The Rise and Fall of E-Learning – What now?
John Wall & Frank McNamee

E-Learning – the silver bullet?

"The next big killer application for the Internet is going to be education. Education over the Internet is going to be so big it is going to make e-mail look like a rounding error" (Chambers 1996).

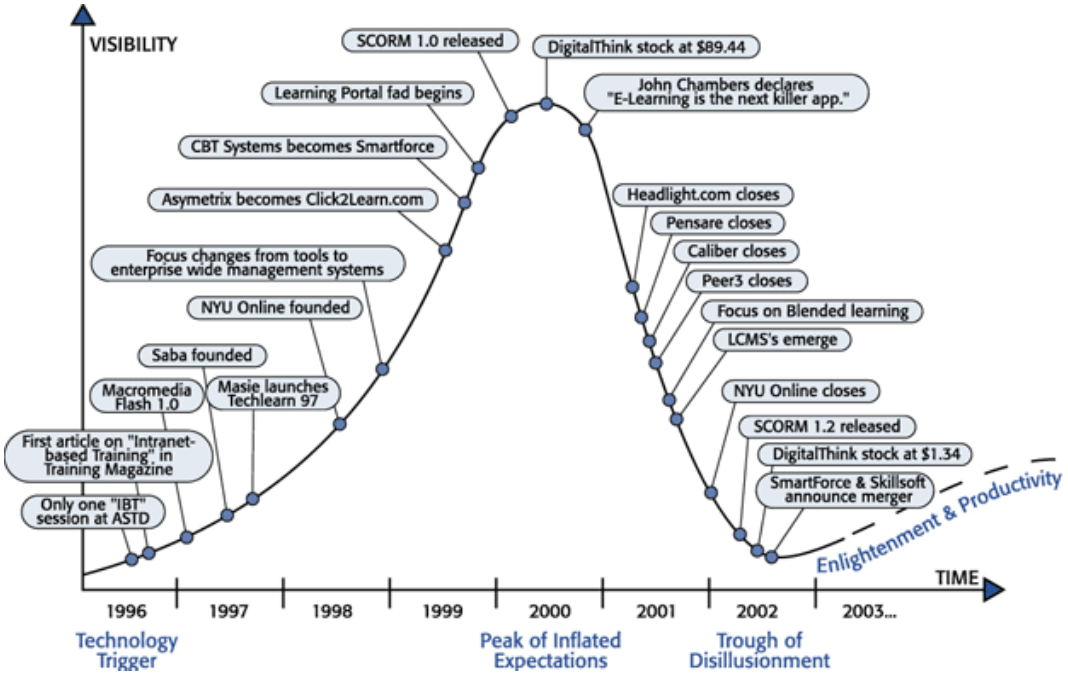
This quotation from such a respected figure as Cisco's John Chambers was typical of the perception of E-Learning that permeated the corporate and educational world in the mid-nineties. Large corporations and academic institutions enthusiastically embraced the new paradigm that was set to dramatically change training and education as we know it. Millions of euro was invested in creating or converting content for online delivery, hundreds of E-Learning related companies were formed and the large players in the Industry saw their stock values soar.

Reality bites

Almost 10 years later the E-Learning world is far removed from that envisaged by John Chambers. Many of the early adopters of the E-Learning golden era have little or no current investment in E-Learning. Numerous E-Learning providers have gone out of business, consolidated or radically changed their business direction. In fact E-Learning has almost become a dirty word, an unmentionable associated with lost investments, lost companies and lost jobs.

Figure 1 provides a startling visual history of E-learning from the mid-nineties to the present day.

Figure 1: E-Learning Hype Cycle



Source: http://www.e-learningguru.com/articles/hype1_1.htm accessed 22nd July 2004

So where did it all go wrong?

