



Deep Insights, Pragmatic Advice



Rapid e-learning

Executive ViewPoint

Fast route to the top, or a road to nowhere? With so much hype and scepticism around Rapid e-learning, what's the reality? What should your approach be? Is Rapid worth your investment, should it be part of your journey? What will it mean to you, your team and your learning organisation?

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About Elearnity

Elearnity is Europe's leading independent Learning Analyst providing independent expert research, analysis and advice on corporate learning, e-learning and learning technologies. We provide expert independent advice to help organisations accelerate and de-risk their corporate learning innovations.

All our services are underpinned by a unique independent expert understanding of corporate learning based on extensive research and independent market profiling. We provide two core services:

- Learning and e-learning Analyst Research with in-depth best practice research, strategic market analysis, news and commentary
- Independent Advisory Consultancy on strategy and best practice

Our research and analysis covers key innovations that are challenging corporate learning organisations; learning transformation, e-learning and blended learning, learning management strategy and systems, the impact of learning and increasing value-added, integrating learning within talent management and performance.

Elearnity's research process focuses on developing deep insights of corporate realities and best practice, and independent understanding of vendor capabilities and actual performance.

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Rapid e-learning Executive Viewpoint

Why should I be interested?

The evolution of Rapid e-learning is one of the most significant developments in learning technologies in recent years. It enables more training to be delivered, by more people, with simpler tools, in shorter timescales and at lower costs. For those organisations already harnessing this approach, it has increased their responsiveness, reduced their costs and had a significant impact on organisational learning as a whole.

This movement has been triggered by genuine business pressures to deliver faster and more flexible results. The simple fact is, that as businesses speed up, so does the need to respond to them quickly and cost sensitively. This is especially true in the current economic climate. “Fit for purpose”, “cost sensitive” and “now” are going to be the catch phrases of many through 2008.

This executive overview looks to provide you with some insights into what Rapid e-learning is and what its impact may be for you. It also examines some of the risks and issues of rapid e-learning - because with opportunity comes danger.

What is Rapid e-learning?

Rapid e-learning is the use of technology to enable organisational learning within 3 weeks. In the fastest approaches ultra rapid e-learning can be developed and deployed to hundreds, if not thousands of learners within hours.

Rapid e-learning results from fresh thinking on the way that e-learning is developed, the processes it follows and the new challenges it looks to solve. It is so much more than just tools.

To be understood Rapid e-learning can be considered as three components,

- Rapid e-learning Processes
- Rapid e-learning Tools
- Rapid e-learning Outcomes

Rapid e-learning Processes

What makes Rapid e-learning fast isn't just the tools.

It is dependent on the processes that are followed. In a rapid project, each stage is compressed to increase efficiency. This applies to the phases of scoping, procurement, design, development, testing and deployment.

Of all these phases potentially the most compressed stages are design and development. Time efficiencies are realised through a smaller and higher skilled teams. There is much less bureaucracy and paperwork. Your subject matter experts work much more directly with the “e-learning developer” and the process of development is much more visual and iterative. The whole development cycle is much more template based and very rich assets in courses are the exception rather than the rule.

Efficiency is required in every stage, because each stage has a critical influence on the speed of delivery. To achieve this, Rapid projects require:

- Total preparation
- Focussed scope
- Clear outcomes - benchmarked targets for success –
- Rapid engagement & procurement processes
- Limited bureaucracy
- Deep partnership based on trust
- Proximity – onsite and part of the team
- Subject matter authority not just the subject matter expert
- Total subject matter authority engagement - short 100% focus – hands-on
- Simple development tools
- Total project management – not all rapid projects are simple, and when there is little latitude for slippage you need expert project management skills to keep things on track.
- The “VERY **BEST**” Instructional Developers – individuals who can be instructional design experts, creative script writers, talented designers, and relationship managers all in one.
- Iterative development methods
- Template driven design
- Tried and tested deployment channels

Rapid e-learning Tools

There are four distinct “rapid” toolsets: virtual classrooms, authoring tools, e-collaboration tools and e-briefing tools. Each operates with a different focus, levels of control and associated risks.

