

# What's a Trainer to Do?

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## ABSTRACT

The advent of web-based training has brought new challenges to the world of the trainer; indeed, in some places the acquisition of web-based courseware has meant the elimination of training departments. However, many organizations are now looking toward a “blended solution” where e-learning is integrated into training programs to create more numerous and more diverse options. This paper looks at web-based training from the trainer’s perspective and focuses on three considerations. First, taking a close-up look at the product itself, I will consider not only the question How does the product compare with what we feel learning is? but also, How is the product evolving in the short period of time it has been in existence? In short, what is our selected vendor delivering? Second, answering the question “Now that we’ve bought it, what do we do with it?” I will consider the trainer’s role in bringing about a blended solution. How do we market it to our learners and how do we use it with our courses? Finally, what is the impact of web-based training on our learning community and their perception of us as training providers? Who is using it? What is the dropout rate? What is it that promotes learner retention? What new expectations for training and training organizations are surfacing as a result of web-based training?

## Keywords

Web-based training, Instructor-led training, “blended-solution”, Return on Investment.

## 1. TRENDINESS

Whereas academia is not always subjected to the same waves and trends as the corporate world, as institutions of learning, it is our responsibility to keep pace with the changes, take part in them, and evaluate them, especially when they are directly related to learning itself. The Training and Publications team within Information Systems at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) has been investigating first, computer-based (CBT) and now web-based training (WBT) options for over three years.

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A few years ago, there was a trend toward having all training being offered via the web. Cost reduction, reaching a distributed workforce, round-the-clock access to information, and consistency of learning were among its many intended goals. The jargon even changed: the “T-word” (training) seemed to disappear and was replaced by “e-learning.” However web-based training was not as successful as had been hoped. Student motivation, incentive and retention were all problems. In fact, designers became concerned whether they had really considered the learner’s perspective. Indeed, for some, this form of delivery of training was even more intimidating than the classroom. As a result, a blended solution was sought whereby web-based training would be integrated with other forms of learning and where the individual’s style of learning would be taken into consideration. In turn, the role of WBT was recouched in the discussion of the life-long learner.[1]

As a member of the Boston Consortium, M.I.T. reviewed several WBT products and joined in a purchase agreement with other area schools. Despite the varying audiences among our schools (see this conference’s panel titled “Building Bridges for Learning Within and Between Organizations”), our search was narrowed down to three vendors. After testing and evaluation, ElementK was selected. M.I.T. embarked upon this project not as a means to save money or to replace current training, but instead to offer yet another vehicle for delivering training to the workplace and to offer yet a broader spectrum of training opportunities.

Since the introduction of first CBT and then WBT, we have watched the evolution of this form of delivering training. Initially lessons were broken into short modules where the learner read small chunks of information in boxes that were positioned in front of screen shots. The lessons required clicking to advance frames of information. There were arrows and descriptions, and sometimes animation. These were not programs overloaded with fancy animation or audio. Initially there was very little difference between the online courses and the instruction manuals that were available from the same vendor and the fact that there was technology behind it seemed superfluous. Some vendors had offered the ability to bookmark or annotate lessons for purposes of navigation and retention, but this was not the case here. So usually you had to either finish the entire module in one sitting or return to your previous location by repeatedly clicking on the navigational arrows. Software crashes were not unusual, stranding learners with no other recourse than to step through each screen until they arrived back to where they were before the crash. When the program expects the student to perform a particular activity and he or she is either unable to do it or does it incorrectly, the program prompts you to “Try Again” or “Do it For Me”. When

you choose “Do it For Me,” the task is performed and you are automatically advanced to the next screen. In the process, you don’t see how the task is performed. This aspect of the program is changing in the next version to give a simulated demonstration of how the task is performed. Skill assessment tests allow a student to determine what material he or she needs to focus on or to judge his or her level of expertise. The tests are comprised of a series of multiple choice questions which vary with each exam and which when scored tell the student which modules to study. Instructor-led courses have also been added to the self-study offerings. In this type of class, the student purchases a text, corresponds with the instructor in a threaded discussion environment, answers exam questions, takes field trips by following hyperlinks, and posts results of assigned projects to a webpage.

