

Why Johnny Can't eLearn

by Brian Propst

When Good Ideas Go Bad

It seems like ages ago that the controversy surrounding a decline in reading literacy became a "hot" item of discussion and that a lack of phonetics was identified as the reason "Johnny could not read". Implementing phonetics, however, was only one of many causes with most of them outside the control of the educational system. Nevertheless, phonetics made the public aware that a problem existed and secondly that education must extend beyond the classroom to be successful.

Today there is another literacy problem that is a growing concern of many educational professionals, but this time it is in field of adult education. The first step in the resolution of any problem is to know of its existence.

From Content to Learner
In the latter part of the 1940's, our society began its transition from an industrial age to an informational age society. One of the greatest educational changes was a shift from content-centered education to learner-centered education.

In a content-centered educational system, the content is the most important element. It is presented; and it is then up to the student to learn the material. In a learner-centered educational system, the student is the most important element. His / her comprehension of the material is more important than the content itself. The implementation of a learner-centered educational system requires that the quality of education be measurable and flexible enough to allow change.

The Process of Learning
Originally, the purpose of the learner-centered educational approach was to create a system



in which the quality of education could be measured and improved. This system allowed a scientific view to content creation and instructional methods that would complement the student's learning style. Many of these systems follow a pattern for deeper levels of education. These levels are sometimes referred to as categories, outcomes, or steps in learning. Each step or outcome is based upon the previous.

At the lowest level of learning is the acquisition of facts by either memorization or simply knowing of their existence. After facts are acquired, the learners are given more information so they acquire an understanding of the information, meaning that they can describe the information in their own words. Following understanding is application; which allows the learner to use understanding of factual information and apply it to a new situation. There are many higher level learner outcomes such as analysis followed by synthesis followed by evaluation; each building on the previous outcomes of learning.

We build upon what we know; we

look for a "hook" to hang newly acquired information. When new information can not be correlated with previous knowledge a new schema has to be created.

Building a new schema is like building any structure, whether it be physical or mental: what level you are building towards will determine the strength of foundation required. We look for correlations between new information and information we already understand. When a correlation does not exist we are at an impasse until a correlation can be established.

Accelerated Business Learning
Unfortunately this learner-centered educational system was never fully understood or accepted. Paradigms of the past were mixed with the new taxonomies of learning to arrive at a model that was more oriented to the priorities of the business world. Business sustainability requires profitability. Profitability demands budgetary control. Business education, therefore, demanded efficiency of presentation and increased learner

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competency. The burden was once again placed upon the student in direct contrast with the intention of the learner-centered educational approach. The speed and amount of information became the standard by which the effectiveness of business education was measured.

In an informational age society, the work force requires new skills, adaptable skills, and more skills at an ever quickening pace. The demands of the business world began to dictate the instructional methods required. These needs resulted in the concepts behind information “chunking”, information architecture and information mapping. Their purpose was to provide the work force with the required skills in a shorter amount of time. Learning content was broken down into small organized chunks of information, allowing the student, at a glance, to visualize the major topics and the order in which they were to be covered. Superfluous information was removed and only the most important elements remained.

Highlight Learning
This organization of content material was so effective that it created a belief that brevity of information facilitated faster comprehension. This misconception established a trend toward converting most training into a series of information highlights with little or no detail. This type of

training is referred to as highlight learning.

Highlight learning has the advantage of presenting factual information quickly allowing assimilation at an accelerated rate. In a business environment, training must balance between business needs and the amount of information required to achieve those needs. Highlight learning achieved this balance.

Earlier we mentioned that the current educational structure is learner-centered. The degree of content detail is based on the desired outcome. In a classroom environment, the instructor determines the amount and level of detail required based upon the individual learner needs and business objectives. The instructor is the bridge between the highlight learning presentation and the learner-centered education system.

Highlight Goes Online
The original concept behind online training was to make training accessible remotely and make it consistent with its classroom counterpart. What occurred originally due to limitations of technology was the placement of media content from highlight learning sessions online,

“as is” with very little extra. As highlight learning removed superfluous detail from instruction, online highlight training made instruction merely a presentation



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of topic headings.

To simply place a highlight learning session online and call it eLearning is ironically not “learning at Internet speed” but rather a return to ineffective 1950s content-centered training. The student is left with more questions than answers and education does not occur. Standards-based curriculums, authentic assessment, and accountability are ignored.

The problem that exists is we have failed to distinguish between eLearning content and the highlight learning presentation for classroom instruction. In online training, the instructor is replaced by media elements. The media elements must convey the desired and intended instructional message. Simply placing the topic headings from highlight learning online with terse text explanations is counter productive for both learning and business objectives. An instructor is a dynamic part of the learning process and cannot be reduced to a simple set of text definitions. Highlight learning simply doesn’t work in the absence of an instructor.

Full Circle
Placing highlight learning online is fast and inexpensive. When training already exists for a classroom environment it is very tempting just to place the content online, but this negates the original business need for the training. The economics of

online highlight learning in many cases has become the premise for creating new courseware. This results in incomplete information being presented as the essential parts of knowledge. eLearning faces the threat of becoming more of a slide show than an educational experience. Content is merely presented and the act of learning is once again placed into the hands of the learner. We have moved from learner-centered back to content-centered education. We have come full circle.

Future Literacy of Adult Education

This full circle not only undermines business objectives but presents a problem for adult literacy. Under the old content-centered educational system, a learner was aware that comprehension was left to them. Today, we assume a learner-centered environment, so the online learner is unaware that more information is required to fully comprehend the material presented.

In the place of knowledge, we have

unawareness, not ignorance. This lulls our current work force and their management into a false sense of security in their own ability. It will not be until a significant problem arises and incorrect resolutions are applied that the inadequacy of current eLearning will become apparent. In the future, when all the "Johnny's" of the world grow up and systems begin to fail, maybe we'll start to look for solutions, but for now this cycle of unrecognized ignorance can only be explained as, "Why Johnny can't eLearn."

SSE Meets Business Needs Through eLearning

Highlight Learning can work in the classroom because an actual instructor brings more than words or a series of steps to his lecture. In a classroom, the instructor takes the desired instruction and communicates this instruction to the student. The instructor can modify the method by which the instructional message is delivered, based upon the capabilities of the learner. For example, an instructor may observe that several of his students learn better by 'doing' and others by discussion. The instructor can use 'hands-on' projects and discussions so that the students have several methods of learning.

In this context, learning is more than the instructors' spoken words: it encompasses how they present the information which includes their body language, their intonation, and inflection. The same is true in creating content for online delivery; communication must be more than simply placing text on a screen. The wording, the organization and the way text is presented are all part of the communication process. In order to create successful online training, the instructional message needs to be sound and the means of communicating this instructional message must to be effective.

At SSE, one of the first steps is the development of a clear and concise instructional message. We realize that highlight learning does not have the benefit of an instructor when conveyed online. From this perspective, we evaluate existing classroom subject matter and define the best means of translating the instructor's material into online content. To simply present a series of headings with text explanations is not sufficient to effectively communicate the instructional message from the classroom to the online training world.

Rather than an online replay of highlight learning, SSE requires that 1) the instructional message be clear and complete, 2) the instructional method chosen be appropriate with the abilities of the learner and 3) media elements be used effectively to communicate. All this is done in the context of a company's technology requirements, time schedules, and financial budget.

At SSE, we believe Johnny can eLearn!