There are a number of reasons for the crash that the E-learning market experienced over and above the general economic downturn and the events of September 11th 2001. Some of these reasons include:

1. People didn't use it.

There seemed to be an assumption underlying the E-learning phenomenon at its early stages that *if we build it they will come* (Zemsky, 2004). In other words if we invest large amounts of resources in hardware and software to develop E-Learning content then people will rush to use it. This is just simply not true.

The single most often repeated problem that we hear from corporations and institutions that have developed E-Learning content is "the poor take up rate". There is millions of euros worth of E-Learning courseware out there that is practically unused.

2. People didn't learn from it.

Much of what masquerades as E-Learning content is simply online text. How many organisations do you know claim to have an E-Learning programme but when you look into it, it is nothing more than online pdf or word documents or at best PowerPoint Presentations? Just because it is online does not make it E-Learning.

The eagerness to embrace the technology that was demonstrated by many organisations during this period overlooked any understanding of the fundamentals of learning (Hamid 2002). Information is not instruction and any form of instruction, be it online or otherwise must be designed based on sound pedagogical principles (McNamee & Wall, 2001).

3. It was overpriced

During the E-Learning hay day it was not unusual for large multinational organisations to have E-Learning budgets worth millions in euro. It was also not untypical that costs in excess of €100,000 per hour of completed content were incurred.

The real beneficiaries from this excess during this period were the E-Learning providers. There is no doubt that organisations were extremely profitable during this period as the market was willing to embrace the potential benefits of this new technology.

The sting in the tale came when the E-Learning projects were evaluated and in many cases it was discovered as above that very little or no usage of the E-Learning content was taking place and that if people were using it they were not learning from it. In other words, organisations saw very little return on their investment. Prior to the events of September 11th 2001 much of the hype of the dot.com boom was dissipating – events of September 11th just accelerated this

4. It was over-hyped

The E-Learning revolution coincided with the dot.com revolution. Like practically all other technology related developments of this period, it was seen as a "must have" by organisations that had a training and learning function. The tremendous hype that surrounded E-Learning in the mid-to-late nineties created an artificial demand for its adoption and implementation. There was a sense that by not having E-Learning as part of its repertoire an organisation was just not at the cutting edge.

Is the E-Learning market dead or is it merely adjusting?

It must be recognised that there are some notable exceptions to the E-Learning "horror story". Organizations like IBM, Cisco, GlaxoSmithKline and the U.S. military have achieved considerable cost savings and increases in productivity through e-learning. However for every success story there is also an example of an e-learning initiative that was a failure.

Many commentators have argued that the recent turbulence in the E-Learning industry is nothing more than a natural shake-out that befalls most promising new industries (Shepard, 2002). It is true that we have seen it before in the computer industry, the car industry etc. where hundreds of providers are reduced to a handful. In these cases what we have is not a declining market but rather a temporary adjustment. The growth projections for E-Learning revenues would appear to endorse this view as they are extremely optimistic; IDC's latest estimate predicts that the worldwide corporate E-Learning market will reach $23.7 billion in 2006, up from $6.6 billion in 2002 (eMarketer, Inc. 2003).

Despite this optimism it is clear that the formula that will ensure that any given E-Learning project works has not yet been identified. There are still many examples of failed ventures; only last April Britain's e-university, UkeU, collapsed despite a £62m investment including a customized E-Learning platform developed by Sun Microsystems.

How can one ensure that an E-Learning project works?

While the E-Learning industry slowly recovers from its nadir in 2002, researchers and practitioners are desperately seeking a model or framework that will avoid the costly lessons of the past and that will succeed where pure E-Learning failed.

What is this model or framework that will guarantee my E-Learning project to work? Only the very brave or very foolish have the answers – as yet. However what can be observed is the emerging trend extolling the virtues of "blended learning". Blended learning may include many forms of learning tools such as real-time virtual / collaborative software, self-paced Web-based courses, electronic performance support systems (EPSS) embedded within the job task environment and knowledge management systems (Singh; 2003). Singh (2003) summarised the modalities that blended learning can take several dimensions as outlined in table 1.

