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Rapid e-Learning: Is It Right For You?

By Gus Pretera
Instructional Designer

In a January 2005 issue of Learning Circuits (www.learningcircuits.org), Dianne Archibald cites a Larstan Business Reports survey: "...over 80 percent of respondents said that rapid e-learning strategies would make a significant contribution to the training initiatives in their companies." Rapid e-Learning is a trend that is sweeping the industry and, as is so often the case with trendy solutions, it is being used as a silver bullet to attack almost any training need. So what is Rapid e-Learning and is it right for you? In this article, I'll try to help you answer these questions.

What is it?

Rapid e-Learning (REL) is a method of developing online courses (a.k.a., courseware) quickly and cheaply. Increasingly, REL is relying on a new genre of tools that convert PowerPoint slides into interactive presentations. There are more and more of these REL tools available today, but the most popular are Adobe's Breeze Presenter and Articulate Presenter Pro. Others include Brainshark, Content Point, Lersus, Snap! Studio, Webex, ReadyGo, and Mindflash.

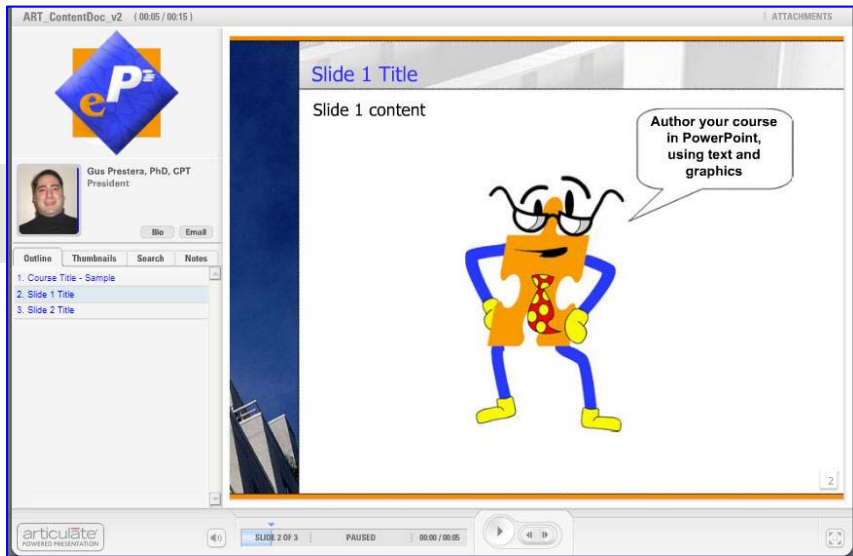


Figure 1: This is a sample of a slide that was converted to courseware through Articulate Presenter Pro, a Rapid e-Learning tool.

What can REL tools do?

REL tools take PowerPoint slides and publish them as courseware in a format called Flash. The Flash player is available on over 98% of PCs, so almost anyone can run a Flash course. That makes your IT department happy. Most REL tools have the ability to publish SCORM-conformant courses with minimal effort, so courses can be integrated into learning management systems (LMSs) quickly and easily. This makes your LMS Administrator happy. When an REL tool publishes the slides, it places them inside of a standard user interface. The

interface is plain but effective and can be tailored to your organization. Color schemes can be changed; your company logo can be added; and interface elements can be disabled/enabled as desired. This creates consistency across courses, which depending on how you look at it can be practical...or boring. Most REL tools enable you to author practice questions and test items and to record test scores.

What are the implications?

While the ability to convert slide decks into courseware may on the surface seem

Continued on Page 3

In This Issue:

- ◆ Rapid e-Learning..... 1
- ◆ Tools Rule:
Developing Databases..... 2
- ◆ Design Tip:
Storytelling..... 2
- ◆ Best Practice Alert!
Project Update Report..... 2

Upcoming Event



Friday, October 6, 2006
Philadelphia Marriott
1201 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107

www.dvhrsummit.com

Delaware Valley Human Resource Partnership (DVHRP)
2006 Learning Summit

**Topic: Corporate Universities and Learning Theory:
Best Practices and Lessons Learned**

Gus will be a panelist at this year's Learning Summit, along with Rhonda Costello, Dean of Commerce University, and Dan Gallagher, Director of Human Resources for Comcast University. We'll be talking about corporate universities and blended learning. ◆



Storytelling

In the 70s and 80s, Roger Schank's work focused on a little-known theory that helped to lay the groundwork for educational simulations, Script Theory. The main principle of Script Theory is that all memories are episodic in nature (i.e., are stored in our brains as movies of sorts). Therefore, our knowledge is organized in a form similar to that of a script.

With scripts, all concepts can be broken down and stated in terms of "primitive acts" performed by an actor on an object (e.g., Jane plays ball). Ideas can then be represented in terms of personal experiences rather than abstract terms and empirical categories.

One practical implication of Script Theory is that storytelling is an ideal form of communicating ideas, especially complex ones, because they enable the listener to understand the context in which the ideas are situated. In a story, it is clear who does what, when, how, and why. A story relates a personal experience and demonstrates actors, actions, and objects interacting.

