Flattening the Learning Process

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A few weeks ago, I presented a lecture on *e-Learning Tools You Can Put To Use*. I warned the audience not to become so enamored with the technology of e-learning that you forget the learner. The learner, after all, is your customer.

As part of my own development, I recently participated in an on-line lecture by Elliot Masie entitled *Learning in a Flatter World*. The presentation was hosted on Microsoft Live Meeting. If you haven't followed Elliott Masie, you should. He is definitely one of the most provocative thought leaders in learning.

Elliott Masie has substantial research to support his idea that the availability of knowledge needs to be "faster, wider and more informal" than ever before. Why? Because information in areas such as compliance, competitive business strategy and organizational development change so rapidly and is needed so immediately that by the time a commercial content developer gets a SCORM compliant course written and on the market, the information is already outdated.

Elliott claims that the need for formal, top-down LMS strategies, based extensive courseware, is falling away to what he calls, "Fingertip Knowledge." Elliot is referring to accurate, just-in-time, well-indexed content – information that is created quickly, using content experts within your institution. The course development is finished in weeks, not months. This is the essence of what the industry calls rapid e-Learning and what I call "Knowledge on Demand(sm).

Have you been on Amazon.com recently? When you look at products for sale on Amazon now, you'll see something new. A camera might feature a photograph taken by someone who recently bought the camera. There may be a comment by a new owner or a tip on using the camera. These are not just endorsements. Amazon is actually relinquishing some of the control of marketing products to their community of buyers.

In like manner, Elliott Masie suggests that today's organizational learning should embrace the community of learners who will add their own experiences, advice and observations to richen the community of learning. He calls this "The Wisdom of the Crowds." New skills are blended into existing practices. New experiences are immediately fed back into the learning environment. This has always been an advantage of classroom-based training, but now, sharing can be adapted to on-line communities using WIKIs, Blogs and the organizational equivalents of social environments like www.MySpace.com .

Think of this way: years back, I heard of an architectural landscape designer who, instead of laying out visually-balanced walkways, simply sodded the common spaces of a university and waited for the students to wear dirt paths in the new lawn. When the patterns were firmly established, he poured the concrete. The point was that the students knew where they needed to go. They were going to take the shortest path regardless where the sidewalks were pointing.

So the trend is toward building open, flexible learning systems -- systems that have the capacity to embrace today's cultural preferences and leverage the knowledge and experience of the learner. These systems:

- Are synchronous, allowing information, not just answers, to pass to and from the learners.
- Deliver what the learner needs to know quickly and easily
- Promote and support social interactions for the sharing of ideas and experiences
- Offer a variety of deployment options for learning on-demand via i-Pods, Cell phones, PDAs and Laptops
- Employ easy-to-use tools for interaction, polling, surveys, forums, testing, audio, video and animation.

Conclusion? Focus on building a collaborative learning process, not the technology, first. Look to the applications you are *already using* to deliver information. You can build a rapid, low-cost, learning environment with common applications. All it takes is imagination and a commitment to collaboration.

For ideas on building your own rapid e-Learning strategy, contact Barry O'Brien at (978) 282-8222
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North Shore Communications Group, Inc., is a full-service communications company specializing in PodCasting, e-Learning, training, video production & streaming and on-line media services.