Where do we start? ✦

Nick Rushby, Conation Technologies Limited

I was at a seminar recently where we were discussing how to specify the requirements for the development of training materials. Naturally, this being the end of 2001 the training media was assumed to be e-learning and this assumption moved the delegates along ever more tortuous paths of trying to define the delivery platform, the need for SCORM compliance and, given that SCORM is an elusive standard, elaborating the specification to define the learning management system – and so on. A reality check among the representatives from commissioning organisations (the clients) quickly established that their starting point was almost always that a particular body of content was to be delivered through e-learning. There was little or no questioning as to the validity of the content – or as to the appropriateness of the medium.

Now, the realpolitik of training is that these fundamental decisions are often pre-empted, and often for what seem, at the time, to be good reasons. Organisational politics, fashion, and sometimes the need for exploration all play their part in innovation. But, when these decisions are set against the disillusionment with e-learning that is growing in some quarters, we might ask whether we are going about things in the right way.

I have frequently argued that we have forgotten the fundamentals of good instructional design in our enthusiasm to embrace exciting new technologies. The cyclic nature of innovation does not encourage new generations of practitioners to pause, read, reflect and learn from those who have gone before – and to learn from their mistakes. I was dismayed to discover at another recent conference presentation, how few knew (about 5% of the audience based on a show of hands admitted to knowing) about the systems approach to instructional design. Of course it is easier, as a training strategist, to take a helicopter view. Those who make their living from developing e-learning cannot afford the luxury of wondering whether alternative approaches might be better!

The problem is that e-learning is failing to deliver its promise and the paying clients are starting to find out! The economics can be improved by reducing the cost of development – if reusable learning objects can be effectively deployed within effective learning management systems but this itself introduces greater complexity and raises questions as to whether a learning object really can be used in so many different contexts. Perhaps, but the big savings are to be found further back in the process.

Instead of specifying the content that is to be delivered (often in the form of existing workbooks or course notes), would it not be more sensible to talk about the learning/training objectives – or if you prefer, the competences that learners should have after they have been through the course? This might of course, involve the course designers in more work, because they would have to look again at the content to see how best they can help the learners achieve those competences. But the potential savings can be considerable. I remember a company which, in the mid 1980s offered a no-win no-fee consultancy service. They would come and review your training system without charge and then take a percentage of the cost savings that they identified when you implemented their recommendations. It was a certain winner and they did very well

---

out of it. Some of the savings came from the introduction of technology based training, but most were through identifying training that was no longer required but had been retained because no one had questioned whether it was really needed – or really the best way of achieving the training objectives. (Please note that, although this argument is set in a training context, it could easily be translated into an educational one. The terminology would need to change and the relationships between learners and their institutions are rather different: the principles remain the same.)

Better still would be to start from specifying the change that the organisation wants to bring about in its capabilities. What should it be able to do in the future that it cannot do now? This leads us through a consideration of the contribution that the people will make to those capabilities and the things that they should be able to do, the things that they should know, that they cannot do or do not know now. This may lead us to the conclusion that there training is only one of the ways to bring that about. For example performance support systems might be a preferable alternative. Perhaps (but speak it softly) we should change the kinds of people that we recruit into the organisation and encourage those that do not have the 'right' competences that they should leave.

Best of all, would be start at the strategic level and ask where the organisation wants to be in, in say five years time. Perhaps however, this is asking rather a lot from educational and training technologists. But it is a prize worth pursuing……