

Championing e-Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the meaning and implications of e-learning and to assist individuals and organizations, whether they be schools or workplaces, with implementing e-learning. The author explains his broad definition of e-learning, discusses pros and cons of e-learning, and elaborates ways to effectively lead e-learning through championing, clear communication and effective project management. The article contains information for leaders in education and training, instructional designers, developers, consultants, instructors and administrators.

Introduction

As we close the door on the 20th century and uncork the millennium we have entered the e-decade. The worldwide Web has given us e-commerce. A new way to sell services, products, anything. The Web and the Net have also increased opportunities to communicate with a large number of people, quickly and cheaply. There are plenty of e-opportunities, all using new technology to grab a larger market share. Maybe even to produce and distribute goods and services more effectively and efficiently. We can hope!

E-commerce, e-business, e-solutions and now e-learning. What's it all about? Are these just trendy words or do they point to new life styles and a new economy? Is e-learning just another new training technology that will be replaced by something 'better'? Another flavor of the month approach to training and education?

In the first few months of the new millennium, e-learning looms large. E-learning pops up in advertisements for training and education services, conference presentations, and it seems to be quite popular marketers of technology-assisted learning products. Is e-learning just a marketing device? Or is this a new word to describe a new reality? What does it mean to add an 'e' to the word learning? As a result of being new and intrinsically vague, e-learning has generated different definitions. Elliott Masie, one of the leaders in the e-learning field, tells us that the 'e' stands for experience. The resources section on the SmartForce Web site explains that e-learning is dynamic, happens in real time, collaborative, individual, comprehensive, and it enables the enterprise. Cisco tells us that e-learning is Internet-enabled learning. Click2learn.com takes a wide view suggesting that e-Learning refers to the creation, delivery, and management of training.

I view the moniker e-learning broadly. It represents convergence in the education, training and information fields. As I see it, the term e-learning groups together education, training and structured information delivered by computers, through the Internet, or the Web, or from the hard drive of the computer, or an organization's network. This definition of e-learning includes CBT, WBT electronic performance support systems, webcasts, listservs and other discussions on the Internet, threaded and unthreaded. Education, training and structured information overlap. The boundaries are not clear as the same materials are used for education, training and information dissemination. Convergence in the learning world, like mergers in the corporate world, is

everywhere.

Educators and trainers are in similar waters as they wade into the e-learning sea. They face similar challenges (even sharks) and they have much to learn from each other. Doers and thinkers in both training and education and we need both can sink or swim depending on the quality of their decisions and their actions. Educators and trainers facing similar challenges can help each other stay afloat. Swimming is safer when you use the buddy system.

Some thought-leaders and marketers are positioning e-learning as a panacea. This is misleading. E-learning is not a universal solution. It is complex. It demands new understanding, new leadership. To give us some of the knowledge we require to become leaders in e-learning, first we will try to understand the strengths and weaknesses of e-learning, next we will consider what is required to champion e-learning in an organization, and we will polish this off with several tips on how to implement e-learning successfully.

Pros and cons of e-learning

E-learning is dichotomous. Whether we are talking about advantages and disadvantages, pros and cons, difficult versus easy we are talking about one entity: e-learning. Like a coin, the moon, a relationship, e-learning has two sides. The whole is composed of the two dichotomies: the pros and cons.

There are over two dozen advantages of e-learning as seen from the perspective of learners, instructors, developers and administrators. We will list these advantages below, followed by a review of eight issues or challenge associated with e-learning.

10 Advantages of e-learning for learners

"When I study online, there is no sitting in the back of the class. The instructor forces us to participate. It is more work than other course. But I learn more."

George, an e-learning student."

Learners appreciate the following qualities of e-learning:

1. E-learning fosters interaction among students and instructors. Interaction stimulates understanding and the recall of information.
2. Accommodates different learning styles and fosters learning through a variety of activities that apply to different learning styles.
3. Fosters self-paced learning whereby students can learn at the rate they prefer.
4. Convenient for students to access any time, any place.
5. Reduces travel time and travel costs for students.
6. Encourages students to browse information through hyperlinks to sites on the worldwide Web and thereby find information relevant to their personal situations.
7. Allows students to select learning materials, or to be directed to content that meets their level of knowledge, interest and what they need to know to perform more effectively in their particular activity.
8. Provides context sensitive help (Electronic performance support systems) to computer users and helps them complete tasks on-the-fly.
9. Develops knowledge of the Internet that will help learners throughout their careers.
10. Encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning and succeeding builds self-knowledge and self-confidence.

Seven advantages of e-learning for instructors

"I like the fact that I don't need to commute to school for classes. That way I can devote more time to my students."

