E-Learning in Support of Change

by Patrick Lambe

This article will look at how e-learning can support a change management programme. This might be a difficult issue to unravel from the change management challenges associated with an e-learning implementation itself. The rule of thumb on this is quite clear: if you are undergoing major changes, and e-learning itself is not going to help you significantly, then don't do it. Wait until you can address the specific change management challenges of e-learning in their own right. The aim of this article is to help you judge whether e-learning will help or hinder your bigger changes.

Change as a Driver for E-learning

E-learning's association with change is an interesting one. Change itself is one of the key drivers for e-learning adoption. In the rapidly moving industries of IT and telecommunications for example, there are large, complex, globally distributed value chains, from component suppliers to manufacturers to service providers to sales outlets to customers. When products and product features change every three to six months, we need faster, deeper means of disseminating knowledge about these new products. Manuals and classroom training sessions will no longer do the job.

In the banking and finance industries, globalization and deregulation mean that rules and regulations can change overnight. In the sensitive world of money, there are few grace periods for complete compliance, and the costs of non-compliance can be heavy. How does a globally distributed bank ensure that all its employees know the new rules – and can apply them to their processes – practically overnight?

When large companies merge or are acquired, you typically have a 30 day window for complete line management integration – anything longer than that will see bad haemorrhaging of employees and customers. But mergers and acquisitions are shady, back door deals, shrouded in secrecy. You don't get much warning or time to prepare in sensitive market conditions. How then do processes, procedures and the new merged vision get disseminated? A 30,000 employee enterprise in 60 countries has a severe challenge using traditional learning methods.

In this fast moving world, large enterprises need to learn faster and more frequently than ever before. And as with so many other things, the ability to technologize our learning, distribute it on the web for 24/7 access, and the ability to update it globally at any time, seems a compelling proposition.

What E-learning can do

So much for the theory. Now let's look at what e-learning can – or can't – do for you. E-learning can span a wide range of tools and options. Figure 1 shows some of the ways that e-learning can be delivered, divided broadly into whether your solution is going to be more group-based versus individual self-study, or whether you need to have people scheduled to be online all at the same time (synchronous) or they interact at different times, as in a web-bulletin board (asynchronous).

