

# THE **e**LEARNING DEVELOPERS' JOURNAL

Strategies and Techniques for Designers, Developers, and Managers of eLearning

## THIS WEEK — DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

### Insights: e-Learning Gurus, Challenges, and Solutions

TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY BILL BRANDON

Everyone knows that it's important to ask an expert when there are questions about the best way to produce e-Learning. At the closing session of The eLearning Producer Conference & Expo 2005 in San Francisco, March 14 to 17, we did just that.

Here is a transcript of the comments of our panel of six experts, moderated by David Holcombe, president of The eLearning Guild, as they answered the top dozen questions collected from the session audience. As a bonus, each of the panelists also contributed their vision of the most important tasks that lie ahead for e-Learning producers.

**David Holcombe:** We have some e-Learning gurus here, and together we are going to find some solutions to some of the questions that you have provided to the panel.

Here are some amazing statistics about our panel: this group has a collective total of 154 years of experience in this industry. Unless you count Thiagi's previous life, in which case we have 210. Collectively, they've written 52 books. And this week they've taught a total of 2784 conference sessions. (Audience

laughs.)

Let's welcome our panel up here: Marc Rosenberg, Clark Aldrich, Thiagi, Ruth Clark, Lance Dublin, and Will Thalheimer. (*Editor's note: See the bios of the panel members at the end of this article.*)

Just to get this process started I'm going to grab a question right off the top of the stack. Two members of the panel will get to answer the question. Each one will be allowed one minute for his or her response. While the first person answers

*What do you get when you bring six of the top e-Learning experts on stage and ask them to respond to tough questions from 500 conference participants? You get wisdom and insight, you get good advice, you get the benefit of years of experience — and you get disagreement, friendly jibes, and a very entertained audience. Read this article and you will have a good picture of an entire range of ideas around a dozen critical issues in e-Learning today!*

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**The eLearning Developers' Journal™** is designed to serve as a catalyst for innovation and as a vehicle for the dissemination of new and practical strategies and techniques for e-Learning designers, developers and managers. The **Journal** is not intended to be the definitive authority. Rather, it is intended to be a medium through which e-Learning practitioners can share their knowledge, expertise and experience with others for the general betterment of all.

As in any profession, there are many different perspectives about the best strategies, techniques and tools one can employ to accomplish a specific objective. This **Journal** will share different perspectives and does not position any one as "the right way," but rather we position each article as "one of the right ways" for accomplishing a goal. We assume that readers will evaluate the merits of each article and use the ideas they contain in a manner appropriate for their specific situation.

The articles contained in the **Journal** are all written by people who are actively engaged in this profession — not by paid journalists or writers. Submissions are always welcome at any time, as are suggestions for articles and future topics. To learn more about how to submit articles and/or ideas, please visit:  
[www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com).



the question, the second person will be listening to some really cool music on the headphones. This means that the second person can't hear what the first person said. We want the answers from each to be a little different, we want to get some opinions. Like all debates, there can be rebuttals, but the audience gets to decide whether to allow the rebuttal.

### The first question: learning styles

**David Holcombe:** So, on to the first question. "How can we accommodate learning styles in e-Learning?"

**Ruth Clark:** I'm going to say that learning styles, and the time and effort that we spend on accommodating learning styles, is the single biggest waste of resources in e-Learning. The reason, very quickly, is that our cognitive commonalities so far outweigh our differences that we would be better served to actually focus on those commonalities — the limitations of our working memory and the strengths of our long-term memory — than to spend a lot of time and energy on things for which there is no research evidence.

**Will Thalheimer:** Learning styles are probably a true thing, definitely a true thing, but I'm a little bit skeptical. First of all, which learning styles are you going to use? There must be a thousand. There's need for cognition, there's field independence/dependence, Myers-Briggs, and there's auditory-visual-kinesthetic — which one are you going to use for your learners in your situation? There's also the question of whether it is really a learning style or is it a learning preference? Perhaps our visual learners are just more comfortable using visual things because they haven't had the experience, so maybe if we cater to their learning style, we're catering to their learning weakness. It could be dangerous. I don't want my surgeon, who's an auditory learner, learning from audiotapes. And finally, auditory, visual and kinesthetic are only three of the five senses. What about the other two? Like olfactory learners. And another thing, I don't want any oral learners in my classroom. (Audience laughs.)

