



Briefings

Multi-Purposed Learning™ Content Beyond “Blended Learning”

Overview

This paper describes a new learning delivery strategy for training professionals, *multi-purposed learning*, that provides the best approach for greatly improving organizational learning effectiveness while lowering overall learning costs.

Most developers focus on determining the *blend* of learning—dividing up content between different modes of delivery, i.e., what stays in the classroom, what goes to CBT, what is provided on the Web, and so on. The result is that content, the organization’s learning “intellectual capital,” is available in only one format.

Multi-purposed learning focuses on taking compelling content and delivering it in the variety of ways required to maximize learning, retention, and application. The result is that the same content can be made available in alternative formats, each offering different advantages to the audience. This is the only way to create just-in-time, just-as-needed training that better meets the needs of learners while lowering overall costs.

Multi-purposed learning goes far beyond deciding between classroom or e-learning. There are over 30 ways to provide content, each offering different advantages for factors such as learning style, scope, accessibility, interactivity, technology required, development cost, delivery cost, and so on.

Multi-purposed learning also addresses the problem of single-event training. Learner retention decay requires that content be available after the event for refresh learning and for coaching sessions. The result of post-event learning is higher retention, better application, and enhanced performance that leads to improved business results.

New digital tools for creating and distributing content now make it cost-effective to produce multi-purposed learning deliverables from single or multiple sources. This can be done quickly and inexpensively and at high quality without needing broadcast-level equipment or production talent. The result is a range of training offerings that best meet *all* the continuous learning needs of employees.

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It's All About Compelling Content

Most organizations making decisions about learning delivery go about it completely backwards. They start with a delivery mode, then evaluate what content fits in. The assumptions are built into typical questions that come up early in the design cycle such as:

“We need to do more Web-based learning. What can we migrate there?”

“Isn't it time to move some of our courses to CD?”

“What management and customer service Internet courses can we buy?”

“How do we make that available on their laptops?”

Instead, organizations should start with the learning goals and content, then make decisions on how to best deliver that content. Why? Because *compelling content is what drives effective learning, not medium or mode of delivery*. Designers should be mode/medium agnostic when it comes to delivering learning. For the right content, there may be no single “best” way to deliver. There is likely to be a variety of ways to deliver learning—each with its own advantages in leading to the same result: enhanced competence and better performance that leads to improved business results.

Examples of compelling content that makes medium irrelevant are seen every day. Ignoring different individual learning styles for the moment, e-learning gurus tell us that people need visual excitement, interaction, ease of access, etc., and that reading simple text is boring. Yet, do people learn from books? Certainly! Books are the basis for the entire school system, and the bulk of organization documentation is in textual form. Why do people learn from books (and even read them for leisure pleasure), a supposedly inferior delivery method? Because the text contains compelling content for the reader.

Similarly, why do people watch broadcast TV programs offering no interaction, pay attention to clever commercials they didn't initially care about, read attractive ads in magazines or newspapers, or stay with a radio channel during breaks? Why do Internet surfers spend hours pouring through pages of Google.com search results looking for a piece of information? These situations don't present the ideal learning experience and don't make the content easily accessible, yet people do them every day. Again, content is paramount.

We know of an accountant who produced a most excruciatingly boring video on tax issues for physicians. Yet, he sold nearly 10,000 copies at \$70 each because the content saved its viewers thousands of dollars. Why do people roll their eyes when told they have to complete certain training? This is a perfect indicator of ineffective content. For the right content, people will break your doors down trying to get in—regardless of the medium or learning experience.

Recommendations: If the content is compelling, the medium isn't that critical. Focus on the content first and then make decisions about delivery. “Without a need, don't proceed.” Find out what people need to learn and where they need to learn it, then deliver accordingly.

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It's Not Merely about e-Learning

Everywhere you look, people are talking or writing about only two types of learning these days—classroom or Web-based distance learning—with the focus being on the latter. These are actually the two end-points of a continuum encompassing over 30 delivery options, many of which are far more learning-effective and cost-effective than either extreme.

In the rush to leverage the Internet, organizations are abandoning many proven learning approaches that can continue to deliver compelling content effectively and at a much lower cost than in-person classroom training or interactive e-learning.

For example, a consumer goods firm still distributes a monthly “Up2Date” audiotape/CD to its 650-person sales force. It is the organization’s highest rated communications vehicle with listenership over 90 percent, and with nearly 20 percent listening to the content more than once.

A retail firm lets employees submit ideas to a voice-mail number at headquarters, then distributes the best ideas back out with a broadcast voice mail. This no-development-cost approach uses the existing phone system to create immediate and targeted content.

Recommendations: Don’t ignore the full range of learning delivery options in a rush to the Internet. Compelling content can be delivered in a variety of historically proven ways without all the specialized technology costs.

Refresh and Coaching are More Important

Most organizational learning activities totally ignore the realities of audience retention. One rule of thumb is that half of what has been heard/experienced in a learning session is gone by the time you adjourn, 75 percent is gone by day’s end, and only 10 percent is retained by the next morning. In the long run, most of us can’t remember what we had for lunch last week, much less what we supposedly learned in a class four months ago.