Virtual Classrooms

These are potentially the fastest and most immediate tools for providing learning and development to dispersed audiences. They almost fall into the class of “ultra rapid”.

If you have a genuine subject authority, access to the information they want to share, then they are practically immediate. And beyond the preparation time there is a very limited overhead on any e-learning team. Virtual Classroom sessions can usually be recorded and played back by those who couldn’t make the live session. This channel is Ideal for systems training and expert briefings.

Rapid-e-Training Authoring Tools

The most common toolsets associated with Rapid e-learning are Rapid Authoring tools. These create traditional e-training courseware through a simple user front end. The comparative usability of these

platforms varies, but their intention is always to enable lower technically skilled people to create content, so they are never overly complex. Rapid e-training solutions fall into three categories.

- Server based tools
- Desktop tools
- Learning Content Management Systems

e-Briefing Tools

There are two types; Visual briefing tools and audio briefing tools. Visual e-Briefing tools typically convert slides decks into e-learning materials. Some allow the application of quizzes and voice-overs; and involve converting slide decks into Flash media so they can be streamed to learners.

Audio briefing tools simply enable you to record and distribute audio in the form of Podcasts or live Skypecasts.

e-Collaboration Tools

e-collaboration tools cover more informal approaches to learning. The main examples of these tools are wikis, blogs, discussion forums, instant messenger and chat rooms. They rely on a shared infrastructure and require very little expertise. Another key dimension to make these collaboration solutions truly effective is RSS feeds. These automatically let subscribers know that an update has happened to a discussion. Collaboration tools also more effective when there is a genuine business driver and proactive user community.

Tools and your e-learning organisation

Whether you are pursuing a centralised, distributed or localised model of e-learning production, different tools and combinations of tools will have a clearer alignment to you. A single tool set is unlikely to hold the answer to all your problems and you will probably need a mixture of tools to be successful.

The key is to apply the right mix for your culture, your unique pressures and opportunities. And that takes insight and experience.

Rapid e-learning Outcomes

Popular Rapid e-Learning Projects

There are a number of common types of rapid e-learning projects that cover briefings, updates, introductions, systems tours and deep dives into niche expertise.

These typically involve topics such as software, processes, products, and technical expertise. In terms of popularity, introductions, briefings and simulations are usually the first projects to move in the direction of rapid e-learning. These topics are usually the most simple and narrow in scope. So, their common theme is knowledge transfer, rather than deep skill or behavioural development.

Risks with Rapid e-learning

There are three main approaches to managing Rapid Projects within organisations.

- Managed
- Facilitated
- Anarchic

In a managed project the e-learning team control every aspect of development; in a facilitated model the e-learning team have an enabling role, whereas in an anarchic environment they have no role other than providing the infrastructure and frameworks. Each style of rapid project management, whether it is managed, facilitated or anarchic, has ever increasing levels of risk and need for e-learning team influence. As your control decreases the number of things can go wrong also start to increase; and influence has to be used to keep solutions effective.

Internal e-learning Resource Demands
& Managing Rapid Development



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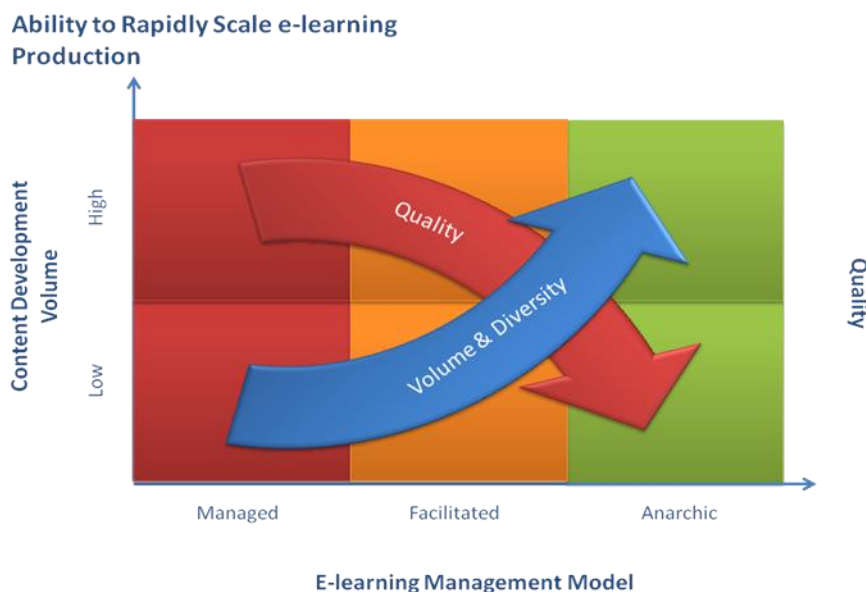
Types of Risk