Jane, an e-learning instructor

Instructors value the following strengths of e-learning:

1. E-learning permits instructors to develop materials using the world-wide resources of the Web.
2. Allows instructors to communicate information in a more engaging fashion than in text-based distance education programs. E-learning offers a wide-range of text, diagrams and images with video and sound, including virtual reality technology that in the future will improve the effectiveness of the approach even further.
3. Convenient for instructors to access any time, any place.
4. Allows instructors to package essential information for all students to access. Instructors can then concentrate on high level activities.
5. Retains records of discussion and allows for later reference through the use of threaded discussion on bulletin boards.
6. Generates more personal gratification for instructors through quality student participation.
7. Reduces travel and accommodation costs associated with training programs.

Five advantages of e-learning for instructional developers

"When I set up my online course, all the course information is in one place. I don't need to worry about making handouts for various classes. It is all on the Web, for anyone to access, anytime, anywhere."

Charles, online learning developer

Advantages of e-learning experienced by instructional developers include:

1. Developers can develop training, demonstrating, in very specific details, how to perform a task such as repairing equipment.
2. E-learning sets a framework for standardized course delivery.
3. Facilitates modifying training and education materials, by using html.
4. Allows developers to design once and use the same module in several programs, by using 'template-like' learning objects.
5. Promotes the orderly layout of course materials, assignments and general administration through a Web site.

Five advantages of e-learning for administrators

"We have instructors retiring in the next few years. Capturing their expertise in an online learning program will help to ensure that we don't lose their expertise."

William, a training administrator

Advantages of e-learning for training and education administrators include the following:

1. E-learning accommodates automated, continuous assessment of student progress.
2. Reduces capital costs associated with traditional bricks and mortar schools and training facilities.
3. Can be accessed by a variety of platforms such as Windows, UNIX and Mac because they all read html files.
4. Templated approach to developing online learning engenders consistency.
5. Allows institutions to build the e-learning modules from courses of leading instructors.

Eight issues with e-learning

"When I started to develop e-learning I had no help. I wish I had taken the time to learn about all the resources that exist."

Allan, teacher of e-learning

All is not rosy on the e-learning front. There are challenges, issues or optimists might say, opportunities to address. Issues associated with the use of e-learning are as follows.

1. Students may be required to purchase or rent new computer equipment.
2. Technical difficulties or operator error may hamper students and instructors.
3. Students and instructors may have gaps in their computer knowledge in such areas as Windows, so they will require training in computer basics before they can start the online learning training.
4. Using telephones lines and Internet service providers to access Internet services, when required, leads to high user fees in many parts of the world.
5. Initial costs of developing courses may be considerable, depending on the approach taken.
6. Instructors may need to become familiar with electronic text books; Internet-based research material, copyright, and other e-learning related topics.
7. Internet bandwidth may not be robust enough to support the desired level of multimedia.
8. People working in the e-learning field at an individual location may be pioneers and not have the support of a network of more experienced colleagues.

Our quick review of two baker's dozen plus pros and eight cons tends to underscore the diversity of e-learning. The challenge one faces as an e-learning leader is to reap the benefits and avoid the pitfalls. What can a leader do to achieve success with e-learning? One of the first steps is to become an effective champion.

Breakfast of champions

"E-learning has many facets. From initial leadership, through development and evaluation, you need strong people at the helm to succeed."

E-learning manager

Leaders who know their subject well and express themselves clearly become effective champions. Successful champions, instructional designers, developers, consultants, instructors and administrators helps ensure successful implementations of e-learning.

Have you championed?

Have you ever championed a cause? Maybe it was at school, in your community, at church or at work. You believed in something and stated your support. You tried to bring others to see issues and events as you saw them. How did it go? What went well? What would you do differently next time? This short section will give you a chance to reflect on effective strategies for championing a cause and give you some tips about explaining e-learning to stakeholders.

What would you do if a senior manager asked you to draw up a plan for implementing e-learning? Or maybe you are past that stage and you are implementing e-learning. How is it going? A few bumps in the road perhaps? Let's review some techniques that will help smooth out some of those bumps.

The role of champions

Champions play important roles in helping organizations understand new ideas. A champion needs to have in-depth knowledge of the ideas he or she is advocating. As well, a champion needs to understand the preoccupations of the persons, including skepticism, who are receiving the message. Champions need to communicate effectively with a planned approach.

Know your subject

Take every opportunity you can to expand your knowledge of e-learning. At the same time you need to think critically about the information that comes your way. You will free and find reputable newsletters and articles

about e-learning at The Masie Center, Brandon Hall's Web site and the e-learning portal I launched called s e-LearningHub.com. In addition ASTD publishes a robust online magazine called Learning Circuits. Inside Technology Training is an excellent magazine about e-learning topics, available in a hard copy or electronically.