The implicit assumption in the learning philosophy of most organizations is that, once employees have completed some learning event, they have a mastery of that knowledge forever. Regardless of the exact retention figures, single-event based learning totally ignores the issue of *learning decay*. The unavoidable truth is that people need to have knowledge and skills continuously refreshed, and with coaching made available, in order to close the learning feedback loop.

A good example is CPR certification. Medical professionals must successfully complete an initial training course. They are then required to annually pass a shorter refresher course to maintain their certification. When it comes to life-and-death, the medical community knows that a one-time class doesn’t guarantee lifetime competence.

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Recommendations: Get out of the mode of thinking that learning certain content (even compelling content) is a single event. Refresh and coaching components can be more important to long-term performance than the lone, initial learning experience, and must be included in the overall design effort. Otherwise, employees are like golfer Chi Chi Rodriguez who said, “The older I get, the better I used to be.”

Just-in-Time, Just-As-Needed Learning

Another aspect of retention theory is its influence on content organization and packaging. Delivering a big chunk of learning well ahead of the actual need subjects the content to unavoidable retention decay. Ideally, learning should be delivered as close as possible to the moment of actual need, much like Jiminy Cricket standing on Pinocchio’s shoulder dispensing advice.

Employees don’t utilize CDs because they have to stop what they’re doing, find the disc, load it, and run it. People don’t like to watch training videos because they have to get up and search for an empty training room where there’s a VCR. Plus, the content is linear, which means they can’t quickly access the specific portion of the tape they need to view. Audiotapes similarly require a cassette player, and are also linear in nature.

So learning must be delivered quickly, and specifically when needed. For example, it might be very helpful for sales supervisors to have the lecture from a training session chunked up into 3-4 minute video segments on the hard disk, the server, or a CD. Supervisors could then easily play the appropriate video when coaching a salesperson on a specific technique, using the slider bar to play and replay any portion of the video in a non-linear fashion.

Recommendations: Just-in-time, just-as-needed learning requires organizations to utilize the full range of delivery options. Instructional designers must also consider the equipment and time limitations of the audience. For example, “windshield time” might be the sole opportunity salespeople have for learning, or service agents may only have access to computers at their desks. These factors mean that the exact same content may need to be delivered in a variety of ways.

Multi-Purposed Content vs. Blended Learning

Blended learning refers to taking a collection of related content and determining how each portion is going to be delivered. This typically consists of breaking the content up and deciding, “We’re going to make this part self-study CBT, this we’ll teach in class, and this we’ll have for Web reference.” It is an either-or process of categorization that creates the ultimate delivery “blend.”

A perfect example was a leading technology company that wanted to convert an annual week-long product introduction and training conference into a two-day meeting. The decision was to move the new product features portion out to pre-work CBT, and then focus the meeting on sales applications and prospecting for each product line. There was no product training in the meeting, no sales training in the pre-work, and no post-event support. Unfortunately, all this was needed afterwards on the job.

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Blended learning is a worthwhile approach, and can lower the direct costs of learning. But it is not the lowest cost or most effective way of helping employees learn and master compelling content.

Multi-purposing requires taking the same content and making it available in a variety of ways and times, depending upon the real-world needs of employees. Instead of specific content only being available in a single delivery mode, information can be provided when and where needed.

Recommendations: Stop thinking of delivery as a decision about where to put each block of content. Start with learners, then determine where and how that content can add value and generate performance improvements. Truly compelling content will likely need to be delivered in a variety of ways to insure the success of the initial event, continuous coaching, and long-term refresh/relearning.

Delivery Options

The range of options for delivering content is nearly overwhelming. The good news is that many of these alternatives can be utilized at a very low cost and with little development effort. Other possibilities leverage existing materials, such as taking the audio from video, or utilizing existing video as the instructional component of CBT/WBT. Currently, there options for live, audio, video, text/graphics, and learner initiated delivery as seen in Figure 1 below.

