

NARRATIVE AND THE CHALLENGE OF E-LEARNING

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A colleague of mine asked a group of people in a training session whether any of them had started an e-learning package, all hands went up. He then asked if any had finished an e-learning package, no hands went up! This reflects many people's experience of e-learning. It is no different from the book we put down or the programme we switch off, many e-learning packages simply aren't compelling enough to keep us engaged until the very end.

I have tested a variety of e-learning packages and if I could get to the end of the first module without copping out I was doing well. Certainly, the amount of learning appears relatively slight in relation to the time and effort required to acquire it. The training methodology is often pedantic, lacks variety and relies on cheesy reward statements to keep you motivated. Many of the packages are thinly disguised adaptations of stand up training courses and little effort has been made to take account of the very different learning situation.

I suggest here that e-learning materials fail for three main reasons. First they often lack any narrative content to engage the user's imagination. They fail to provide a context for the learning i.e. how the skills can improve your personal effectiveness and how others have benefited. And finally in the words of *The New Consumer*, they lack authenticity: people won't invest time in e-learning (or anything else) if they don't have complete faith in its credentials.

Narrative Works

We generally think of narrative only in the context of story telling. But narrative is just as relevant to writing copy for a brochure or devising the structure and content of a Web site. It's what keeps you turning the pages and exploring the links. Narrative enlists the audience's imagination, which is far more effective than trying to appeal to its intellect.

Humans don't simply prefer narrative to pure description, we are narrative junkies! We need our daily fix of narrative whether it's through news, soaps or gossip. But narrative also has an important biological purpose and has been shown to be essential to the acquisition of knowledge. We teach infants language and life skills largely through storytelling and play. Teachers and trainers use narrative in many different ways, often quite unconsciously. The use of storytelling and visioning techniques are helping businesses uncover the creativity of their employees, and the ideas that emerge are communicated across the organisation in narrative form. Viral marketing is a narrative in the form of gossip and it spreads like wildfire.

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Narrative has been understood as a way of structuring texts since Aristotle, but we also use narrative as a way of structuring our thoughts and language, something we do from our earliest years (Bruner, 1996; Engel, 1995; McNeil, 1996; Nelson, 1989). Narrative shapes our knowledge and experience and is central to the processes of teaching and learning because it aids reconstruction, retrospection, prediction and memory as well as motivation (Plowman, 1996b). Narrative is a structure which is used to generate and convey information and knowledge between people and is a solution to the problem of how to translate knowing into telling (Scholes, 1980).

There seems to be little information available concerning the effectiveness of commercial e-learning materials and most of the published research is in relation to their use in education. The ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council) funded Multimedia, Education and Narrative Organisation (MENO) is dedicated to the study of the use of interactive media in education. They summarise the effect of a lack of narrative in educational learning packages thus:

For interactive media, unlike traditional media, one of the key benefits is seen as being the lack of imposed structure, giving much greater freedom of control to the user. However, in the context of instruction, this benefit runs counter to the learner's need to discern structure if there is a message to be understood. We have found from observation that learners working on interactive media with no clear narrative structure display learning behaviour that is generally unfocused and inconclusive.

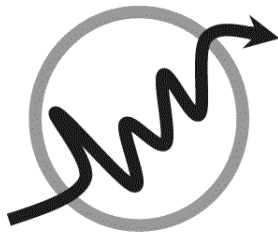
In a teaching situation, the relationship between teacher and student is fundamental to success of learning, so how is this exercised in an e-learning programme? Lydia Plowman refers here to observations of children using CD-ROM packages.

We do not get this sense of collusion between the author and user with CD-ROMs; if anything, our relationship with the designer is based on frustration. The user gets little assistance with construction of narrative and the secrets of multimedia are more likely to be unearthed serendipitously than as a result of special scrutiny. The invisible material on a CD-ROM has equal status to the visible. In a book all text is equally visible and accessible, but some sections of a CD-ROM can be so deeply embedded in a nested structure that a whole sequence of interactions is required to get deep into the text. ...The paradox is that all data on a CD-ROM is equally accessible to the computer. The deepness is an illusion, a fiction of the way the material is constructed, but an integral part of a technologically interactive text

as the illusion is determined by how many decisions and mouse clicks it takes to find the information.