### How can we speed up our e-Learning development processes?

**David Holcombe:** Thiagi's going to step up on this one. Who else? Thank you, Clark — you get to listen to the music first.

**Thiagi:** (To Clark Aldrich) How many fingers am I holding up? (Audience laughs.) He can hear everything.

OK, how can we speed up e-Learning? Go to my Web site (<http://www.thiagi.com/>). I have a page called "Faster, Cheaper, Better," which contains 10 principles of speeding up all kinds of instructional design. But step one is, what ever you do, never, ever use systematic instructional design approach. (Audience laughs.)

**Clark Aldrich:** I actually have that challenge working with the National Cancer Institute in supporting a very large application. What we did was to create common templates. We created very, very specific templates that take people through a consistent training process for all the applications. One of my favorite quotes is, "A gentleman is never rude unintentionally." The templates are there for suggestions, not forcing people to use them, but getting them essentially, you know, to fill in the blanks. Pedagogical content is embedded in the templates. I think we should be thinking about building content that takes longer to create and that actually works well. I would be very worried about trying to speed up the process even more than we already have. But if you had to do it, I think that creating common templates and instructions and examples that go with the topic is the right way. By the way, the stuff I had done for the National Cancer Institute will be available to everyone here and in the world in a week. So you can access it yourself.

### Is there a central resource for research on learning?

**David Holcombe:** Let's go on to our next question. This is a 25 pointer. "I want a central resource for fact-based, evidence-based research on what works for e-Learning instructional design. In other words, something that separates the wheat from the chaff." Ruth would like to answer this one, and Marc.

**Ruth Clark:** Okay, go to my Web site (<http://www.clarktraining.com/>), or to one of my books, and there are also two other Web sites in the medical community (of course they're about a hundred years ahead of us). One of those web sites is called the Cochrane Collaboration (<http://www.cochrane.org/index0.htm>), and what they're doing is meta-analysis of all the medical research. Now there's a corollary in the educational and

social sciences, called the Campbell Collaboration (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>).

Don't get too excited though, because we're not as well-funded, and there's not nearly the amount of repository there of evidence-based information. However, I think we're moving in the right direction in terms of building these kinds of links between the communities of practice of people who are producing research and those of us who are actually going to consume it. One quick reference: this summer Rich Mayer has edited a new journal, and he has a new handbook coming out in August called the *Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning* (for a preview, see <http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521547512>). It will all be written by the researchers who did the research, explaining how their research applies to the practical world. It's coming out this summer from Cambridge Press.

**David Holcombe:** Now we have to get Marc to take the headset off. He's really enjoying that music. You see the look on his face?

**Marc Rosenberg:** It was an Irish jig — how appropriate for St. Patrick's Day.

The question was about a place to go for fact-based research. So the answer to this question is, so would I. Did Ruth tell you where there is one? *Three* of them? I didn't hear a word. But here's the thing. So now you know where they are, but in order to use it, you have to promise to actually *use* it. This means, if the research tells you something, even if it's overwhelming, you have to actually pay attention to it. And you have to convince your boss, and everyone else out there, that there is a right way and a wrong way, and that this is a little bit of rocket science, and it does matter about learning, because if you ask for a fact-based research source that puts everything into perspective about whether e-Learning works or not, and then you ignore it, you get what you deserve.

### What should I stay focused on next year?

**David Holcombe:** "If I should stay focused on only one thing in the next year, what should it be?" This one's worth 24 points. There's Lance, and there's Will. So Will, you go first — what's the one thing that you should focus on in the next year?

**Will Thalheimer:** I would focus on what

the performance situation is, and give the learners practice retrieving information just like they have to retrieve it in their performance situation. That's it.

