

Defining the “e” in e-learning

Twenty years ago, using technology to enhance a learning experience meant plugging in the overhead projector and flipping through color-coded transparencies. It wasn't long before some trainers jumped on the PowerPoint bandwagon in the 90s and abandoned those fancy pieces of plastic and scented markers. Some even circumvented the big screen entirely and began to deliver page-turner CD programs for learners to explore at their own pace.

As technology continued to advance, trainers (and learners) wanted more from e-learning—more interaction, more content, more engagement. Developers answered that call—the page-turners of early e-learning faded as media rich courses with audio, video, complex exercises, and all sorts of extraneous bells and whistles were popping up on intranets everywhere. Developers (and learners) were enticed, but still, we wanted more.

Where e-learning falls short

On the surface, e-learning can deliver everything a training manager dreams of. Consistency, ease of delivery, interactivity, testing and tracking...all are important and common elements of today's e-learning programs. Yet, with all e-learning can do, it still can only take a learner so far. What most e-learning lacks is context—the ability to put learners in truly real-world situations where they must make real decisions and then face the consequences of those decisions.

In his book, *The End of Training*, Michael Vaughan of Regis Learning Solutions uses the Richness and Reach model to show how different training methods rate in terms of interactivity and engagement (richness) and target audience size (reach). Using this model, traditional lecture-based training has low reach and low richness. E-learning has extended reach, yet is limited in richness. Following this model, the most effective training solution is one with high richness and extended reach. Enter simulations.

Simulation: Not just for pilots anymore

“E-learning continues to be a great tool for establishing a learner's knowledge base of awareness and literacy,” Vaughan says. “However, there is a large gap between knowing something and being able to do something. That's where simulations fit in; they bridge the gap between knowing and doing.” When you think of simulations, you might think of pilots or astronauts in a high-tech amusement park ride contraption that lets them experience flight without leaving the ground. In many ways, these high-risk occupations gave life to training simulations decades ago.

Today, simulation training is accessible far beyond the virtual cockpit. It wasn't so long ago that most industries shied away from simulations out of fear that their businesses would change before the relevant simulations could be completed. Advances in Responsive Modeling technology and improved processes allow simulation developers to import a company's data into a specialized portal and create real-world simulations in weeks rather than months.

Technology talk: realistic simulations

Improved technology has also enhanced the quality of simulations available to business trainers. Early simulations were based on complicated decision trees that took learners down a linear path. “A Responsive Model evaluates many decisions simultaneously, providing a more realistic learning experience,” explains Vaughan, adding that today’s simulation technology “reduces the time it takes learners to understand the interdependencies of running a business by giving them the opportunity to experiment and explore the cause-and-effect relationships between operating decisions and business outcomes without facing real-world consequences.”

Simulation shopping

As development time and costs decrease, more businesses are looking at simulations to supplement—or even replace—current training programs. When shopping for a simulations vendor, Vaughan suggests that decision makers look for simulation programs that are:

- **Experiential.** Do learners gain knowledge through trial-and-error?
- **Practical.** Are learners engaged in critical thinking and problem solving while solving real business problems?
- **Challenging.** Do learners have the opportunity to evaluate how decisions impact various parts of the business?
- **Engaging.** Are the programs fun, emotional, and competitive?

When a simulation developer’s samples fit the bill, put them to the test. A good vendor, Vaughan says, should be able to “provide a simulation blueprint and prototype within a few weeks of the first meeting—this will tell you a lot about their technologies, processes and ability to understand your business.” And, perhaps, that understanding is the first step to creating authentic simulation...and true e-learning.

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