## 2. “INFORMATION IS NOT LEARNING”[2]

So what is the student’s experience in this kind of environment? Learning is passive on many counts. One is expected to read and absorb. Or is it to read and take notes? This form of instruction is not too different from self-paced instruction manuals except that you are now lacking the ease of navigation that a book offers: the ability to look forward and back; to browse and scan; to consult an index, a table of contents, or glossary; to follow those hyperlinks that naturally crop up in an inquisitive mind. What else has been lost? Interactivity and the basics features that have been built into software applications over the last decade that allow for discovery (tool tips for example) are missing. The static nature of the screen shots does not provide someone with the ability to explore the possibilities of the question “what happens when I push this button?” or to investigate contingencies when wondering “can I also do this?”

In addition to the tediousness of this experience there is a kind of a removal from the product itself. Is one really gaining practice at using the software in this environment? Regardless of how much memory your computer has or your skill at multitasking, the process of moving between an online learning course and the live product is cumbersome. It leaves one wondering whether maybe having two machines working simultaneously might be the ideal setup for doing web-based learning or whether indeed web-based training is a suitable means for learning how to use computer applications. Maybe other fields such as Human Relations lend themselves better to this form of presentation.

And what kind of learners have we become? Over the years of unending upgrades and new products, we have become pretty good at teaching ourselves. Beginning users will need a more guided introduction. Proponents of web-based training and blended solutions are now creating “Learn How to Learn Online” programs to precede web-based training.[3] But isn’t this just one more layer of training, accentuating how unnatural or unintuitive WBT currently is?

Two kinds of learners I have encountered in my work whom I would consider are good candidates for WBT are:

- The Reverse Engineer: This is the person who takes a final product produced by the software and works backwards; taking it apart and seeing how it was put together. In the process, he or she discovers what tasks were required to create it. References include user guides, reference manuals,

help files, and most importantly, a mentor who can give pointers and critique along the way.

- The Autodidact: This is the person who is motivated by a project and a deadline. Maybe he or she needs to create a newsletter, a slide show, or a website. A student in one of my hands-on classes told me that the way she learns a new application is that she buys two books on the same subject, and comparing the two presentations of the information, she teaches herself how to use it well enough to complete the project. However, she asserts that taking an instructor-led class has more expedient results.

In both of these cases there is a high-level of interactivity and discovery on the part of the learner. Learning is case-based. With WBT, exercises and files are internal to the application. One does not have the ability to deconstruct a report and reconstruct it again.

As courseware evolves in WBT, more interactivity is appearing. Beyond the mere multiple choice questions that initially comprised the only form of interactivity, courses are beginning to allow you to peruse menus and simulations allow you to perform tasks. Arrows added to screen shots guide us to the choices we are to make or the place we are to click thereby allowing us to be lead through the lessons without paying too much attention. The need to get familiar with all the parts of a screen or to find things yourself in the interface can get lost as we are so passively led. Today, isn’t one of our most important skills the ability to visually scan a screen, sort through the information there and home in on what is significant?

The advantages of web-based training are exactly as every vendor has told us: it is available 24x7 and there is an extensive list of course offerings. Additionally, as long as the vendor keeps pace with the changing software market, the student can take advantage of the most current versions and upgrades on the market. This is true of ElementK. Within days of the release of Photoshop 6, there were several levels of courses available and the ability to sign up for the upcoming instructor-led course. Office XP was released May 31st and June 1st a “New features in XP” course was available.

Another step in the evolutionary process of the product has been the addition of other online resources. These include Books 24x7 and Brainbench.

Books 24x7 provides the ability to read books online and print out chapters if you so desire. This is especially nice given the high price and ephemeral nature of this kind of book today. You can leave bookmarks to return to later and you can build your own virtual bookshelf of materials you wish to have on hand for reference. It also includes a very powerful search engine that allows you to search by subject across books. This way you can compare and contrast what authors may have to say about a particular topic. This has become one of the most attractive features of our web-based training application. But one must ask, are we ultimately using this product as an “e-reference” rather than as a vehicle for e-learning? To reiterate, information is not learning.

Brainbench is an online skills testing and certification authority. Here you can practice for and take exams. You can earn certification that is recognized in the field. The presence of this

service could potentially build incentive or motivation into the product. With the ability to acquire something that is transferable, one may feel more inclined to pursue more training via ElementK.

### 3. “NOW THAT WE’VE BOUGHT IT, WHAT DO WE DO WITH IT?”

So what is a trainer to do now that a product has been acquired that could possibly bring about the demise of his or her job? As trainers in the academic world we can be thankful that it is not our job to be obsessed with the return on investment (ROI) of this new product. But nonetheless, in our role as trainer we can be integral in raising that return on investment through our own teachings. Rather than sabotage a product by finding all of its shortcomings and faults, one strategy is for the trainer to promote its strong points and to work towards bringing about a blended solution.

