

E- Learning; a philosophy not a manifesto

Wherever we turn these days all kinds of “e” are quickly growing and developing around us. Now as my surname begins with an “e”, then I better be careful what I say. But this does mean that I do appreciate that “e” is only the fifth letter in the alphabet. Therefore, to use our full and diverse vocabulary, then many other letters are available to be used. “E” is only one part of many other parts, whether it is “e” commerce, “e” shopping, or “e” learning. The whole has to be looked at and with “e” learning, it seems to me that this whole, has at least five main aspects:

- It suits some types of learning better than other types
- It is a means to an end and not an end in itself
- Some people like the “e” screen and environment, some do not, and some like a mixture of “old” and “e”.
- It has already, replaced some methods of learning
- It is, another valuable option in the tool-bag of learning

Please, read on for a brief consideration of each of these five main aspects.

1.0. It suits some types of learning better than it suits some others.

In looking at “e” learning, then we need to consider which of the two general types of learning we are involved with - “puzzle solving” learning or “making possibilities” learning. These are fundamentally different, and require different learning methods

1.1. “Puzzle solving learning” uses programmed knowledge, which is applied to solve a current puzzle.

Puzzles are those things that have a “best” solution and often a “right” answer.

- There is a familiar, known, accepted answer.
- Knowledge and facts are acquired and are used to bring about the required solution.
- The knowledge acquiring will be often be more directive led, for example by say teachers/trainers.
- The method used is basically, “if you do this, then...”
- The individual is taught “how to” do something basically the same as everyone else.
- It is usually about getting better at what is already done.

- It is looking for efficiency by getting people to do things right.
- It enables efficient performance control.
- It has an outcome of basic “doing”. It is traditional education and learning.

1.2. “Making possibilities” learning involves more insight, critical reflection and thought being applied to solve a problem, which maybe more future orientated in its outcome.

- It deals with situations, which have outcomes that are more uncertain.
- It deals with complexity as paradox is usually, found.
- It is not so much a case of finding the right answer, but more a case of, asking the right question.
- In exploring situations, (when acquiring knowledge and solving puzzles maybe a part of the process), there is a requirement to go beyond this into innovation and creativity. This needs a deeper level of understanding.
- More challenging questioning is used, for example, about what is needed and for example, by asking why?
- Following this questioning, reflecting and thinking is used; this is then followed by experimentation and testing.
- This leads, eventually, towards finding an acceptable outcome.
- It is promoting effectiveness and doing the right things.
- The individual will often learn from someone who assist’s, helps and guides by asking questions such as “what if” and “why”.
- The individual learns how to “see it wider” to “critically evaluate”, and to “think it through for themselves”.

Clearly these two levels of learning are fundamentally different and preventing confusion is critical. The following may help to bring this clarity when having to decide upon an appropriate learning methodology:

Is learning required:

- For individuals to apply knowledge to do something to “standard,” and in accordance with current thinking and with relatively certain outcomes?
- For individuals to apply knowledge, to develop new problem solving skills and then move towards handling more future related problems with uncertain outcomes?
- For individuals to become more, of what they want/aspire to be?
- For teams and groups to learn together to get things done?
- To impact upon the development of the company?

"E" learning would seem to be much better for individual based, programmed puzzle solving learning, and also for, the more technical "hard" stuff. Both of these have more black and white answers with clear outcomes and expected standards. The learner needs to find "the right answer".

But "e" learning is perhaps of less use for the "touchy/feely" soft stuff and also less use for, the non pre-programmed, making possibilities learning. This type of learning needs more reflection, more innovation and challenge and finding out "just what is the question/problem!" It can involve team/group learning situations, where it can include those many types of interaction that are lost on the keyboard/screen.

2.0. It is a means to an end and not an end in itself

For some people, technology becomes an end in itself. These people get a "technology fix" that becomes the "answer" to all known problems. As with all good sales pitches, "E" learning is often sold as a "Need" rather than a "Want". Here, "E" learning is seen as having all the answers and that anything new will be automatically better. Tony Harris (Training Consultant) says "we must always retain control of the process and whilst change is a constant, we must not be constantly changing". This is true, but how often are things changed because of "flavours of the month", "everyone is going to be doing it", and it is "new and nice to have". So often, what is really happening here is change for the sake of change and for technology "fixing".