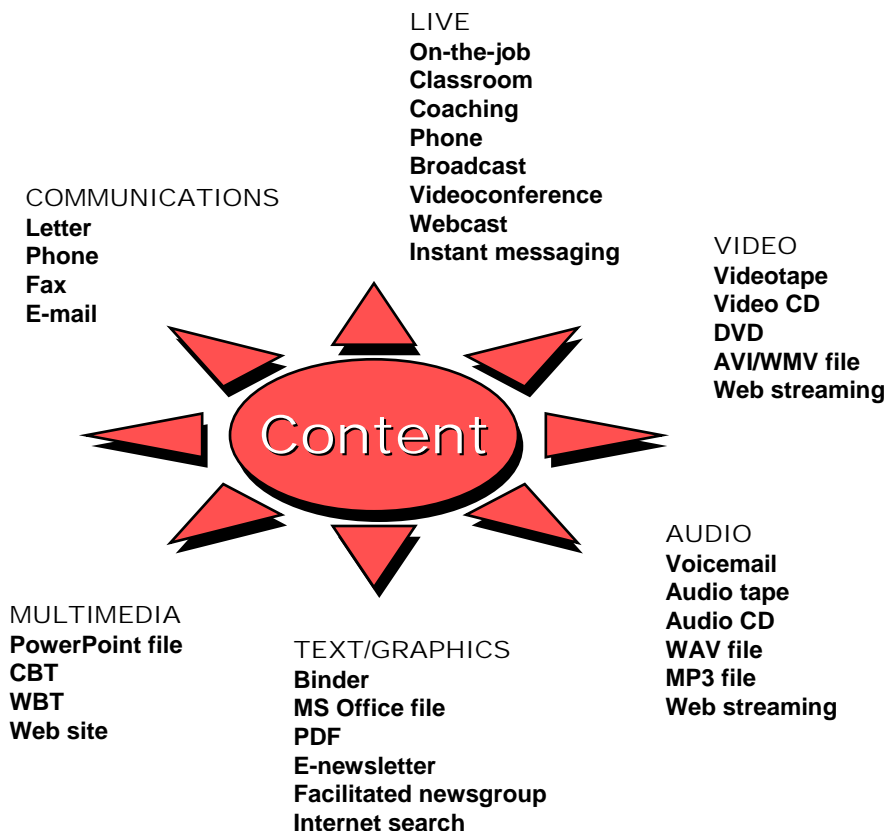


Figure 1.

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Multi-purposed learning consists of developing source content, and then leveraging it in as many different ways as possible to fulfill the initial learning and continuous refresh/reference requirements of employees. The goal is to “create once – deploy many” as needed.

Recommendations: Start considering the full range of options in making learning delivery decisions. Leverage existing or new intellectual capital (content) in different ways to address the varied needs of learners. Keep costs down while simultaneously increasing learning by multi-purposing content and delivering it in readily and easily accessible modes.

An Example of Multi-Purposed Content

A common problem is what to do with existing classroom training. Converting a multi-day course into CBT/WBT using course authoring tools or Web tools can cost hundreds of thousands of development dollars. Alternatively, a single existing classroom course could be quickly and cost-effectively multi-purposed in a variety of live or off-line ways:

- Videotape course lectures using a reasonably-priced mini-DV camera. Digitize the tapes and edit the lectures into topic modules. Provide them on videotape for linear viewing, or on CD, DVD, hard disk, server, or Web for non-linear viewing. This “talking head” approach is palatable as long as the content is compelling and the segments are to-the-point.
- Extract audio from the video and make it available on tape, CD, e-mailed MP3 file, or Web site download. The audience can use recorders, Walkman, car, portable MP3 player, PC, etc., wherever they are.
- If the course is PowerPoint based, match the audio explanation (taken from the video) to each slide and integrate it into the course presentation (as self-playing audio per slide.) Since the resulting file is likely to be very large, make the new presentation available on CD or a server.
- Further edit the video files into short, three to five minute segments by topic. Make these available on CDs, Web site, or servers for use by supervisors for coaching or by students for review/refresh.
- Use audio sound bites for Up2Date audiotapes, CDs, or in short training phone messages.
- Use the short video segments for the instructional portion of a CBT/WBT course. (This eliminates a large portion of the programming effort since interaction types and test questions are pre-built program objects.) Add interactions and testing using one of the mainline authoring tools or languages. Distribute the course on CD or Web.
- Supplement this content by making the instructor/SME available for real-time or off-line support through several of the contact options listed above.

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- Create an internal chat area or newsgroup for learners. Encourage them to post their questions and share solutions. Have an instructor/SME periodically monitor the site and contribute answers when needed. This gets learners teaching each other without *any* organizational content development effort. Share the resulting concerns/ideas using several of the above training vehicles.

This is one example of how an existing classroom course can readily be transformed into a complete multi-purposed learning package positioned for just-in-time, just-as-needed training. Offering this entire range of services can often cost far less than the investment required to spin off a portion of the course to self-study using a blended learning approach.

Recommendations: Start thinking about, “What do we have and how can we get more use out of it?” The goal is to find inexpensive ways to resolve another audience learning need in the most time-efficient and place-effective fashion.

Summary

New, low-cost, easy-to-use digital tools for capturing, producing, and distributing content have opened up a wide range of delivery options. Learning deliverables can now be hybrid combinations of content in a variety of formats, all with different characteristics for the learner. The tools no longer require highly specialized media producers or computer programmers to create high-value deliverables. And as *The Blair Witch Project* illustrated, compelling content overshadows the need for studio-level production values.

Therefore, training professionals need to rethink their instructional strategies. Blended learning isolates content into single-mode deliverables. This limits the overall benefit content can provide, fails to meet the time and place needs of the audience, and ignores the reality of learner retention decay.

Multi-purposed learning helps training professionals maximize the value of organizational intellectual capital, better meet learner needs, and increase retention and mastery—all while reducing training costs.

About the Author ...

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