Once we acquired ElementK, the issue became how to promote it to our client community. We publicized it through our usual channels such as the Information Systems newsletter, the Training web page, and announcements and emailings to client groups. After brainstorming we came up with several other means, two of which were publicizing it in our instructor-led training courses and offering periodic hands-on workshops in its use.

By bringing the WBT option to the attention of the attendees in our instructor-led training courses, they became aware of the availability of other forms of learning. This population is an important factor in knowing whether this is an effective learning tool in the workplace and an important indicator of whether we should renew this contract. Courseware can be used as a pre-class exercise. It can aid a student in keeping pace with an instructor-led course that might have been a bit fast. It can take the edge off of the initial strangeness of a new topic and skill set. It provides a foundation in terminology and competencies that could enhance the in-class experience. Couldn’t this ultimately allow us to redesign our own courses to be more challenging or to be more in the style of case-based learning?

For some, WBT course materials can be used as a post-class experience. Some may want to review a topic that they didn’t thoroughly grasp. It can be a good review for the individual who was unable to go back to the office and immediately apply those things we practiced and learned in the classroom. With WBT, a student can run through a few modules and refresh his or her knowledge of the topic. For all its shortcomings as being more an e-reference rather than e-learning tool, we as trainers can exploit its e-reference value. Ideally, it would be nice to be able to point students to the exact modules that they should consult, like assigning a homework chapter. This implies that we know the materials within ElementK fairly intimately, an ambitious project in itself. It therefore becomes incumbent upon the trainer to constantly participate in web-based learning. We become product testers and content testers.

The skills assessment tool that comes with some—unfortunately, not yet all—courses can be used as pre- and post-class reference tools to gauge skill level. Students can be encouraged to use this tool prior to taking a course in order to judge their own level. They can judge whether a particular course is appropriate to the level of competency. This also implies that our own skill

assessment tools are in place for the courses we offer and that our course descriptions are accurate and in place.

The hands-on workshop is yet another marketing tool. In response to the debates of the last decade as to whether the trainer should be “The Sage on the Stage” or the “Guide on the Side,” here we trainers find ourselves in both roles. Our experience with the product allows us to tell them of gold that is to be had and to show them where and how to mine it.

Our workshop is only one hour in length and offered at noontime in order to reach the same audience we do with our standard monthly events. Students receive an account and log into ElementK. I begin with a tour of the website and an overview of what is available. It is a walk around a cybercampus: you see the facilities and you receive a course catalog. Even in a web-based world, with all its alleged conveniences, the handheld tour is a timesaver and a selling point for many prospective users. Students are introduced to the operational side of things too: making sure Shockwave is installed, turning sound off or on, changing passwords, and showing them where to go when their course list disappears after they are absent for a while. Students are introduced to the kinds of courses that are available and what they can anticipate. Here I demonstrate the difference between a self-study course and an instructor-led course. A visit to a new course or a higher-level course illustrates the fact that greater interactivity can be found than in the early Word and Excel courses. We visit Books 24x7 with a demonstration of a subject search (good examples are “mail merge” or “pivot tables”) that shows how one can view and access material across several different books. Students are then encouraged to enroll in a course and see what the courses look like. I share my experiences with them, what I felt worked for me, what I found valuable. They have contact with a person to whom they can address their questions and problems.

As trainers, we are not responsible for measuring return on investment, but it is our job to be aware of efficiency in learning. In our instructor-led courses, how do we best use the class time so that our students leave competent in key skills? Time is our most precious commodity these days, and everything seems to be competing for our it: whether it is our families requesting our presence, the best sellers begging to be read, our garden begging to be more beautiful, or our careers demanding us to be more highly skilled. Therefore, after asking the question “are they learning?” we must also ask, “given the investment of time, how much are our students learning?” Is clicking through little information boxes the way to go? And what about retention rate? Our statistics show that the vast majority of the people who request accounts log into them once and then do not return.