While Dr. Schank's work has primarily been applied to educational simulations, where storytelling is a central element, it is equally relevant to other forms of instruction. Whether in a textbook, workbook, instructor-led course, or even in a Rapid e-Learning course, storytelling can help learners make connections and make inferences about complex ideas.

Consider how you might weave more storytelling into your next course.

**Tools Rule:
Building Databases to Support Training Needs**

Mae Prestera is a former accountant with strong Access database skills. Though she is now an Instructional Designer and Project Manager, she continues to develop database tools both for eP and for eP clients.

One of our clients recently asked us to develop a process and a set of tools to help their training professionals conduct a yearly training needs analysis. Among the tools we developed was an Access database application.

This tool enables users to:

- Enter learning and performance needs
- Prioritize those needs
- Assign solutions to those needs
- Generate reports that represent action plans for individuals or groups within the organization



Our Microsoft Access Mae-ven



Mae developed the tool and is currently working with the client to deploy it within the organization. If you have a similar need, or have questions about how databases can help your training organization, call Mae at 610-449-2060 or email her at mae@effectperformance.com.

Best Practice Alert!
Project Updates



Project Update Report
Client - Project: **effectPerformance - WBT Demo**
Update Compiled By: **Mae Prestera**
For Week Ending **8/21/05** Week # 5

Overall Status: The project timeline was revised for additional DD development and review DD approval is still pending due to a rescheduling of last week's meeting.

Action Items		Resource	Dates		Risk Management			
Deliverable/Product	Task	Who?	Status	Exp	Act	Risk or Issue	Proc Imp.	Status/Planned Action
Design Doc	Make revisions and submit second draft to client	Alicia, Hal and Mae	Open	8/16				

ACTION ITEMS

Project Update Report
Client - Project: **effectPerformance - WBT Demo**
Update Compiled By: **Mae Prestera**
For Week Ending **8/21/05** Week # 5

Deliverable	Work Product	Status	Submitted			Approved			Notes
			Base	Exp	Act	Base	Exp	Act	
effectPerformance WBT Demo		Started, In Progress							
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Design Doc	Started, In Progress	7/26	7/26	7/26	8/10	8/18		
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Look and Feel	Started, In Progress	7/26	7/26	7/26	8/10	8/18		
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Content Doc	Not Started	9/6	9/19		9/19	10/3		
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Create Template Library	Not Started	8/29	9/16		na	na	na	
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Alpha	Not Started	9/28	10/11		10/3	10/17		
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Beta	Not Started	10/18	10/26		10/19	11/2		
effectPerformance WBT Demo	Gold	Not Started	10/25	11/7		10/25	11/11		

PROJECT MILESTONES

▲ Keeping project team members and stakeholders updated are important with any kind of project. At eP, each project lead produces a written weekly update, using one of our home-grown tools, the Project Update Report (PUR). It keeps projects PURring along.

The PUR includes an overview of the current status, notes, and listings of the prior week's events as well as next week's planned events. It also includes a table listing all action items as well as one describing the status of project milestones.



Good Luck Karen!



Karen Marker will be starting a long-term engagement with our friends at PDG. She's been a long-time contributor at eP and will be sorely missed. ♦

Rapid e-Learning: Is It Right For You?

Continued from Page 1



rather benign, it is in fact a rather remarkable development within the field of e-learning and has profound implications for how we design and produce effective courseware.

Death of a Storyboard - With REL, the Instructional Designer (ID) designs the course content in PowerPoint, leveraging that tool's native capabilities for graphics and motion. This is a dramatic change from designing courses "on paper" in storyboard form. By doing away with storyboards, REL eliminates the middleman, as it were. This reduces time and cost. It also enables the ID to exercise more control over the design of the course and to make design changes on the fly.

Death of a Graphic Artist - With REL, IDs can control the layout of the content and can create many of the graphics, builds, highlights, hyperlinks, and simple animations themselves, thereby reducing the amount of external graphics work that needs to be done. While there will always be a need for professionally produced graphics and Flash elements, the need can be reduced considerably if the ID has some graphics acumen and intermediate-level PowerPoint skills.

Death of a Programmer - In the early days of e-learning (before we called it that), many IDs had graphics development and programming skills, so they would produce their own courses using one of the early authoring tools. For example, I used to design and build courses in Authorware by myself. In the past few decades, the disciplines have become more specialized as the tools have grown in complexity. However, REL tools dramatically simplify the development process. They require no coding or scripting. This means that it is again possible for IDs to act as their own programmers (sorry programmers). By reducing the number of people involved in a project, you reduce time and cost.

Next, you are probably hoping to hear how REL is causing the "death of a salesman," but sadly, even REL won't fix that for you.

Can't I just do it myself?

If you are a subject-matter expert and are tech savvy, have some graphics skill, and are able to design effective course content, then you could use an REL to develop a course by yourself. This would save a great deal of time and cost.

Control Panel
Outline of the slides, thumbnails, search function, and speaker notes all work automatically. The logo, speaker photo, and speaker information can be changed.

