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Think “Exciting”: E-Learning and the Big “E”

By Bernard Luskin

- The exploding new media and communications environment has implications for the future of both K–12 and adult learning as media, technology, and learning psychology increasingly become tools for learning in and outside the classroom.
- The new research area of media studies, i.e., the study of media effects, includes media psychology because an understanding of human behavior is vital to the effective use of technology in education.
- The “e” in e-learning means much more than “electronic” when applied to e-learning — think instead of a big “E” for “exciting, energetic, engaging, extended” learning.

Technology, globalization, and new knowledge about how people learn are having dramatic effects on diverse approaches to teaching and learning worldwide.¹ Most of the literature about these changes refers to physical technology, however, such as computers, iPods, iPhones, MP3 players, and the overall proliferation of gadgets and gizmos.

The exploding new media and communications environment has implications for the future of both K–12 and adult learning as media and technology increasingly become tools for learning in and outside the classroom. Media studies provide a frame for the situation, including research into the devices being used, who is using them, how they are being used, and their effectiveness.² Both educators and technology experts need to understand not just the hardware but also the “wetware” of human behavior in response to technology-supported teaching and learning. Theories of psychology and active learning are growing in importance and represent strategic advances underlying the progress now being made. Many theories apply, and technology professionals should study psychology to understand how media elements (pictures, graphics, and sound) combine to influence behavior. “Pay attention” has meaning. Think about it.

A Broader Definition of “E”

New online teaching organizations, schools, and colleges increasingly use diverse technology. I am on the Board of Trustees of [HiTechHi L.A.](#), for example, a California high school that exemplifies the successful use of blended learning and computer learning in education. I also follow and participate in the debate about the various devices and technologies. As a learning psychologist, I believe it is important to open our minds to a broader definition and understanding of the “e” in e-learning. To many, the “e” means electronic, but I assert that the “e” means *more* than electronic when applied to e-learning. It actually means “exciting, empirical, empathetic, extra, emerging, energetic, exceptional, early, eloquent, everywhere, ephemeral, extended, effortless, epic, evangelistic, eclectic, engaging, extended” learning — and more. The point is that e-learning may be individual, tutorial, a significant part of a mentoring process, and a tool for personal communication that is not well understood. I want to help make the case that there is a new learning psychology in which the “e” has vastly broader implications. The psychology of media is an important emerging field, and an understanding of psychology is central to the most effective use of new media in society.³

In support of this position, note that magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) research into behavior, along with more sophisticated methods, advances learning psychology, including our understanding of “the ways and the why’s” people learn and grow. The new learning psychology draws on existing theories in psychology and applies to e-media in facilitating learning. As I wrote in 2006:

*Media studies include media psychology. Why? It is no longer sufficient to combine money with technology and creativity to achieve a successful product. An understanding of human behavior is crucial as well. University courses in media psychology include topics like the physiology and psychology of learning, cognitive and sensory psychology, theories of trying, success, persuasion and attention.*⁴

Examples of theories in psychology that follow are not specific or unique to media or to learning. Nonetheless, these examples of concepts and theories in learning psychology and human behavior must be understood for e-learning to continue to improve. We must open our minds and understand that it is not the *how* of the “e” that drives changes, but the *excitement* of the “e” as it stimulates behavior. If we study theories of learning and think of them in the context of a big “E” for learning, we think of theories of motivation, success, intelligence, mastery, psycho-visualization, believability, color, sound, cognition, repetition and attention, personality, semantics, persuasion, and control. Then we can begin to realize the implications that arise from recognizing the potential of these theories in transforming opportunities for learning. As Marshall McLuhan said, the medium is both message and massage.⁵ McLuhan also understood that it is the behaviors — the human responses — that reveal the effects achieved through media and communications.

A New, Blended Model

Media, communications, and learning psychology combine in a new growth area. The first blended model of master’s and doctoral programs in Media Psychology were launched by Fielding Graduate University in 2002. PhD and EdD graduates of the Media Psychology and Media Studies program at Fielding are now teaching in other colleges and universities. New programs also have been launched at NYU, The New School, Touro University, The University of Michigan, and UCLA. In addition, the growth of [Media Psychology](#), Division 46 of the American Psychology Association, fosters media in learning as a priority. A stated objective is to:

Support research on the effects of media on the public, and the effectiveness of media in transmitting psychological information.

Stuart Fischhoff provides a personal definition:

*[M]edia psychology is concerned with the inter- and intra-personal psychological dimensions underlying the impact and use of any medium of communication, irrespective of the nature of the subject matter being communicated.*⁶

Media Psychology has also attracted the attention of the community of family therapists, and media and the family is a growing area of professional attention. New programs have launched worldwide in learning, media, and communications psychology, as well. A search for qualified faculty is under way, looking for those with the skills to develop, launch, and teach in these new programs. Educational institutions will need faculty and staff who understand higher concepts in the media arts and sciences and how to apply them for effective learning.

Tools of the Future

Much of the discussion about e-learning still revolves around gadgets and gizmos — the important devices that we use in daily life. I would suggest simply that individuals in all segments of educational leadership take steps to advance progress in education by including in their conversations how to:

- Apply theories of behavior
- Add the human experience

Technology administrators, CIOs, CLOs, academic administrators, and educational leaders at all levels should make conscious efforts to facilitate the understanding of why new technology is having behavioral effects on society, on individuals, and in products entering markets. Let's think about why people behave the way they do as we recognize that the meaning of e-learning will continue to evolve far beyond the small "e = electronic" to fulfill the promise of the big "E = exciting."

Endnotes

1. Bernard J. Luskin, *Casting the Net over Global Learning: New Developments in Workforce and Online Psychologies* (Santa Ana, CA: Griffin Publishing, 2002).
2. Bernard J. Luskin, "Professional Development: Who Might Today's CIO Be Tomorrow?" *Greentree Gazette* (May 2006), p. 44.
3. Bernard J. Luskin, "[Media Psychology: A Field Whose Time Is Here](#)," *The California Psychologist*, (May/June 2003).
4. Luskin, "Who Might Today's CIO Be Tomorrow?"
5. See the [FAQs for Marshall McLuhan's work](#), which explain the seeming mistake in "the medium is the message" and other points of his philosophy.
6. Stuart Fischhoff, "[Media Psychology: A Personal Essay in Definition and Purview](#)," 2005.

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