Narrative as Landscape

With a bit of imagination, Aristotle's description of narrative as '...a sequence of events, the removal of any one of which would destroy the whole' can be applied just as well to interactive media. Bob Hughes in his paper *Narrative as Landscape* suggests that storytellers are actually guiding us through a three dimensional narrative landscape. The language of narrative certainly has many parallels with the language of navigation. Stories are full of twists and turns with diversions from the main story line. Writers get bogged down and readers lose their way. The idea of a narrative landscape suggests that the actual story told is one of many that could have emerged. Lewis Carol creates a fantastical narrative landscape in *Alice in Wonderland*. We know that more characters and stories would come to light if we were able to explore it further. The same goes for Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows*.



A story is not merely a series of linear events. It explores a narrative landscape that could theoretically be crossed by a variety of routes. In many computer games, the user explores a narrative landscape with the help of wizards and Voice of God instructions.

Lessons from Gamers

Non-linear narratives are the basis of most computer games. The player is the hero with clear goals, obstacles and rewards. He or she is assisted by friendly guides such as wizards and 'voice of God' instructions. The hunt for visual clues and the need to complete certain tasks all drive the narrative forward, opening up new levels for players to explore. And there are endless cheats that enable the player to rebel against the plot and share authorship of the narrative.

As a recent Gartner report indicated, the makers of e-learning materials have much to learn from the creators of computer games. However, it is unlikely that most publishers of e-learning materials, whose roots are mainly in

formal training, will have the necessary skills or bandwidth to make the leap to conceive their packages as learning experiences within a narrative landscape!

What's the Context?

It is hard work to deliver any message with out a context – that is its relevance to the recipient's circumstances and the world they live in? In advertising, the context is the product positioning - an insight into the aspirations of the people who might be attracted to a product such as femininity for a soap or success with girls for a deodorant. In the workplace, it may be the demand for people with particular skills or the changing nature of the workplace will make the skills on offer a valuable asset. Even if employees are instructed to participate in an e-learning, perhaps as part of their targets, they will still get more from it (and be motivated to complete it) if they believe that it will be personally rewarding or enhance their value in the job market.

Creating that context is the job of the training designer and should not be left to the employer or training manager. Time could we well spent at the beginning of a package to find out the user's perception of the value of the training to them and, where there are doubts, show why they might find it rewarding.

Users would appreciate an honest appraisal i.e. 'you are wasting your time here, try something else' or be told to only to complete selected modules. The dream of personalised and highly intuitive CBT is still some way off but deep down that's what people really expect from e-learning. Even within existing technology, there's much that can be done to make the experience more personal and relevant.

Authenticity and The New Consumer

As Lewis & Bridger point out in their book 'The Soul of the New Consumer', the scarcities in the New Economy are not products but 'time, attention and trust'. Unless e-learning courses come from respected academic institutions such as Harvard in the US or Cranfield in the UK, users have to rely on the publisher's credentials to provide authenticity. Another factor is that the authorship of most packages is anonymous. However, I would be far more interested if I knew something about the authors' background and experience. Even if they are not subject experts, I would like to know what lengths they went to make sure that the content represents the latest thinking.

E-mpperor's New Clothes

Most of the commentary about commercial e-learning is surprisingly anodyne and uncritical. Is this because so much invested in the success of e-learning?

It may suit a company to tick the staff training box with a low cost process that doesn't take people away from the workplace. Staff may also find it convenient or expedient to play along so we could be looking at a classical case of the E-mpperor's new clothes?

Perhaps e-learning is coming out of the wrong stables where issues such as narrative, context and authenticity are simply not understood or appreciated. Perhaps e-learning as a stand-alone process will really never work and that, as some people I talk to are beginning to realise, it should be regarded more as a training tool to be used in conjunction with face-to-face, on the job and computer based training.

REFERENCES

Narrative, Interactivity and the Secret World of Multimedia Lydia Plowman-Senior Research Fellow in the School of Cognitive & Computing Sciences at the University of Sussex.

The Soul of the New Consumer – David Lewis & Darren Bridger, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Bob Hughes paper, Narrative as Landscape can be found with other interesting papers on narrative and hypermedia on the site of MENO (Multimedia Education and Narrative Organisation).
<http://meno.open.ac.uk/ht97.html>

Bob Hughes own Web site can be found at <http://www.dustormagic.net/>

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Do you have a message to articulate, a business to develop, people to train? Do your marketing communications reflect your true value? If not, it may be time to get creative with your communication.