© Patrick Lambe 2002

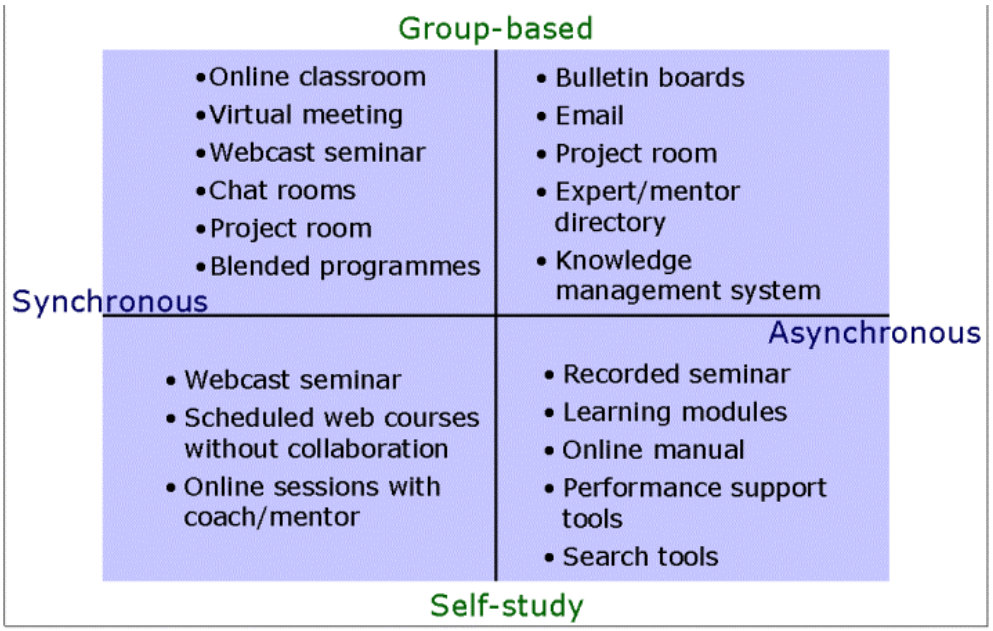

Fig 1. The E-Learning Portfolio

The main thing to notice about this division of e-learning types, is that e-learning performs a slightly different role in each quadrant (see Figure 2). In the group-based synchronous environment you have something closest to the traditional modes of learning and training, but you can also enable more collaborative, team-based activities and projects. The group-based asynchronous environment comes closer to the learning environment provided by a learning portal or a knowledge management system. Team knowledge and learning can be shared or posted, but there are no “live” meetings where people gather at the same time. The asynchronous self-study quadrant is more focused on specific job support, and provides information rather than interactive or collaborative learning. Finally, the synchronous self-study quadrant performs more of a broadcast role.

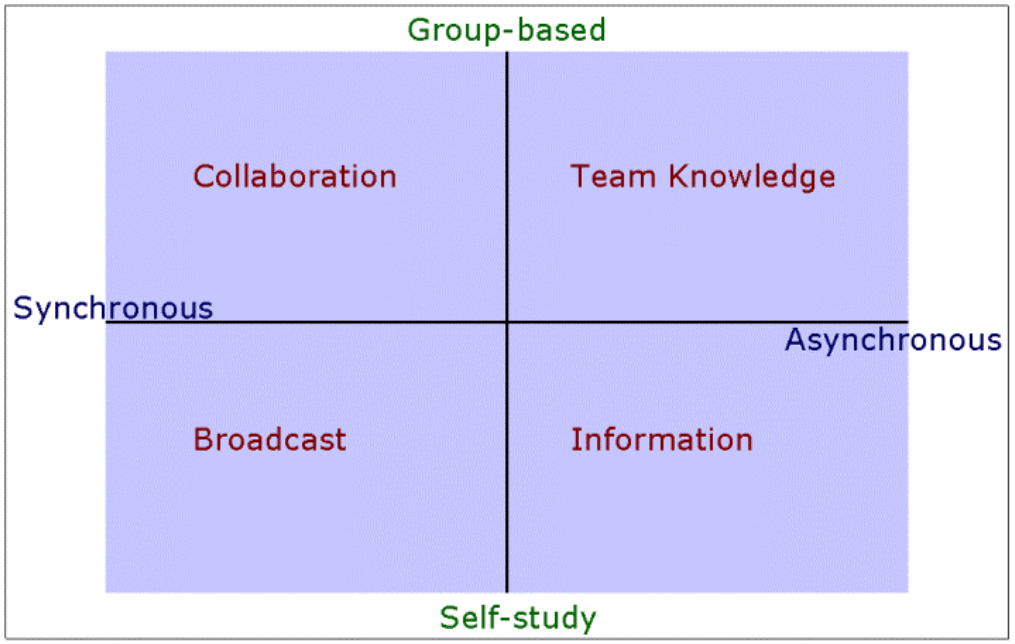

Fig 2. E-Learning Roles

What E-learning can't do

In a little while, we'll look at what happens to people in the midst of rapid and deep change, and what their learning (and other) needs turn out to be. Before we do that, it's worth considering one more critical feature of anything online that involves communication of knowledge.

Ever since the early days of the ARPANET, researchers have noticed that human interaction changes when it goes online. In the 1980s a team of researchers at MIT explored how people communicate and collaborate online (Sproull and Kiesler, *Connections*, 1991). They reached some interesting conclusions. For example, they found that social and behavioural cues that we use in face to face interaction are largely filtered out online, because they are visual and auditory cues. We may "read" the status of our interlocutors through how they dress (expensive suit and tie?) and how they speak (highly educated accent?). Except for the most thick skinned of us, we learn how to take visual cues from our conversation partner, and modify our communications accordingly. If their eyes are preoccupied elsewhere, we may speak more loudly to gain their attention, or try to make our content more interesting. We pick up very quickly any slight cues that tell us we are annoying our partner.

