Exploding the myths of synchronous e-learning (Nov 08)

Clive Shepherd looks at synchronous e-learning and dispels some of the myths surrounding it.

'Synchronous e-learning' is not a term that rolls off the tongue. Quite why the e-learning industry adopted telecommunications speak to describe its offerings is lost in the mists of time, but it seems like we're stuck with the terms 'synchronous' to mean 'live' or 'real-time', and 'asynchronous' to mean 'self-paced.'

Not that the distinction isn't useful. Asynchronous communication has many advantages, not least the ability it affords the learner to control the pace, the flexibility it provides over when and where learning takes place, and the space it allows for reflection. On the other hand, we know that this is rarely enough: self-paced learning is frequently put off to another day, provides restrictions on the collaboration that can be accommodated, and lacks any sense of urgency. That's where synchronous communication comes in, whether that's face-to-face, over the telephone or online. Live events have immediacy, they facilitate networking, they act as targets by which activities must be completed, and they're simpler to design and support. Blended design is often just a question of determining what elements of a programme should be synchronous and which asynchronous.

SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING

Synchronous e-learning involves the use of the Internet or an intranet to bring people together to communicate in real-time. At the simplest level, this could involve no more than a get together in a chat room or using instant messaging. More typically, in a training context, it will extend to the use of web conferencing software to provide what is a 'virtual classroom' environment in which training events can occur. There is also a high end; employing virtual worlds as more immersive environments in which to meet, but more of that later. Synchronous e-learning, of the web conferencing variety, has been relatively slow to take off in Europe, but with travel budgets being cut back for budgetary or environmental reasons, we're starting to see quite an upsurge in interest. Usage may not yet be at US levels, where recent surveys suggest 10% of all formal training takes place this way, but it is surely just a matter of time.

REAL-TIME LEARNING STATISTICS

The eLearning Guild's June 2008 report on Real-time Learning Using Web Conferencing shows just how positive users of this technology have become. According to the report, "94.7% believe that a synchronous learning system (SLS) is essential to their organisation, and 86.7% either strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that, when set up and used properly, synchronous online sessions are as effective as good face-to-face classroom sessions." The report makes three main points:

- If you are not using a synchronous learning tool, you should be.
- By recording sessions, good synchronous learning can become good 'on-demand' learning
- If you are using a synchronous learning tool, there are probably things you can do to make your sessions better.

These three points make sense. The trouble is that many people's early experiences of web conferencing have not always been that brilliant; not only have there been frequent technical problems (much less common now we have much better bandwidth and more robust software), but plenty of 'death by PowerPoint' of the online variety. So it would be fair to say that synchronous e-learning has the reputation for being relatively inexpensive, flexible and convenient, but also rather second best to the face-to-face alternative and ideally taken in small doses. That's how I felt too up until recently. In October I attended the eLearning Network's 'Thinking Synch' event in London. I must admit that, prior to the event, I thought I had a pretty good handle on how to use virtual classrooms and other synchronous technologies successfully. Clearly I was out of touch, because the various speakers showed how imaginatively the
technology could be used and how synchronous e-learning could stand alone, not as a poor imitation of the face-to-face classroom, but as a valuable medium in its own right.

**Synchronous e-Learning Myths 1: one hour is enough for anyone**

The first myth to be exploded was that virtual classrooms are OK, but for no more than an hour at a time. Here’s the evidence to the contrary: Brian Bishop, now head of instructional design for Caspian Learning, described how in his time at Teletech@Home, he put together an induction training programme for call centre operators working from home which broke the mould. Previously, Teletech had worked only from bricks and mortar call centres, using a three week classroom programme to train new operators. Their new venture was designed to attract those who did not want to or could not work in the city, but preferred part-time employment from home. Brian designed a fast track induction, also over three weeks, but this time for just four hours a day, entirely online. It contained a wide variety of components that Brian described as ‘thickly authentic activities,’ conducted online but in a way that was more realistic than could be achieved in a classroom:

- software simulations and role plays created using Adobe Captivate
- one-to-one coaching sessions
- interludes in which operators could take some real calls, but then come back to the virtual classroom to discuss their experience

The results were compelling: improved customer satisfaction, reduced employee turnover (down from 35% to 20%) and increased productivity. Teletech were able to take advantage of a more mature, stable workforce and train them in half the time. In another session, Alan Saunders of Illustra, specialists in executive coaching, described how budget constraints at a major multinational saw them shift a face-to-face event for senior management, due to take place in a glamorous overseas venue, to a three month online-only format. Alan admitted that some participants were reluctant, given a poor prior experience of webinars, but these shortcomings were short lived. The course was a sensational success. Illustra has now trained something like 10,000 sales people, managers and directors around the world through virtual sessions. What’s also interesting is that both of these examples centre on soft skills, which is not the usual focus for synchronous e-learning. That means we have two myths exploded in one go, Not bad going.