**Lance Dublin:** If it's just one thing, it's changing how you spell e-Learning. Right now, we spell e-Learning either "e-learning" or "elearning" without the dash, depending on how many bits you have. I think e-Learning should be spelled with "e" in the exponential position ("Learning<sup>e</sup>"). So it's "learning" to the "e" power. I think the biggest mental mistake we make is thinking we're changing how learning happens, which we're not at all. What we're changing is

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**I don't think companies are resistant to e-Learning. I think they don't get it. They don't understand it. I have never seen a situation where if you show people a better mousetrap, they don't want the better mousetrap. I think a lot of the resistance is in our heads.**

— Marc Rosenberg

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how we're enabling learning to happen. By simply moving the "e" from the front to the exponential position, it changes your mental mindset and mental map about what your job is.

### Quality versus crap

**David Holcombe:** This is worth 23 points, so it's still at the top. "How can we better educate or persuade our organizations about quality versus crap, so time and money constraints don't stay the catalyst for more bad e-Learning?" (Audience applause.)

**Marc Rosenberg:** OK, first of all, stop building crap. That would be the first thing. When you're trying to persuade your organization, they only know from what they see. Stop showing them crap, stop building crap, stop telling them, "You can have it tomorrow." There was an initial question here about speed. I

really do believe in the phrase that you can have it good, you can have it fast, you can have it cheap — pick two. Well, stop eliminating the one called "good" in favor of the one called "fast." I think we are what we eat. You cannot convince people that there's a better way to do things, if you don't demonstrate that there's a better way to do things, if you don't find a small solution. Prove it to them. Find a small project — anywhere — and do it the right way. Find a project being done by some other company, and show that to them.

**Clark Aldrich:** I'm always amazed at how many e-Learning developers, from a content perspective, are bottom feeders. It's like, "Let's find the educational issue that's the least important to the organization and do it as quickly and cheaply as possible. And then move on to the next thing." I think at least some portion of the portfolio of every single person here should be on the big, tough "CEO cares" kind of issue, which is not how to use the new version of Windows, how to use PeopleSoft, or whatever. It's how to do leadership or how to do whatever happens to be important to your organization. Then devote at least 30% of your resources, or, really, more like 60% or 90% toward solving the big issues. You'll have the time, you'll have the budget, and if you're successful you'll have the attention of the organization.

### Overcoming resistance to e-Learning

**David Holcombe:** Okay, here's a new question, this one's a 20. "How do you promote e-Learning in a company that is resistant to e-Learning?"

**Marc Rosenberg:** First of all, I don't think companies are resistant to e-Learning, I think they don't get it. They don't understand it. I have never seen a situation where if you show people a better mousetrap, they don't want the better mousetrap. I think a lot of the resistance is in our heads. Historically, in this business the last people to get on board with e-Learning are always the trainers. You go out to a sales vice president or a customer care vice president or a technical vice president, they want their problems solved.

So the best way to sell e-Learning is not to sell e-Learning. Sell problem solutions. And you aren't going to be able to sit there and explain to an executive what e-Learning is or what performance

support is. But when they see it, they'll want it. So again, it goes back to finding a prototype. A small project, a model, even if you have to bring it in and say, "This is what's possible." They're smart people — they'll see it and they'll say, "I want it!" I don't think the problem is selling e-Learning, I think the problem is demonstrating value.

**Lance Dublin:** I think the simple way to do that is to define e-Learning in a way that includes how people already are using technology to learn. In most organizations people think e-Learning stands for e-Course which stands for e-Boring which stands for e-I-Don't-Want-To-Do-It. So, on the other hand, most workers in today's businesses are sitting in front of a computer or PDA, and searching on Google, and sending emails, and learning 24-7.

The best way, I find, to promote e-Learning in organizations is to identify the fact that they're already doing e-Learning — if you change back to my other theme — to change your definition of e-Learning away from e-Course and toward the use of technology to enable learning, which enables performance. Oftentimes, I find that people are doing it without knowing it. Everybody's talking about e-Learning without a definition published, so therefore they're bringing to you the definition that they're thinking. You can change their thinking by pointing out that really the definition of e-Learning (or learning to the e power) can encompass the way they're already doing it. Go in the direction the donkey's already running.