This has a big impact on how we behave in meetings. We give visual cues when we want to indicate that we have something to say, and this will prompt the current speaker either to let us speak, or block us out. Sproull and Kiesler found that in face to face meetings, the opinions of the most highly ranked person present was most likely to influence the final decision of the group. When we go online, such visual and auditory cues are filtered out. Even online video conferencing gives poor visual definition and screens out a lot of the more subtle signals we use to moderate how we interact.

This has some significant effects – some of them positive, some of them negative. For example, online meetings screen out a lot of the status signals that exist in real space. Participants tend to be more forthcoming, and decisions are reached more often on the basis of the perceived competency of the speakers, rather than on their status. Where lower-ranking people are often quiet in face to face meetings, online they can make much bigger contributions.

Negatively, the lack of moderating emotional cues often results in extreme, undifferentiated emotional responses. "Flaming" is a term for extreme aggression online, and it is most commonly prompted by an unintended and misunderstood comment. Email miscommunications are universal. In one experiment with students conducted at MIT, passions ran so high that the students (who were in individual cubicles) had to be escorted from the building by security staff one by one, lest they meet face to face, and turn virtual rage into real rage.

Discussions are also harder to manage and bring to a convergent conclusion or decision online. Online discussions tend to be a series of broadcast messages from participants, rather than a chained sequence of utterances and reflections or reactions upon those utterances. People find it hard to "listen" online, for the simple reason that we "listen" mostly with our eyes and ears. In the early 1970s American psychologist Alfred Meherabian discovered that in any communications that had emotional

content, up to 93% of how we understood the other person's intended message, was drawn from visual and auditory cues. Only 7% came from the actual words used. Translate this insight to the medium of the web, where almost all communication even now is via text, and we begin to understand how difficult complex communication and learning might be.

The online medium is not full of negatives as we have seen. But where complex and emotion-laden communications are concerned, face to face is our only strong measure, followed at some distance by the telephone call. Online communication via text is extremely weak where we need to have impact. Figure 3 below shows some of the communications that suit face to face contact, and some of the things that online contact can deal with relatively well.

Face to Face	Online
•negotiation	•briefing
•persuasion	•informing
•counselling	•advice
•confusion	•support
•conflict	•slow decisions
•convergence	•parallel processes
•urgent decisions	•questioning
•innovation	•polling
•listening	•investigating
•influencing	•creativity
•selling	•broadcasting
•focus	•discovery

Fig 3. Communication effectiveness

Supporting Change with E-learning

Finally to the management of change. Interestingly, the list of activities in Figure 3 above also captures pretty comprehensively a lot of the activities you'll need to engage in during a change management programme. In fact, in many change programmes, the broadcasting, communication and information provision is absolutely critical to employee needs. E-learning can perform this role intelligently and effectively, if well designed.

But more important to note is that in many change environments, uncertainty, insecurity, anger, nervousness and confusion are very common. The provision of online content and tools cannot completely provide for employee needs in the domain of emotions. Face to face support is absolutely essential. If e-learning is to be used at all in this domain, it is as a communications and collaboration extension to strong relationships and teams founded on regular face to face contact. E-learning can be a powerful support to collaboration (as we saw above) but only based on strong, pre-existing relationships, regularly fed by face to face contact.

A final word. Few work environments are ready for large-scale e-learning implementations. There will be barriers and impediments that will themselves need a change management strategy of their own. To avoid overload, make sure that your e-learning programme is geared intelligently to help and resource your employees through change, and not to challenge them into further misery and confusion.

© Patrick Lambe 2002