Another way to learn about e-learning is to take a course teach one or develop one. There are modest, but free courses available at Virtual University. Or you could teach a course at Virtual University or set up a course at any of a number of virtual classrooms such as Blackboard, eSocrates, FirstClass, click2learn and WebCT. There are several good books about e-learning, and many of these are reviewed in published reviews at e-LearningHub.com.

Know your stakeholders

If you are championing e-learning, chances are your stakeholders will have some hot spots. If you identify these hot spots and address them, it will be easier to lead an e-learning project. The list below summarizes the hot spots of managers and administrators in business and education today. This list will help you identify the hot spots of the stakeholders in your organizations who you need to convince as you move forward with e-learning.

1. The bottom line focus of modern business leads training managers to seek ways to reduce training program costs.
2. Reduced funding for education and training, force institutions to look for more economical ways to deliver education.
3. On campus and at training centers, the pressures on space, teaching time and facilities such as laboratories and libraries lead to an openness to consider alternative delivery methods.
4. The expanding numbers of mature students are motivated, independent learners and are ready for the independent study mode of e-learning.
5. Many full-time and part-time students are under economic pressures, work part-time and appreciate the reduced travel time of e-learning.
6. Our entrepreneurial society is preoccupied with proving that it produces quality products. E-learning, with interactive Internet communication tools, is certainly an improvement over traditional distance education.
7. Entrepreneurs look at the forecasts for huge growth in the number of North Americans using online learning. Many of these will be employed full-time and studying part-time. To investors they represent an attractive market. Most have college degrees, good incomes, and it seems they will be ready to spend their money to study online.
8. Full-time students and part-time students who are working full-time and leading harried lives appreciate the opportunity to study from the comfort of their homes and avoid commuting to a campus.

Dealing with skepticism

When approaching stakeholders with a proposal for e-learning, an advocate of e-learning should bear in mind that the stakeholders might be skeptical about technological innovation. This skepticism might stem from involvement in a failed, information technology, implementation or from another negative experience. An effective champion anticipates the resistance of stakeholders and develops counter arguments.

Sources of skepticism

Here are a few facts and figures you should be familiar with when you are talking to other people about e-learning. Essentially, the message is that computer projects can be far more complex than one anticipates. They can cost far more money than planned and take far more time. As well, computer projects tend to generate unanticipated post-implementation costs. Moreover, we will see below that some university

professors have specific concerns with e-learning.

The stakeholders you try to convince about e-learning might not be familiar with the sources we cite below, but chances are that they have been part of a computer project that did not deliver as planned. Therefore they might approach your e-learning proposals with guarded optimism or skepticism.

In the mid-1990's the Standish Group found that only 16.2% of software projects are completed on-time and on-budget . Scientific America reported in 1997 that the bill for supporting computers far exceeds initial expenditures. For example, the average annual bill for supporting each computer was in the neighborhood of \$13,000, including technical support, service technicians, and time wasted when systems are down. Technorealism points out that we should both fear and welcome new technology. Most of all we need to be realistic. Technorealism articulates eight principles from thinking critically about technology and approaching it realistically.

Some faculty members have real concerns about technology and online learning. Professor David Noble argues that the trend towards automation of higher education is a battle between students and professors on one side, and university administrations and companies with "educational products" to sell. Professor Andrew Feenberg was an online learning innovator. Today he sees politicians, university administrations, and computer and telecommunications companies taking over from faculty. This commercial approach, in his mind is guaranteed to provoke instant hostility among faculty.

We can see that there are legitimate sources of skepticism about IT projects and by projection their little cousins e-learning projects. The important idea here is to be aware that others might be far less enthusiastic about e-learning than you are as a project leader. In general, one of the most effective actions you can take to overcome opposition to e-learning is to make certain that you communicate effectively.

Communicating effectively

An effective champion achieves success through clear communication. It is hard to explain new things to people when they know nothing about them. Have you ever tried to talk to people about technology-assisted learning? Did they look confused? Did they look away when you tried to engage them? Perhaps they pretended they understood. But did they? Here are some thoughts about communicating clearly, engaging your listeners and championing a cause like e-learning.

I have a good friend, Paul Corkum. He is a scientist. It seems that every time I see him, he is just returning from an international scientific conference where he has presented a provocative paper about a new scientific discovery to do with ultrafast-pulse lasers. When I ask Paul about his latest research, he grabs the nearest prop and eases into a jargon-free story. Recently, for example, he pulled the pen out of his shirt pocket and started to explain to me how his lab has managed to use a laser to rotate molecules.

