

# A rapid evolution



The provision of learning has changed radically over the past decade

**Eddie Kilkelly**

e-learning in the mid-to-late 1990s, the reality didn't live up to the hype or learners' expectations. Computer-based training was flat and unengaging, and it deservedly developed a poor reputation.

## Turning and tipping points

Three key events early in the new millennium constituted a turning point. First, network carriers improved the speed of the UK's communications lines, increasing the amount and type of content that could be delivered in a timely way. Second, the use of XML meant e-learning could be created, amended and updated more easily, incorporating more interactivity and media-rich content. Finally, the greater capability and proliferation of mobile devices and PDAs meant that learning content could be delivered away from the desktop. The take-up of business apps for the Apple iPhone is a case in point.

With the technology in place, we just needed a tipping point in the use of e-learning. That has now arrived, for a number of reasons.

First, the recent recession has made organisations more aware of the cost benefits generated by e-learning. Many organisations that had been considering using e-learning for several years have finally made the move.

Second, many L&D professionals face budget restrictions, so they need to do more with less. Elements of e-learning can often be repurposed and repackaged and it is more cost-effective to update. This is essential when organisations change so rapidly and L&D professionals regularly need to refresh training courses.

The faster pace of business is another factor driving uptake. E-learning can be rolled out to a team, department or organisation as required and the learning completed at a time that fits the learner's schedule. This flexibility is invaluable in busy organisations that wish to improve capability without reducing productivity.

Multimedia e-learning also fits with employees' interest levels and attention spans. People want exactly the information they need, exactly when they need it. E-learning is delivered in bite-sized modules, making it easier for users to find the specific

elements of the training they need at any given time. Innovations like gaming and interactive content also aid engagement and learning retention.

Multimedia learning also chimes with the shift in learner expectations. People are now used to looking for information and transacting over the internet for business and pleasure, and the gaming industry has changed user perceptions of interactivity and presentation. For many, it is now second nature to query Google for information, so online learning is less of an alien concept. In short, the time is right for e-learning in terms of technical ability, organisational desire and learner acceptance.

## The latest developments

Now we have the exciting potential of multimedia and live learning. Multimedia learning can be delivered via a number of different methods, from a desktop PC to a mobile phone or other web-enabled device. The tools may include voice over IP (VoIP) web conferencing, the use of forums or social networks, and search and retrieval of additional data from specific information sources or the internet.

It is media-rich, using audio, video and animation content, and incorporating games and simulations as needed. It may include testing to pre-check knowledge

and evaluate learning outcomes, and be supported by real-life tutors, coaches or mentors – remotely or in the classroom. It may also include live learning, using technology to access and participate remotely in a live classroom seminar.

People with similar learning needs can be brought together virtually to share experiences and learn collaboratively, so these interventions more closely reflect, replicate or even improve on what happens in the classroom environment. What's more, multimedia content enables learning modules to be combined and updated like never before. Developers have an infinite number of possibilities in terms of what content is delivered via different media.

At the end of the formal element of the learning, the programme can be extended through the provision of sources of further information and learning, the inclusion of social learning tools, and the reinforcement of learning through online interactive games. This ensures that the basic level of learning is consistent, but each individual can interact with the programme in a way that is unique to them.

### Getting the mix right

Whatever the learning resources available to L&D professionals, they must start with an in-depth learning needs analysis, combined with a realistic appraisal of the corporate culture and technological capabilities within the organisation.

It is essential to question just about everything. What are the benefits of different learning approaches and how are they used? No matter how interactive it is, e-learning must be short, punchy and focused. Live learning is not simply a case of delivering a classroom course over a webinar; it is essential to hold the learner's attention and give them breaks every 30 minutes or so.

It is then necessary to decide on the right blend of learning – which interventions will best meet the various learning needs of different groups of employees – and design a comprehensive, structured and effective learning programme.

Multimedia and live learning are comparatively new developments, so L&D professionals may benefit from working with external providers who have already built a degree of expertise. This is more cost-effective, as they can help the organisation to avoid common mistakes.

In addition, while there may be an initial premium for innovation, the modular nature of multimedia learning may ultimately require a more open dialogue on pricing, as employees may access only parts of the programme according to their individual needs.

The biggest challenges are ensuring the quality of


learning outcomes and understanding the complexity of managing these solutions. Whether it is e-learning, webinars or coaching, the overall message has to remain consistent throughout.

The Google generation may also need direction in identifying reliable sources of additional information. And it is important to remember that one of the biggest failures in L&D is when an e-learning course is published but there is no follow-up to ensure completion among the target group and check learning. It is essential to manage a multimedia learning or live learning programme; this is not a hands-off method of delivering learning – quite the opposite. It is even more important to follow up and ensure completion or the impetus can be lost. Multimedia learning in particular requires L&D professionals to keep track of who is accessing which content over each technological platform in a highly structured and managed way.

L&D professionals still need to promote the learning – ideally with deadlines for completing each stage – and offer incentives to encourage learners.

### A credible option

This is still a new area of learning, but there are already indicators of potential success. ILX recently piloted an online portal to give learners wishing to undertake a Prince2 foundation or practitioner qualification the interaction and experience of a classroom course via a web browser. The course includes live instructor-led video broadcasts and post-session interactive activities and quizzes to reinforce the online learning. Initial feedback has been very positive, with participants from countries including India, South Africa and the UK stating that they felt the training was highly engaging and informative and that they would recommend it to others.

The appetite for multimedia and live learning is there. It is up to L&D professionals to put strategies in place to maximise the opportunity. 

Eddie Kilkelly is chief operating officer of ILX Group  
[www.ilxgroup.com](http://www.ilxgroup.com)

## Strategies for learning success

The flexibility of multimedia learning allows it to be deployed in practically any organisation and to meet any learning need. Modules can be tailored and adapted within large corporations; equally individuals can benefit from off-the-shelf programmes.

It is essential that the organisation's culture is conducive to e-learning. Are staff self-starters? Do they value learning? Is the organisation constrained in terms of how learning is delivered? Does the structure of the working day enable employees to fit learning into their schedules?

HR and L&D managers must think around the subject matter and not just the content itself. What format is best suited to the learning need? What other sources could be integrated into the learning? What opportunities exist for interactivity and collaboration between learners? What is the most effective way of

impacting knowledge – visually or verbally?

Employees must have access to computers and mobiles and be proficient in using them. Where interactivity with other learners is part of the learning, there must be consistency and standardisation in the technology. Even cash-rich multinationals can have problems here, because they may have slightly different infrastructures and comms links in different countries. Elements may be repackaged to be more easily accessible; for example, where mobile broadband links are better than landlines, content delivery could be weighted towards mobile devices.

It's important to pilot new learning programmes to ensure they are effective and work for learners. Rolling out an untested programme could expose mistakes that are seen as evidence that e-learning is still not as effective as traditional training.