**Synchronous e-Learning Myths 2: classroom will always be best**

I was also surprised by several case studies that seemed to suggest that better results could be achieved in the virtual classroom than face-to-face. Hard-hitting evidence came from Illustra's online executive coaching programme, mentioned above, which received phenomenal feedback: “The delivery by virtual media made it even more interesting.” “Best training I have ever had.” “We consider Illustra's programme to be the benchmark for all training.” The expectation is that online events will be lower rated, but Illustra's programme scored 4.9 out of 5. Significantly, Illustra charge exactly the same for their online programme as they do for the face-to-face equivalent. With these results, perhaps they should charge more.

**FURTHER SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING EVIDENCE**

Further evidence came from Matthew James and Dr Kathy Seddon from the National College for School Leadership who presented on ‘multi-layered synchronous learning’. They made the point that web conferencing encourages multiple dialogues among participants. Online you can be viewing a slide and listening to a speaker while simultaneously interacting with peers through text chat. In other words, online learners have excess capacity for interaction that the formal element of the event will not always utilise; online that capacity can be used to the full. And, this additional channel is not superficial or frivolous; the speakers reported that many participants asked if the session could continue after the facilitator had left, so they could continue their discussions. This dynamic, of what the speakers called ‘co-construction,’ is not typically evident in a face-to-face environment. Another positive aspect of web conferencing
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was identified by Val Brooks and Judy Hooton of Stockton City Learning Centre. Their students reported that the relative anonymity of web conferencing meant there was less chance of one person monopolising the conversation as traditional barriers to communication were broken down. We may not fully appreciate yet what attributes of synchronous online communication are providing this unexpected additional value, nor do we know what exact conditions are necessary for the greatest success; however, we should be encouraged that we are beginning to see really effective use of a new medium, going beyond a mere imitation of the face-to-face classroom.

Synchronous e-Learning Myths 3: just more death by PowerPoint

I’d like to conclude my review by expressing my surprise at just how inventive people are becoming at using synchronous e-learning technologies. I’ve seen some really good web conferencing sessions but more often than not they’re simple presentations with slides, sprinkled with interactions. Now, when you have a good speaker with good slides and meaningful interactivity then that’s a good combination whatever the medium, but I think it’s fair to say that most facilitators shy away from formats that challenge this rather safe model. So, I was pleased to hear about the many ways in which people are adopting more innovative approaches: Val Brooks and Judy Hooton of Stockton City Learning Centre have been setting up sessions where kids can interview a top rocket scientist from Houston; in another session they have had teams of children from different schools around the world engage in online grand prix racing. Here, synchronous e-learning is providing opportunities that simply couldn’t be achieved any other way.

OTHER USES FOR SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Brian Bishop showed how Teletech@Home used web conferencing to run highly authentic role plays for call centre operators based at home. Now here the medium was just perfect, because working on a PC using web conferencing software and interacting by voice alone is so close to the call centre operator’s real job; nevertheless, this approach could surely be applied as successfully to the training of other skills. Finally Ron Edwards of Ambient Performance showed how sales and customer service role plays could be conducted with great realism in Forterra, a system that allows real-time interaction in virtual worlds. The videos that Ron showed just blew me away, because these online sessions were so much more realistic and flexible than classroom role plays. See for yourself, you can download the videos from the Forterra site. Virtual worlds, including open environments such as Second Life, can add an extra dimension to synchronous e-learning, by situating the event in an authentic and immersive environment that engages learners in a way simple web conferencing (or face-to-face events) can struggle to achieve.

IN SUMMARY

So, it seems that synchronous e-learning simply can’t be put in a box labelled ‘second best but very cheap’: you’re not restricted to short sessions, you can do a lot more than inflict online death by PowerPoint, and design it well and you can achieve better results than you will in a classroom. And that's progress by anyone’s measure.

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