There are fundamentally three types of risks that need to be managed through the production of e-learning materials.

- **Technical** - The risks around the compatibility to the IT infrastructure such as servers and PCs but also in terms deploying the content through a Learning Management System, portal or intranet page.
- **Instructional** – The risks that the instructional design will not be effective.
- **Content** – there is limited accuracy in the content or its plain wrong.

In managed projects the risks are relatively low, controls will be in place and experience will ensure that there is compatibility to your IT estate. The level of expectation around instructional design should also be higher, so

there is a much higher probability that the course will be engaging. The content will also be much more formally verified through sign offs, so the possibility of the content being wrong should also be lower.



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In a Facilitated model there is a reasonable guarantee that the course will be technically suitable, but with less experienced instructional design experience in your subject matter expert, a higher risk that the course won't hit the target for the learner. There are also increased risks that the content won't be rigorously approved and contain errors, if you are not engaged with a strong subject matter expert. In the Anarchic model there are greater risks of technical incompatibility, as well as instructional ineffectiveness, and in the worst case scenarios there could be complete misinformation.

There are very good reasons for using a combination of a managed, facilitated and anarchic approaches. But, whatever approaches are used, what is essential is that technical, content and instructional risks are proactively managed by you and/or your supplier.

Keys to Rapid e-Learning Success

There are 10 keys to rapid e-learning success. These are the criteria that can help filter whether a rapid project is suitable:

1. Knowledge Focussed
2. Tight Development Timescale
3. Timeliness – responding to individuals' demand
4. Clear Context, Light Treatment or and Narrow Scope
5. Low Complexity – both in content and outcome
6. Availability of Subject Matter Authority
7. Stretched or Low Budget
8. Bite-sized Learning Modules

9. Systems Orientated
10. Self Sustaining – maintenance is the responsibility of the business

Strategic Implications of Rapid e-learning

There is a mentality that is very much a part of the rapid development model. It's almost a philosophy – a state of mind that is the basis of its success – “The Way of the Rapid”.

And much of this philosophy can have a very positive effect on your traditional e-learning processes.

Getting it “Right First Time”!

Rapid projects have this principle at their core.

To some extent in the traditional model there is an overtone that the content will be right eventually. In a Rapid project getting it right first time at all costs is everything.

Intimacy

Team intimacy is crucial to a rapid project, closer contact enables processes to be accelerated through shared understanding and rapid communication. Connected to intimacy is a higher degree of informality around the development processes. The importance of good relationships is always highlighted when you need to get the best out of people quickly.

Subject Matter Authority – Not the Subject Matter Expert.

An absolute must have is the right subject matter authority – being an expert is one thing – being the authority is another. It means that sign off is unequivocal, whenever it happens, and the room for iteration is dramatically reduced, which in turn shortens the development process.

Total Preparedness

Whilst some of the pieces may have been left to develop through the project, in a traditional model of development – the more prepared and developed your thinking at the outset, the better your outcome will be at the end. This means gathering as much background content as possible and making initial drafts of structure and content.

Laser Precision with your Project Scope

In the “rapid” world you cover the bare essentials, the things that are critical to your audience. There is no slack or fat – so you need complete precision in the scope and outcomes.