Should we as trainers be concerned with retention rate? Definitely our vendor should be concerned if not specifically with retention rate then with number and length of log ins. After all, maybe this is an environment where start-to-finish accomplishment of courses is no longer relevant; that our students are going to be going in and out of classes, learning some HTML here, experimenting with the new features of Photoshop there. In an article “How to Keep E-Learners from E-scaping,” James Moshinskic[4] looks at the issue of motivation and makes some important recommendations. The audience for these recommendations, however, is the instructional designers, managers, and learners rather than trainers. But of note to the trainer are three of his suggestions:

provide the human touch, make it timely, and stimulate curiosity. All three of these are objectives of the hands-on workshop. The student gets a personal introduction to the e-learning environment and has someone to whom they can ask their questions or voice their problems. By introducing the student to the course offerings and making them aware of the vendor's promptness in responding to market change, learners now have a key to some "just-in-time-training." To stimulate a learner's curiosity, a trainer can demonstrate the positive features of the product and make it attractive to learners in a way that a salesperson may not. The trainer can address the learner's inner question of "what's in it for me?"

And finally, as trainers we can establish a working relationship with our vendor. We can alert them to the things we like and don't like. We can submit our wish list of things we would like to see. We can relay our students' reactions to them. WBT is still evolving and we trainers have the potential to affect that evolution. In her article "E-Trainer Evolution," Rossett says that "Conventional boundaries are starting to erode as publishers, universities, and startups redefine themselves, seeking ways to be THE education, training, and information provider." [5] We as trainers naturally cross over these boundaries in our endeavor to deliver learning to our clients and to transform information into learning.

#### **4. THE IMPACT OF WEB-BASED TRAINING ON OUR LEARNING COMMUNITY**

After only a year's experience with the current vendor, what changes are we seeing? What new expectations for training and training organizations are surfacing as a result of web-based training?

We have seen no decrease in enrollment in our instructor-led courses as a result of WBT. What change is happening is occurring in our very distributed workforce. Individuals are discovering the potentials of WBT and deciding for themselves whether they wish to embrace this as a form of learning. Many of those engaging in e-learning at our site are those that currently feel the need or motivation to enhance their competencies, their skill sets. One type of client who is responding favorably to the availability of online courseware is the extremely motivated high-end user. They may be preparing for system administration certification exams, learning or refreshing programming skills, or simply keeping pace with innovation in the field. Others, involved in web publishing for example, appreciate the variety of course offerings that enhance their current level of expertise. In the workshops, I am encountering new employees who want to get as much training under their belts as fast as possible.

As I have mentioned above, there are many implications or challenges for the trainer with the mere existence of web-based training materials. How can our classes make up for the shortcomings in lack of interactivity in the course materials? Can we assume a better-prepared student with the availability of online courseware? Bringing about a blended solution implies our embracing these new materials and making links to them from our own classroom instruction. For our own effectiveness we are

encouraged to continually hone our course descriptions and our skill assessment tools.

Conceivably, we could experience requests for online courses that are specific to our environment that are not offered through our vendor, such as our data warehouse query and report applications or our financial application package. The mention of the availability of WBT has brought in a few odd-ball lurkers from across the Internet wondering if they can take the instructor classes we offer on a web-based basis or if they can enroll in our instructor led courses in a distance learning capacity. However, in this first year of rolling out WBT, our clients' perception of us as training providers has not changed.

#### **5. SUMMARY: "WHATEVER WORKS FOR YOU"**

So what's a trainer to do?

1. Know what is there. Evaluate the content and the form. Determine what you can use and what you can assign.
2. Given this content and form, determine how the classroom experience can be improved upon. What are those things that only we as live trainers can offer?
3. Get to know your clients and their learning styles. You can recommend ways that they can productively use or not use this product.
4. Get to know your vendor. It is still early in the game; our opinions and criticisms can help shape the next version.

#### **6. REFERENCES**

- [1] Bob Mosher, Executive Director of Education at ElementK, put forward this new model in his presentation "Blended Solutions: Getting the Best of EVERYTHING!" at the Training 2001 conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in March, 2001.
- [2] Quoting a remark made by Dr. M. David Merrill in a 1998 *Training* magazine article, Kevin Kruse takes this as the title of his article in *ASTD Learning Circuits*, February 2001. [http://www.learningcircuits.org/feb2000/feb2000\\_webrules.html](http://www.learningcircuits.org/feb2000/feb2000_webrules.html). Here he proposes a model for WBT based on Robert Gagne's "event of instruction" and some of the basic tenets of adult learning.
- [3] Two such programs are delineated by Jennifer Hoffman in "Learning How to Learn Online" (a chapter from her book *The Synchronous Trainer's Survival Guide*, <http://www.insynctraining.com/pages/books.html>, May 2000) and Nuala Sweeney in "eLearning 1.0. How to be an E-Learner" (*ASTD Learning Circuits*, May 2001. <http://www.learnngcircuits.org/2001/au2001/learn.html>).
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