

e-Learning at light speed or just more Flash in the pan?

Too much to do, not enough time, not enough money? Well, now you can breathe more easily because Rapid e-Learning (REL) development tools promise to help non-learning specialists publish their learning materials more quickly, easily and cheaply than ever before. Designed to help you get past the bottleneck of not being able to originate and/or edit your learning content fast enough, REL development tools are an important enabler of "just in time training" and a pragmatic alternative to having to wait months and pay anywhere between £10k and £50k per running hour of "proper" e-Learning.

There are many different tools available, including Breeze, Mindflash, Articulate, ReadyGo Web Course Builder, PresentationPro, RapidBuilder and Webex. Each has its strengths and its weaknesses but there are a few common denominators:

- Existing content and/or IT competence is leveraged through the use of more "familiar" vehicles, such as PowerPoint, Word and HTML
- Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) become proxy developers
- Vendors' case studies focus on highly volatile content and/or extremely tight timescales
- Ease of use is prized over functionality

That said, some REL tools allow you to include voiceover and video in addition to the standard text and graphics, some feature ways of adding in interactivity, some help you to integrate synchronous facilities, and so on.

Few, though, facilitate a personalised learning experience, tracking and reporting often leaves much to be desired, the learning is usually linear and passive and the focus is very much on the "sender" rather than the "receiver". But there again, we've been using textbooks for hundreds of years and it'll be a while yet before we get rid of them, despite their weaknesses!

The trick is not to expect REL to do everything. The secret is you have to know when to use it and you have to use it carefully.

More haste less speed

The first thing to bear in mind is that development is only one of many stumbling blocks and just because you vault the first hurdle quicker than you'd imagined doesn't mean you will complete the race intact. You will still need to ensure your people:

- have access to your work
- are motivated to do it
- have time enough to do it
- get the right things at the right time in the right way

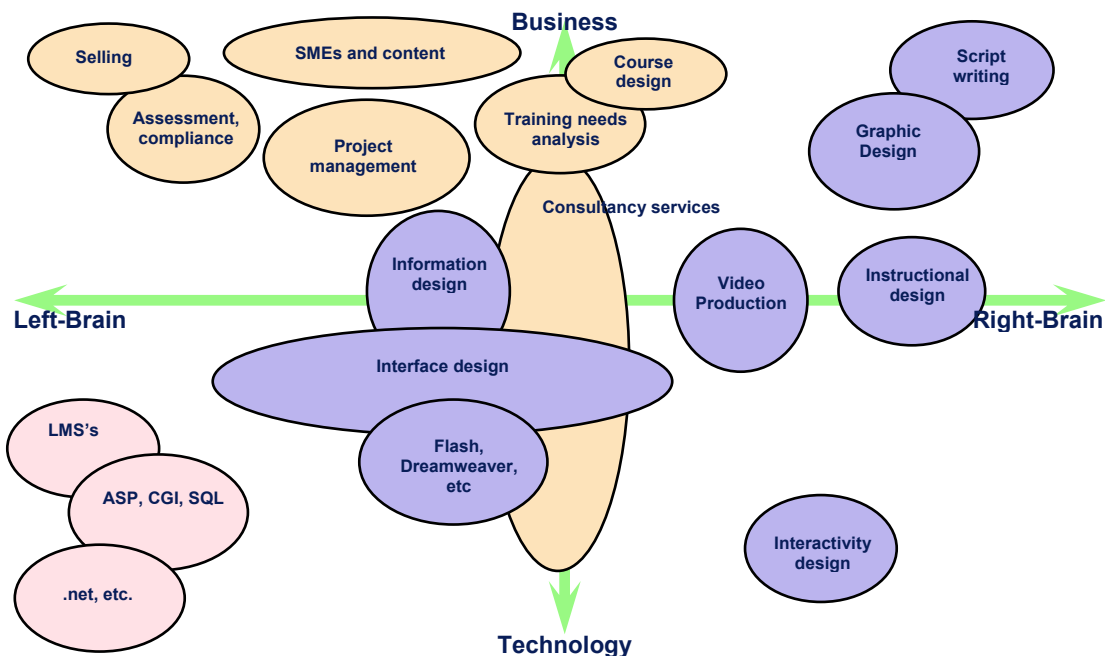
- get the benefit personally as well as professionally, and so on

Focusing too narrowly on the speed of development at the expense of the bigger picture will simply mean that you'll fail earlier.