Disposable and Fit for Purpose Content

If what you are looking for is mass production with minimal effort, then “rapid” approaches are going to be right for you. It is a natural evolution of production. “Artisan” approaches become deskilled and open to less crafting hands. If you are looking for a masterpiece then you are less likely to find them from amateurs. Keep to the tools, techniques and skills of people who can craft them for you. If you are happy with something that

is of the moment, disposable and fit for purpose, what other choice would you have other than to use a Rapid approach?

Smaller Audiences

One the effects of having lower costs and faster development rates is that the economics of producing e-learning content for smaller audiences is less challenging a hurdle.

In a traditional world small audiences would have been too expensive to create solutions for. What might be an economics ceiling for a traditional course of 1000 users, becomes 500 in the “rapid” world where the same project could be delivered at half the price.

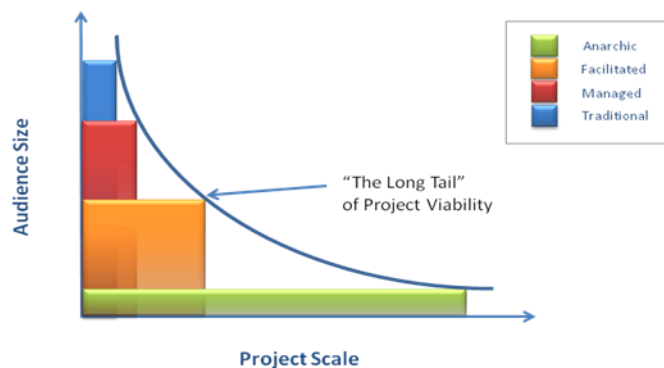
Or, if you use rapid tool sets and virtual classrooms, then tens of users is a viable audience where previously it would have been hundreds.

More Volatile Content

Besides this trend to reducing numbers in the project threshold for e-learning, there is also trend to deploy increasingly volatile content – which in the past would have carried to high an overhead to keep up to date.

This expansion into what could be considered as niche activity is also analogous to the “The Long Tail”. It’s the Amazon business model. They don’t just sell high volumes of the best seller lists; much of their success is down to the large volume of diverse and low selling titles they provide. This is a pattern found extensively on the internet.

Effect of Rapid e-learning on Project Viability Through Tools and Management Approaches



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Using this principle with Rapid e-learning you can consider creating disposable content, where the content is out of date in 6 months or less.

Again, it is essential to stress that this is not a one way or another choice. The really significant point about the “Long Tail” is how you use different e-learning project management approaches to maximum your effect on your organisation. It’s really about blending your approach and your toolsets to increase your reach. By using more informal “anarchic” choices, you enabled a much wider range of learning activity.

Bite-sized Chunks

One of the key features of rapid e-learning is the trend to provide learners with smaller more bite-sized chunks. Whilst the traditional e-learning course may well have taken anything over an hour to complete, what is particularly interesting with the Rapid approach is that modules are often targeted to last in the region of 20 minutes. This represents potentially a third of the old course duration.

The chunking of material into more manageable sizes for the learner is an important development because it is weighting the material in the favour of the learner rather than the subject matter. This makes projects much more modular and much more tuned into the way the brain works.

Good Enough

A significant debate since the emergence of Rapid e-learning has been how “good” does the content need to be for it to be effective? This concern is voiced because content is increasingly being developed by subject matter experts rather than professional e-learning teams. In real terms good enough can apply to Instructional Design, Graphics Design, Timeliness and Learning Outcome. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that just “good enough” materials do have impact. This can be particularly true where Rapid solutions provide the answers to the right questions, to the right people, at the right time.

Permanent feature of the Blend

Blended learning unjustly had many detractors when it was muted as a concept at the start of this Millennium. But, rapid e-learning may just be the trigger to look at blending again with fresh eyes. Especially if it starts to open up the range and volume of learning opportunities you offer. Rapid e-learning is a component in creating compelling blends and effective learning.

The Long Term Market Impact of Rapid e-learning

Whilst the Rapid e-learning movement definitely has a significant impact on your ability to deliver learning, blending and maximising budgets - there are some consequences to rapid e-learning which may not be so positive.

Where's the comparative Research?

