it does not exist then it needs drumming up.**
- **Complex multi-media presentations can prove a distraction to learners; what does work effectively is relevant content allied with clear navigation and good typographical design.**
- **There are currently 169 learning management systems for sale in the UK - and none are necessary to begin e-learning.**

As a consultant offering such advice, you should be able to lower considerably the e-learning attrition rates in your client organisation. However the bigger challenge is to use the new technologies to empower, engage, excite and inspire learners - and it can be done - trust me, I'm a consultant!

REFERENCES

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