Attachments
Attach documents, such as a printable version of the course

Audio
You can record audio yourself directly in Articulate's built-in audio editor, or you can import professionally recorded audio files and then sync them to the on-screen action.

Navigation
The navigation panel has Play, Rewind, and Skip buttons as well as a slide bar that marks the progress of audio. It also has an audio on/off controller.

Media
You author your slides in PowerPoint, where you can take advantage of PowerPoint's special effects to create builds, highlights, and movement.

You can insert clip art or external graphics files. You can also insert Flash files containing animations or special practice exercises.

Figure 2: Describes some of the features of Articulate's interface, which is similar that of many other REL tools.

However, the reality is that there are very few people who have this combination of skills. Even if you are a Jack-of-all-trades (or Jane), you may not have time or interest in doing everything yourself. Lastly, a team of specialists can give your course a professional polish that Jack-of-all-trade designers are rarely able to achieve. So, while REL tools shift more of the development work to the ID, graphic artists and programmers can still make valuable contributions.

Case in Point

A few months ago, I designed a 30-minute REL course. It was for a pharma client that needed to inform its employees about an update to the company's project management methodology. The course

included custom graphics, Flash animations, professionally recorded audio narration, practice exercises, and a post test, and yet went live on their LMS 7 weeks after we kicked off. We spent about two weeks discussing the updates, writing the content, and laying out the course in PowerPoint. During that time, we conducted our LMS integration testing. The client then reviewed the content and we had approval within two weeks. Media production, integration, and debugging took two weeks. In the 7th week, the client reviewed the Beta release of the course; we made a few minor changes; the client approved the course; and the LMS Administrator deployed the course. In the end, the client received a professionally designed and produced

Continued on Page 4

Rapid e-Learning: Is It Right For You?

Continued from Page 3

course for a fraction of the cost and time it would have taken to produce it using a traditional approach.

Is REL a Silver Bullet?

Despite the advantages of REL, there are no silver bullet solutions that can be applied to every learning need. While REL tools are easier to use than traditional authoring tools, REL tools are also rather primitive in terms of their capabilities. For every nifty feature, there are several limitations and known bugs to go with it. A good ID can work with these limitations to produce a sound course. Still, let's not get carried away with euphoria.

When is REL Suitable?

Clearly, REL is a tempting approach when you have slim budgets and tight timelines. It is ideally suited for content that is changing often. For example, content that is highly regulated; IT content supporting a tool that gets updated regularly; and best practices that are constantly evolving. It is also ideally suited for situations in which the message needs to get out quickly. For example, you might need to inform your employees of an important policy change.

You might be starting to say to yourself: "Self, all of my training content is urgent and changes frequently; my budgets are always slim; and my timelines are always tight. Therefore, REL is always the way to go!" Before you get yourself too worked up, let's consider instructional goals. REL is not suitable for addressing ALL learning needs.

REL is suitable for designing courses that are knowledge-oriented...that address awareness, knowledge, and basic understanding needs. In other words, think of REL when you are saying to yourself: "Self, we need to make workers aware of our diversity policy" or "Self, we need workers to know the organization's 10 customer service objectives" or "Self, we need workers to understand the performance review process." Here are some examples:

- **Updates** – "Here's what's new in the IT2000 v3.8 Release!"
- **Primers** – "Introduction to IT2000"

...it is in fact a rather remarkable development within the field of e-learning and has profound implications for how we design and produce effective courseware.



- **Knowledge Transfer** – "Lessons learned by Americans working in UAE"
- **Presenting Analysis Results** – "Results from our survey of company sales reps"
- **Basic Information** – "Interactive product catalog: Features, benefits, and pricing"
- **Basic Conceptual Knowledge** – "What is Rapid e-Learning?"
- **Conceptual Process** – "Process overview: Conducting a needs analysis"

When is REL not suitable?

REL is much less suitable for designing courses that are skill-oriented...that try to teach others HOW to perform a task (e.g., how to conduct job interview). Why? To teach workers HOW, you need to be able to:

- (1) Show them how to do it in a realistic situation
- (2) Give them an opportunity to practice doing it in a realistic situation
- (3) Give them meaningful feedback on how well they did it
- (4) Assess them on performance and track performance scores


PowerPoint slides and multiple-choice questions aren't going to be enough. Also, if you need a course that develops a learner's higher order thinking skills, such as problem-solving, trouble-shooting, decision-making, analysis, evaluation, and creativity or interpersonal communication skills, then REL will usually be inadequate as a stand-alone solution.

Conclusion

In the hands of professionals, REL tools can be used to develop effective knowledge-based courses faster and less expensively than with traditional authoring tools. REL tools are not sophisticated or robust, but they do the basic things well. Keep in mind that the more you try to stretch their capabilities, the more you offset the time and cost benefits. Hopefully, you now know what REL is and whether or not it's right for your needs. If you have additional questions, please give us a call at 610-449-2060.

**In this issue of
Live & Learn...**

- Rapid e-Learning. What is it? Is it right for you?
- Tools Rule. Learn how we use Microsoft Access to support training
- Design Tip: Storytelling
- Best Practice: Project Updates



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1513 Fairview Avenue
Havertown, PA 19083-4235