There is no definitive research into the comparative effectiveness of rapid and traditional e-learning techniques... This is great news for the Rapid development community. Without compelling evidence, who will really be able to articulate another way than a Rapid approach, even if they want to spend more on a complex programme? We can all say that a richer course will probably have a bigger impact, but without data it's as equally valid to say there is life on Mars.

All roads lead to Rapid?

Rapid e-learning has some compelling monetary drivers, but there is a risk for both your internal proposition and the wider e-learning market that rapid e-learning becomes over dominant. There is a distinct possibility that an over reliance on rapid modes may well be difficult to break. As more and more projects work their way down the rapid route, you may reach a point of no return.

Road to nowhere?

That isn't necessarily a bad place to be, until you need to invest more heavily in a premium programme. But, at that point, how do you articulate the extra need for extra time costs and resources?

If you escalate this situation across the e-learning industry there are further questions. Rapid means faster which means cheaper... perhaps it even means more. But, there is a possibility that the "e-learning market" will start to slow in revenue growth - as companies look to extract more value from less money.

Final Insight

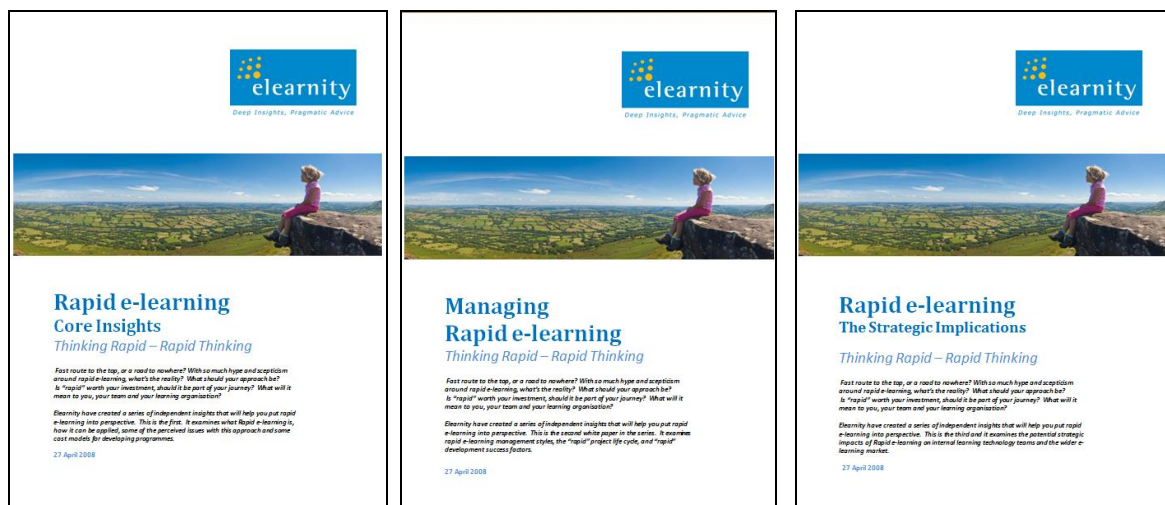
The evolution of Rapid e-learning is one of the most significant developments in learning technologies in recent years. It enables more training to be delivered, by more people, with simpler tools, in shorter timescales and at lower costs. As the economic climate cools, buyers are going to have an increased appetite for that sort of offering. And once it becomes part of the stable diet of organisations it's going to be here to stay.

To find out more

To help you assess **Rapid e-learning** in more depth for your organisation, Elearnity have created a suite of white papers.

They initially cover three perspectives:

- Core Insights into Rapid e-learning
- Managing Rapid e-learning Projects
- The Strategic Impact of Rapid e-learning



These white papers will be available to download from www.elearnity.com

Accelerate and De-risk

To talk to us about our research on Rapid e-learning, or to discuss what it might specifically mean for your organisation please contact us at info@elearnity.com.

We will use our independent expertise to provide you with the guidance you need to accelerate and de-risk your decisions. We have a wealth of experience, tools, research and profiles at our disposal. We don't have any "products" to sell and we have no "vested "interest" to bias your outcomes. We concentrate on pragmatic, independent advice.

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