Table 1 Range of Blended Learning Options

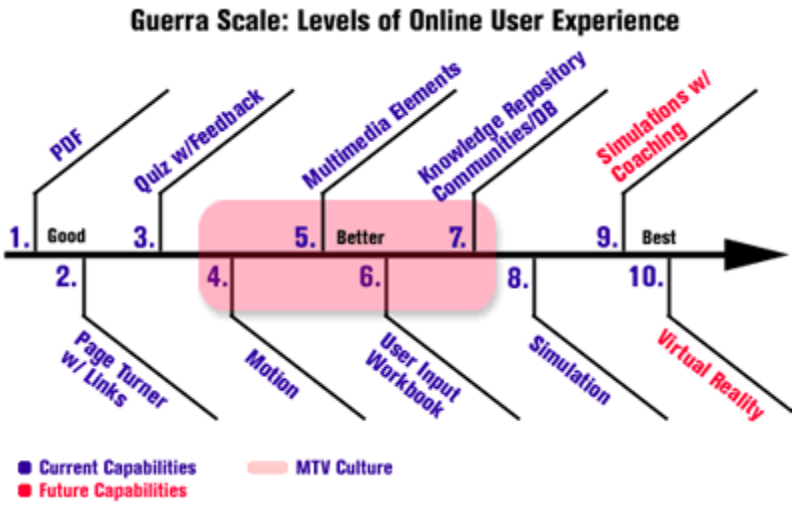
Dimension of Learning	Principal Traits	Example
Blending offline and Online Learning	The offline occurs in a traditional classroom situation with the online learning usually meaning over an Internet or Intranet.	A learning programme that provides study materials and research resources over the Web with the instructor-led classroom training as the principle medium of instruction.

Blending Self Paced and Live Collaborative Learning	Self-paced learning implies solidarity, on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner. Collaborative learning implies a more dynamic communication among many learners that brings about knowledge sharing...	May include review of important literature on a regulatory change or new product followed by a live, online, peer-to-peer discussion of the material's application to the learner's job and customers.
Blending Structured and Unstructured Learning	Most learning in the workplace happens in an unstructured form via meetings, hallway conversations or emails. Thus not all forms of learning imply a premeditated, structured or formal learning programme.	A blended programme design may look to actively capture conversations and documents from unstructured learning events into knowledge repositories available on-demand, supporting the way knowledge-workers collaborate and work.
Blending Custom Content with Off-the-Shelf Content	Off-the-shelf content is by definition generic. Generic content is much less expensive to buy and frequently has higher production value s than customised content. Generic self-paced content can be customised with a blend of live experiences (classroom or online) or with content customisation.	Industry standards such as SCORM open the door to increasingly flexible blending of off-the-shelf and custom content, improving the user experience while minimising cost.
Blending Learning, Practice, and Performance Support	Supplementing learning with practice and just in time support performance support tools that facilitate the appropriate execution of job tasks.	Cutting-edge productivity tools provide workspace environments that package together the computer based work, collaborative and performance support tools.

Source: adopted from Singh (2003)

Guerra and Heffernan (2004) developed the Guerra Scale (see figure 2) which, outlines the range of e-learning content that a learner can use. It is an attempt to describe an increasingly interactive user experience using a 1 to 10 scale in which 1 involves simple reading text on a screen through to 10 representing a virtual reality scenario.

Figure 2 Levels of Online User Experience



Source: Guerra and Heffernan available at http://www.learningcircuits.org/2004/mar2004/guerra.htm

Given the experiences of the e-learning industry since 2000, it is difficult to see individual organizations making the investment in virtual reality E-learning experiences. However in delivering workplace learning and offering continuing professional development opportunities, consideration of the use of blended learning in any of the formats outlined in table 1 earlier in conjunction with the MTV culture

as identified by Guerra and Heffernan (2004) may well offer an avenue for organizations to meet future learning needs.

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