Introducing the Super-SME

Secondly, one of the main reasons why "proper" e-Learning or blended solutions are sometimes late, go over budget or have to be re-worked is that there are so many people involved in the supply chain. And these people have rather different perceptions and expectations of their own and each other's position and value.

Imagine these people plotted on a matrix with two dimensions: the first between business focus on the one hand and technology focus on the other; the second between left- and right-brained thinking. In a production company, you typically have three kinds of folks: customer-facing sales people and/or consultants (pink); instructional designers, content developers and graphic designers (blue); and hard-core coders (lilac):



We can argue about the dimensions and the positioning of the bubbles but the point is that there are a lot of different agendas with a great deal of potential for communicational drop-offs. And that's before we add in the client as the third dimension! The challenge for e-Learning and blended practitioners is to get these bubbles all working harmoniously, so that collective strengths are exploited and

weaknesses are minimised. This is a constant, strategic challenge which differentiates the leaders from the followers.

Effectively, REL has come along and burst some of these bubbles, such that the SME, instead of just being the content expert, must now proxy for a number of others, chief amongst them the instructional designer. This is good and bad, depending on how ambitious your learning initiative is, and, frankly, whether your SME is up to it. SME's now have to think more about their audiences, goals and objectives, needs analysis (so far so good - kind of), learning theory and practice (excuse me?), graphics, interactivity, tracking, synchronous elements ("sorry, my real forte is Word documents").

Also, in the real world, the people who are recognised as knowing most about the subject aren't always the best communicators of the subject, which is one of the many reasons why really good instructional designers are worth their weight in gold. So how do you work out when it is OK to burst a few bubbles?

Don't try to do everything with REL

Most learning initiatives can be categorised as being either tell, test or teach applications. **Tell** is probably the easiest kind of learning to design and build, **Teach** the hardest, with **Test** somewhere in between.

This is oversimplifying, of course, but thinking about tell, test or teach can help you decide whether or not you're asking too much of your REL in general and your SMEs in particular:

- **Tell** applications contain one-way communication: you have to tell somebody something. Examples might include a health and safety briefing, a lecture, an advert, a presentation of a product's features and benefits, some late breaking price changes, and so on
- **Test** applications go beyond tells in that they assume you will want to assess the skills and / or knowledge of your users. Some test applications won't do any telling (like a conventional school exam), others will (you've just told them about some fire regulations, now you want to make sure they've understood it)
- **Teach** applications are more complex still because they should support personal reflection, communication with peers, tutors and others, should provide access to reference materials, should contain more complex, interactive learning materials, should be integrated into the workplace, and so on

So, REL on its own can often be the most cost-effective option for "tell" initiatives, especially when the information is volatile, super-urgent and/or when the fundamentals have been learned already and all you're trying to do is provide updates. REL can also be good for "test" applications, especially when it's knowledge which is being assessed. But "teaching" new skills, changing people's attitudes and behaviours, achieving and maintaining competence and getting people to perform

more effectively probably demands a blended solution, where you need to mix in more ingredients to complement your REL. It's not always going to work on its own.

Last slide

If you're thinking of investing in a rapid development tool, please arrange for the SME and any other stakeholders to be involved in the decision making process. The weights you attach to the different criteria you identify will of course very much depend on your needs and situation but ease of use and robustness should be near the top of your list.

Focus on the tactical rather than strategic, picking off some quick wins. REL is a brilliant opportunity but it isn't the answer to everything. It's merely another ingredient which needs to be carefully blended. This is a story for another time.