

## **“All hail the learner”**

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There is a myth that has pervaded much of the training industry for many years – Content is King! In fact, I even remember an in-depth discussion on the matter when I joined a large training company in the early-90’s. They believed content was their key asset and their key differentiator. Maintenance of this precious asset and its uniqueness was their core focus, and big projects were won or lost on the basis of what “content” they could bring to the table.

The rationale behind this is of course simple. Content costs money to produce and good content costs a lot of money to produce (and maintain). Having a large and high quality content base was a barrier to entry for many of our prime competition. It wasn’t just a question of track record and credibility, it was also the availability of hard content that could be quickly and cheaply adaptable for a particular customer’s needs.

And then along came certification training with the source companies producing their own courseware and accrediting a delivery channel. We fought it all the way, but ultimately it didn’t really matter. Whether certification was useful or not, the market shifted, the differentiator was consciously eroded and then we found out what really mattered. (but not quite yet).

As we moved towards the millennium, the “content is king” battle cry was picked up and expounded by the fledgling e-learning industry, and you will still hear it shouted loudly from the battlements at many e-learning conferences. The origin of this viewpoint is obvious - many of the early e-learning flag-carriers were computer-based training companies, evolving from CD-ROMs to the world of the Internet. For them e-learning offered the ability to sell their product without the hassle of a CD distribution business. For them, content was everything, it was their vested interest. They had invested a lot of money in their content asset that was transitioned from CDs to the web and then made available through a learning portal on the Internet or corporate intranets.

In some ways, and for many of the e-learning vendors, life hasn’t really changed that much. The content has become more tuned for Internet delivery. It is also now available in smaller units called learning objects rather than monolithic courses. An online tutor may now provide some form of online support via mail or chat, and test results can now be pulled back into the organisation to show progress or compliance.

So what’s the problem? Well it’s simple really. The original premise is wrong, content isn’t king, the learner is!

This may sound stupid or obvious depending on your starting viewpoint, but I really don’t understand how we can continue to perpetuate the myth of content, seemingly unquestioned. To my mind, it wasn’t really valid in classroom training, it certainly isn’t true for e-learning. Developing good content is expensive, and learners do learn better from good content. But they never chose to come to our courses because we had great content. They came because they thought we had good content, great instructors, a good learning environment, and probably just as importantly, better and more motivated delegates on our courses.

Now if all this was true when we had the learners captive, just think how important this becomes when you don’t. That’s the reality of e-learning. The learner is somewhere else, engaging in the learning process from their environment and not yours. And it is probably not exactly an ideal environment for learning. Accessing learning through a web browser, across a poor bandwidth connection using content that was reengineered for web delivery to a PC with no soundcard or terrible speakers in an open plan office or with the kids screaming in the background, doesn’t exactly sound a great recipe for success, does it? And maybe all they wanted to do was ask someone who knew what they were talking about a question and get an intelligent answer?

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If we want to motivate and engage learners we need to focus more on them and less purely on content. We need the learner to be the core of the design. Content is an important but only one of many means of delivery. Exercises, instruction, discussion, question and answer, simulation, collaboration are just as valid and just as relevant if not more relevant in many circumstances. It may be that all the learner wants is a quick discussion with someone knowledgeable. Or they may want an answer to a specific question, together with some working examples. For more developmental needs, they probably need a mix of passive and active learning. Time to read and comprehend, time to try, and time to get some feedback on how well they are doing. All of the above can be facilitated or supported using technology and our learning design approaches need to utilise all of these approaches where appropriate – not just focusing on increasing the interactivity or sexiness of the content.

The learner is king, all hail the learner!