

“Assessing On-line ”

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One of the age-old problems for any training and development activity is proving people have learnt something. Within many training programmes this will be done via some form of assessment of the learner. Some programmes build assessment into the learning process itself, most commonly with pre-assessments to help identify the current knowledge of the learner and to target the learning activity to come. Assessments can also provide useful diagnostic tools for the learners and trainers alike, as well as proof of knowledge attained. Diagnostic tools help to make the learning process better tailored to an individuals specific needs or starting point, as well as streamlining and supporting the delivery process.

Proving knowledge levels is particularly important if there is a need to demonstrate compliance against external standards of knowledge. As well as obvious industries such as financial services or pharmaceuticals, many other organisations have more basic compliance issues, including food hygiene in food retail organisations, or for health and safety.

So if assessment is a good thing, why don't we do much more of it? Having said that most learning programmes include some form of assessment, I think it is fair to say that much of this assessment is weak. The use of pre and post assessment together is by no means universal. Most learners are forced to go through the same learning process regardless of the results of their pre-assessment results. And the logistics of delivery often dictate the resultant learning process rather than the needs or the knowledge of individual learners.

In individual training courses, there may often be no specific assessment at all. This often leaves us in the position where assessment of competency is judged by "did they attend the course" rather than can they show they learnt something! Surely all learning activity would benefit from more explicit assessment to help better focus the learning activity, and to prove attainment of learning outcomes.

One of the big reasons this hasn't happened is it is difficult, both difficult to design and difficult to administer. Designing good assessments requires a good level of understanding of the domain knowledge, and of assessment techniques and design. Whilst we would hope the people designing learning programmes have the former, they often don't have the latter. Designing good assessments takes a lot of thought. The assessment process has to be valid, and the scope and depth of knowledge assessed needs to be appropriate.

Administration of the assessment process also turns out be difficult. In reality this may actually be the biggest. Paper-based assessments require physical administration and management, coupled with manual data entry into a system to allow analysis and reporting. For fixed assessments with high volumes, this process can be automated using scanning technology but this is expensive. The administration process soaks administrative resource and limits how we can manage it effectively within the learning process. One of the reasons why most individual courses have little or no formal assessment built in.

So if assessment is important but hard to scale or automate, why don't we put it on-line?

I want to emphasise here that I'm not talking about using on-line assessment within on-line content, I'm kind of taking that for granted. Most e-learning content already has assessment embedded into it. No I'm talking about using on-line assessment as part of *all forms of learning* activity, be it on-line or not.

E-LEARNING ARTICLES

Learning is increasingly driven by either core programmes or just-in-time requirements. Core programmes are becoming inherently blended in design. Assessment should form a key part of this, to focus learning time, to manage progression through the programme, and to assess the quality of learning. Just-in-time learning is increasingly on-line anyway because that's the only cost effective way to deliver it. In both cases, there is a strong case and a strong drive to put the assessment on-line as well. Although we still have issues of good design, on-line assessment tools provide many more options; more question types, random question sets, and dynamic assessment based on previous responses. These can significantly improve the flexibility and frequency of the assessment process.

But the big gain is in terms of collapsing and automating the administration process. As well as reducing the costs of current administration, it makes it much more practical to use assessments in a far more general way. The net effect could be to allow broader use within most learning programmes and to enable their frequent use as a diagnostic tool for learners – even if the main programme is not on-line. Yes there are issues - access and security for a start, but the benefits are significant. If we are in the learning business, assessment is a key tool in improving the appropriateness of our product as well as the proving the quality of our outcomes.