I know precious little about physics. My academic background is in history and education. So it is a miracle that Paul can explain to me, a scientific ignoramus, the latest scientific discoveries. I suspect that Paul loves the challenge and he accepts it willingly. He smiles through his explanation. He always tells me what practical applications his research might lead to. How it could affect me personally one day. He uses props. He uses simple words. He does not talk down. He makes me feel good about our interaction. With his enthusiasm, vast knowledge and willingness to come to my level, Paul engages me in another one of his moments in the history of science. I feel privileged. And I learn something! Even better ♦ I retain what he tells me. Months later my mind's eye clearly evokes the image of Paul talking to me.

There are lessons here that apply to explaining and championing e-learning. You can use Paul's approach with colleagues, managers, stakeholders, and sponsors. All of these people need to understand e-learning. What you say is important. How you say it is even more important. People who surround you need to understand e-learning in order to support you and your e-learning projects. However these key stakeholders might be as ignorant of e-learning as I am of physics. By following Paul's example you will communicate better about e-learning and become a more effective champion.

A phone-in radio show

To appreciate the challenge of explaining e-learning, think of yourself as 'an expert' on a one-hour radio phone-in show about e-learning. If you cannot imagine yourself doing a radio phone-in show, then choose another scenario that seems realistic to you. Perhaps you are explaining e-learning to a management group or friends at a party or to a neighbor.

The first question from the host of the radio show, or the one that is probably on the mind of other people you talk to, will be something like, "What is e-learning?" Remember, when you answer. No jargon. Enthusiasm. On the radio you need to be concise and precise. You can hook your listeners if you mention the potential impact of e-learning on them. Pretend your listeners know precious little about e-learning. Maybe they don't know much about technology. However they have all attended a school, so you can use schools as a point of departure. (Recall how Paul Corkum spoke to me.)

Your answer might be something like the following. E-learning is a way to teach. It replaces or supplements brick and mortar schools and training centers with a computer. There are three elements of e-learning: 1) a learner, 2) technology, including a computer and 3) information or skills to be learned. E-learning is important to each of us because it offers a new way to learn anyplace, anytime.

Did I succeed? Is my explanation free of jargon, enthusiastic? Do I describe the potential impact of e-learning on my listeners? What would you change for your audience? Maybe your audience is familiar with CBT. In that case you should explain that CBT is included in our definition of e-learning. And you could go on to explain what online learning has that CBT does not have and what CBT has that e-learning does not have. If your audience is sophisticated you could explain that e-learning is an appropriate term because it combines different approaches to learning. CBT is merging with Web-based training and EPSS and the Internet is being used to support discussions among students and instructors.

Avoiding confusing e-learning jargon

When I talk with colleagues or savvy clients about e-learning, we sometimes use terms that our stakeholders either do not know, or do not know very well. When e-learning experts talk to stakeholders they must be careful to avoid using jargon that stakeholders will not understand. If champions use jargon they risk confusing or alienating stakeholders. Asynchronous is a fine word with the right crowd. As is distributed learning. But when we use such terms with people who do not know them we tend to drive a wedge between ourselves and those people.

If you have been using some of these 'jargony' terms for so long that they roll off your tongue and you have trouble finding substitute words, you need to look for simple explanations. For example, synchronous communication can be called real time communication or immediate communication like the telephone.

Different communication strokes for different folks

Effective communication will help to gain understanding and acceptance of your e-learning program. We invite you to think about developing a communication strategy. To do that, collect your thoughts around the

following:

1. Which groups need to know about the e-learning program?
2. What message does each group need to hear?
3. What do they not need to hear?
4. When should the message go to them?
5. How should the message be distributed?
6. Who should be associated with the message as a spokesperson?
7. Who should not deliver the message?
8. What are your skills for delivering the message?
9. Where do you require assistance to deliver the championing message?
10. Who can help where you require assistance deliver the championing message?
11. How should you approach people who can help you?

After you and your team have answered the 11 questions above, and others based on your environment, you might decide that the best way to communicate with one group is a short message from senior management. With another group, the best way could be to make short presentations during regularly scheduled meetings. And you might also decide to craft an interesting, people-oriented article in the organization's newsletter. In each of these efforts to communicate about e-learning you will need to develop messages that deal with the specific concerns the individual target groups harbor.

Managing an e-learning project

"Don't forget organizations are made up of people. People resist change. You need to deal with their resistance when you introduce e-learning."

