4 Mistakes I Made Creating
My First eLearning Course

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Excerpt

Many of us think the transition of live workshop courseware to eLearning is as easy as recording an existing PowerPoint for viewing on a LMS website. I made plenty of mistakes attempting to create a self-study course directly from a traditional, live classroom course. It is easy to underestimate the courseware preparation and content differences between eLearning and traditional classroom learning.

4 Mistakes Creating an eLearning Course

My company, Leading Software Maniacs, has been involved for quite some time creating and presenting innovative live workshops for software developers and managers on how to lead teams to deliver projects on time. Workshops are usually created as a set of slides and is usually accompanied with printed handouts for the student. Before creating an eLearning course, I should have marked down the key characteristics of live classroom workshops:

- Set time and location

- Interaction expected between the instructor and students

- Presentation pace depends on how well the students are following the content

- Attendees are involved with the same material at the same time

- Exercises designed to involve all attendees

- Handout material is usually a replica of the course content (thumbnails of the slides)

The workshop is presented by loading the slideshow on a computer connected to a projector onto a screen. These basic characteristics have a definite influence on how courseware is designed, created, and presented.

An eLearning course, however, usually consists of a video with instructor voiceover that is streamed to each student's computing device. Some eLearning courses include a downloadable handout (usually a PDF) and an online mechanism at the end of the class that performs a final test. The course is then made available for student viewing utilizing the services of a learning management system (LMS). Although some LMS systems support the ability for multiple participants to collaborate, the current state of the art LMS assumes individual self-study, self-directed student involvement. Some key characteristics of an eLearning course includes the following:

- There is no set time, students can sign up and view courses whenever they want

- There is no interaction with other students

- Exercises designed for groups won't work for eLearning

- Handouts shouldn't rely on a speaker

I made plenty of mistakes creating my first eLearning course, but four of them really stick out.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

When you create workshop material (usually with PowerPoint or Keynote), there is a tendency to build your slideshows using the default page size common to most projectors that you intend to use. Traditionally, a 4:3 aspect ratio (1,024 x 768 pixels) should work with any and all equipment. The projector dictates what your courseware layout format should be.

When creating an eLearning course, you can't predict what computing device the user will be using so the layout must conform to the device's display characteristics the user wants to view it on. For example, Lynda.com's browser interface assumes that you are going to use a desktop or laptop computer with a 16:9 aspect ratio full screen display. (An aspect ratio is basically the relationship between display width and display height.)

With mLearning (mobile learning) becoming popular, a tablet typically reverts back to the old 4:3 aspect ratio and viewing a wide screen presentation will have black bars at the top and bottom of your display. DigitalChalk, one of many LMS providers, allows you to create slide content that utilizes either format. And, if you think you can easily create a sophisticated slideshow that automatically supports both aspect ratio, think again. In creating my first eLearning course, I chose a format that wasn't used by most of my students and received negative feedback that the presentation didn't look good. (I will devote a future article on an approach to solve this very subject.)

Use the Best Equipment You Can Afford

The old adage that "you get what you pay for" is especially true when selecting tools for eLearning content creation. Most Windows and OS X (Mac) systems have a built-in means to record what is being displayed on your screen as long as you won't have to edit your recording later. The built-in microphone is good enough for Skype and should be good enough for eLearning content, right? Both of those assumptions are incorrect and, in my experience, if you don't dazzle your prospective student with decent quality video and audio, you will lose them as future customers.

We have all watched eLearning courses that the voice sounds too distant, has way to many "ums" and "ughs," is too loud (or too low), or is plagued with hiss or background traffic roar. You could rent out a professional recording studio. For most of us, that option is too expensive and requires extensive planning to minimize the time you are in the studio. My first recording quality was horrible.

I needed great screen video recording and post-production software and although I wanted to subscribe to use Adobe Captivate, I chose Techsmith's Camtasia instead. No more "ums" or "ughs" mistakes and no more lengthy pauses—Camtasia makes professional editing effortless.

Audio was a different problem. I gave up on using the built-in computer microphones and tried several microphones and finally realized that the best option was a USB powered headset with microphone. There are tons of USB headsets available on the market, but I found a winner from a little-known German company called beyerdynamic: the MMX 300 or its baby brother, the MMX 2. Both deliver great recording quality, but my favorite is still the MMX 300. Avoid headsets aimed for the gamer community and select one that is specifically designed for high-quality voice recordings.

Ditch Group Exercises

In live workshops, a common technique to ensure that students comprehend the material being taught is to split up into teams and to run through a group exercise. Although I have met instructors who believe their secret is to teach only 20 percent of the time (and let the students perform work the remainder 80 percent of classroom time), group exercises can help with retention of material. Training, whether live classroom or eLearning) won't be successful if the material isn't retained and without instructor-led involvement, students can easily become frustrated performing long, ill-defined exercises with fellow tablemates they don't even know.

Still, well-designed exercises can have significant impact for content retention. I restructured group exercises to somehow work for individuals at key points in an eLearning course. The result surprised me: it confused the student. Whereas some courseware developers simply skip exercises altogether and assume that a multiple choice test at the end of the eLearning course is good enough.

I found that including specific breaks in the course video for the self-study student to take a quiz. In fact, the more quizzes the better. Gamification of eLearning material is also a great opportunity to turn probing questions into a fun game (with the use of a computer game app or even a simple board game). The more I learn about the benefits of gamification, the more I am excited about its future in learning and eLearning.

Handouts Should Emphasize Content Retention

Handout material is often a simple export of PowerPoint slides used in the course (usually two or three slides per page). This can be great for a live workshop where student interactions while each slide is being presented. This can inspire the student to jot down notes alongside each slide in the handout.

Not quite the same with eLearning where there is typically no ability to interact with other students and a slide by slide handout review after you've gone through the course can result in more questions for the student. With one of my latest eLearning course I created a handbook that follows the train of thought in the video courseware, but is not a thumbnail representative of each slide. In fact, the handout is actually a workbook that includes more detailed textual information, tables and diagrams, and questionnaires designed to re-enforce content retention. In other words, the handout provides more background course information that augments the course video and with quizzes, it becomes a core component of the course, and not just an afterthought.

The Benefits of Creating an eLearning Course the Right Way

ELearning has the distinct advantage of letting students learn at their own pace, but it has the distinct disadvantage of lacking immediate interaction between the instructor and fellow students. The more professional and effectively designed your eLearning courseware is, the more likely you will have satisfied customers. And that is exactly how you create repeat customers.

Bio

Ken Whitaker, of Leading Software Maniacs, has more than 25 years of software development leadership and training experience. He has written books on leadership and is an innovator in instructional design and agile project leadership workshops. Ken is the creator of PM Chalkboard, a software company VP, and the editor for *Better Software* magazine. He is creating a unique gamifcation product that redefines learning.