But different learning methods are often about supporting the learner better. Certainly here, technology can be a useful means as a part of the learning process and "E" has some positive benefits to offer here. The Open University is actively embracing e-mail support to students, as does David Granville's Scilnet "e" learning system. As David comments, "students now tell us that it is the most friendly and personal way to learn of any method they have experienced. We now have 85% of students on or ahead of schedule compared with less than 20% on the traditional methods. It proves that e- learning is not just about content, it is very much still about support".

3.0 Some people prefer the "e" screen and environment however some people do not-and some people, like a mixture of "old" and "e".

When considering "e" learning, then we should never forget the user, the client, and the learner. Are not trainers, especially, all about making it easier for learners to learn-by whatever method? If "e" does this, then fine. If it does not, then let us use the learning method that will assist learning better. The "horses for courses" viewpoint must prevail.

"Some people are best suited to traditional classrooms; some people are best suited to competency based programmes whilst a growing number are turning to the virtual classroom" (Tony Harris- Training Consultant). We should always be looking to improve the way people can learn better. Whilst some say, "if it is not broken, then why fix it", the answer to this saying should always be, "but can we can improve it?" With any "e" learning, then any change or any improvement must be customer, user, client, learner focussed. If there are other gains to be had then good-but customer focus first please.

4.0. It has already, replaced some types of learning

"E" learning methods have already replaced some former types of learning and in so doing, has replaced trainers. I know this personally though having some training work replaced by "e" learning. Changes pushed by technology have happened to everyone, and trainers should not think they are in an immune and unique position here.

But then, are not problems, opportunities?

The material still needs to be developed. The content is the critical part of "e" learning, the "bells and whistles" are useful but they will not sustain a poor content. After all-rubbish in, then rubbish out and recycling on poor existing material will not work. Great opportunities exist with "e" to use more attractive and moving visuals, and checklist feedback questioning including sounds. Simulations, interactions can all add to make a more interesting, challenging and useful learning experience. The Internet is not after all a replacement of Teletext- the Internet is different and presents new communication opportunities .For example; a new market can be developed. This maybe on a potential world wide basis with the availability of 24/7 learning experiences that are instant, on demand and satisfy those who "want it now".

5.0. It is, a valuable option in the tool-bag of learning

Learning for me, is, any method and process which uses, personal-power, knowledge and experience to:

- a) Makes sense of things, (by thinking),
- b) Make things happen, (by doing),
- c) Bring about change, (by moving from one position to another).

The method and process can be classroom, simulation, activity, seminars, workbooks, conferences, exams, projects, assignments, one to one coaching etc. as well as "e" learning. "E" is not the only answer but it is one part- a growing, and therefore important, part- of the tool-bag.

A strategic question to us all is "what new inventions and developments are around, that will take us into the next three years".

"E" learning is one of these new developments. It will be ignored at peril, but needs to be looked at with maturity-a maturity that uses it, where and when it is feasible and is capable of being used to its best extent. No "technology fixes" and ends in themselves please! As Tony Harris notes well "e-learning has its own life cycle, it is up to each individual to decide when to climb aboard and start peddling"

Acknowledgements

With especial thanks for "skeleton fleshing out" via "e" mail, face to face/telephone chats, and Internet discussion groups, to the following people:

- Tony Harris, Training Consultant, an "e" trainer/assessor, (amongst other things)
- David Granville, C.E.O., an early adopter, and developer of "e" learning, (look at www.scilnet.com.)
- Mark Williams, a UKHRD network contributor, (look at www.celemi.com)
- John Kelly, a UKHRD contributor and CBT developer, (look at www.PressTech.co.uk)

This article is the full version of a shorter version published in Open Learning Today, BAOL, January 2001 with title "A growing part of the trainers tool-bag"

Stuart Emmett is a freelance independent trainer and consultant who trades under the name of Learn and Change - Stuart believes that in times of change, it is only those who consciously learn, that will inherit, a successful future.

Stuart has operational and strategic experience in varied commercial service industries - gained in the UK and Nigeria - and is particularly interested in the "people issues" of management processes, as well as logistics and supply-chain management.

With exceptional practical and successful strong training and facilitation skills, Stuart can be contacted at stuart@learnandchnage.com or by visiting www.learnandchange.com