Comment from an e-learning administrator

If you: instructional designers, developers, consultants, instructors and administrators do help introduce e-learning in your organization, you will probably be fostering substantive change. Re-jigging an organization for e-learning changes the way students learn, and it could change the roles of everyone associated with learning. It is no wonder you may experience considerable resistance. E-learning, normally means using the Web, CBT and EPSS instead of attending classes and it's an adjustment especially for learners. You need to use a wide range of thoughtful tactics to create a positive environment for introducing e-learning. The following guidelines help to get results from e-learning.

Four tips for starting an e-learning project

1. Use the correct e-learning terminology. Teach it to others and encourage them to learn the correct terms. A shared language will help people to understand what e-learning is and to communicate with each other.
2. Encourage frank discussion. We need to create a safe place for opposing ideas to be expressed. Better to bring them out and to try to deal with conflicting ideas than to force them underground to fester.
3. Be creative. There is no one way to do e-learning. And online learning does not need to be an all or nothing phenomenon. You can combine e-learning with leader-led instruction.
4. Promote. You will know that stakeholders are ready for e-learning when they are ready to take the time to talk to you. Exploit these opportunities when they occur and positively report on your progress.

Three tips for communicating about e-learning

1. Be decisive. Consensus building is not good enough. When you lead an e-learning intervention, colleagues and clients will expect you to be predictable, make decisive statements and keep your actions congruent with your statements.
2. Bring issues alive. The difference between a good e-learning project manager and a great one is that a great

one makes the issues alive for people, creates a sense of urgency, and helps people sing from the same song sheet.

3. Remain positive. Most people want you to succeed. If you remain positive, think critically about what you are doing, and adjust your actions when you don't succeed you will eventually succeed.

Three tips for managing e-learning projects

1. Divide and conquer. An e-learning intervention may seem daunting; however, chunked into achievable segments it is 'doable'. 'Inch by inch life is a cinch, yard by yard it gets very hard!
2. Manage expectations. Typically at the outset of a change intervention like the implementation of e-learning, people are enthusiastic. Later, when events don't go as well as predicted, when deadlines are missed and when some unrealistic goals are not achieved, people may become negative. One goal of a project manager is to manage expectations. Do not let people become overly optimistic at the beginning, and then the chances are reduced that they will be in despair when all targets are not achieved.
3. Foster teamwork. Effective teams, with people helping each other, accomplish more than individuals. Members of effective teams place the success of the group above their individual success. E-learning leaders need to establish expectations for teamwork, model appropriate behaviors and reward teamwork.

Four tips for managing risks associated with e-learning projects

1. Sustain momentum. Every project has potential pitfalls in such areas as time, scope, quality and resources. You need to monitor these four interrelated variables, report on their status and develop tactics to attenuate risks to the project's success.
2. Get early wins. As you implement e-learning and incur problems and opportunities, go after the low fruit, the things that are easiest to harvest. You need some early wins to show success.
3. Deal with resistance. A few people may resist what you are doing in e-learning. Learn about the people who are resisting and the source of their resistance. Their resistance may be well-founded. Learn whether they are unwilling, unable, or unknowing. And develop appropriate strategies.
4. Manage scope creep. As e-learning project progress, expectations of people involved in the projects may grow. Most of these expectations can only be met by doing additional work. If you do agree to take on more than you outline in your original workplan, you must be very clear that this requires more resources or time, or quality will suffer. Otherwise you will miss deadlines or have to compromise some part of your project.

As an important player in the e-learning game you will help organizations sort through the hype, and see whether they are ready for e-learning. Common sense, critical thinking and a constant focus on what needs to be done to improve employees' performance need to be your beacons. If you plan your work and work your plan, you and your organization, will be ready for e-learning.

Summary

Implementing e-learning is not for the faint of heart. It can be challenging. You could experience setbacks, even failure. To succeed you need to understand the up and down side of e-learning. You need to address the weaknesses especially the perceptions of weaknesses or the skepticism of stakeholders. Successful champions of e-learning are effective communicators. They explain new words clearly, concretely, in terms that their listeners understand. The essence of championing is clear communication. Decide what you need to say, to whom and how. Plan what you are going to say and follow through on your plan. Remember. Stakeholders need answers. Effective champions anticipate questions before they are asked, find the answers and deliver them in a convincing manner. Tips, tactics, strategies play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of an e-learning program. Plan the start of the project, concentrate on communicating, manage carefully, identify risks and address them, and most of all lead inspire the people around you with your support for the e-learning project and your reasoned enthusiasm.

Anchors away!

Tempted to go sailing in the e-learning sea? Looking for a vessel? Do you see yourself as the captain, the leader? Need an anchor, charts or navigational aids? As a first step we recommend that you check out e-LearningHub.com.

I wish you smooth sailing!

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