**David Holcombe:** Will, did you have a rebuttal?

**Will Thalheimer:** I'm going to pick up on what Marc said. Marc said that there's not that much resistance out there. But he sort of bifurcated this. There's not resistance on the business side, but there is on the training side. I've seen that in teaching an online Learning course on research-based instructional design. After delivering this course to the training folks for a client they said to me, "We thought you were going to come in here and tell us that e-Learning is great. And you didn't do that." And I said, "Well, e-Learning is a tool. It's good for some things and it's bad for other things." When I showed them the research, when I showed them how to think about this in terms of what they already knew, they were very open to it. These were people who didn't want

to be there. I didn't know that, unfortunately. So I think there is a way to change these people's minds.

Was that an okay rebuttal, Marc?

**Lance Dublin:** That wasn't a rebuttal. That was just a "buttle." (Audience laughter).

I want to go back to the fact-based research question. What more research does there need to be than the simple statement that, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." (Ruth Clark vigorously raises her

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**...we should be thinking about building content that takes longer to create and that actually works well. I would be very worried about trying to speed up the process even more than we already have. But if you had to do it, I think that creating common templates and instructions and examples that go with the topic is the right way.**

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— Clark Aldrich

hand to indicate a rebuttal.) (Audience laughter.) It's actually not a quote from Thiagi. It's a quote from me when I was reincarnated as Confucius.

But, to me, all the research has done is to prove that it's actually a true statement. So when people push fact-based research, I find that it's a defensive mechanism to try and justify something that we already know is true.

**Thiagi:** Lance obviously uses research like a drunk uses a lamp post. (More audience laughter.) Let me explicate. Not for illumination, but for support. The quote he gave is one of the stupidest quotes, and I have conducted research to show that there are situations where people actually "do," and panic, and get distracted and not learn anything at all. To me, one thing I learned, by listening to Will, is that the world is full of bogus research. We do a great injustice by

quoting Confucius when it actually comes from an ancient Hindu philosopher. (Audience laughter.)

**David Holcombe:** One last comment on this, Will, and then we'll move on.

**Will Thalheimer:** I actually looked up that quote. It is not in *Bartleby's Familiar Quotations*, it is not in the *International Thesaurus of Quotations*, so it's not from Confucius — I'm with the Hindus on this one. (More laughter.)

## Best global production design team practices

**David Holcombe:** Let's move on to a new question. "What are your top three best practices or tools to accomplish 'faster-better-cheaper' with a globally distributed production design team?"

**Lance Dublin:** Who wants it "better-faster-cheaper"? Globally "better-faster-cheaper," is that what everybody wants? Yes or no.

First thing of all is, think thin. Think thin solutions that therefore you can deploy better-faster-cheaper.

The thinnest solution I know is Google. It doesn't have Flash, it doesn't have animation, it's designed as a specific tool and it accomplishes its goal very well, in my opinion.

It starts with your design process, not with the processes to do design. So are you solving the right problem, or are you building training for the sake of training? The best story I can tell to illustrate that is when the ATM (Automatic Teller Machine) was invented, the only group that wasn't invited to be on the design team, what you think it was? The training people! Because the designers said, "If you ask training people if you could build a complicated technology and a sophisticated application that people around the world who didn't speak English and didn't have any education could do, they would tell you it's impossible."

**David Holcombe:** Would you like me to read the question again, Thiagi?

**Thiagi:** No, I've got the answer. The question doesn't matter. (Audience laughter.)

Item number one. Let the inmates run the asylum. I had to design a simulation for human performance technology staffs. What they did was to put two paragraphs starting up a story of an International Space Station human performance problem. Then everybody would contribute one more paragraph to the continuing story. The story kept on going, I had to eventually come in pre-

pared to be one of the participants, kill the heroine, and what happened, within 30 minutes, somebody said, "He woke up and found it was all a dream," and started the story again. And they learned a lot.

Number two, always build an airplane while you're flying it. Don't do org chart analysis, post it online and keep tweaking it, keep doing it while you learn.

And number three, never tell people all of the answers. (Audience laughter.)

### Building an online strategy

**David Holcombe:** Let's move onto another question. "Where would I start in developing an online strategy from the ground up?"

That's the basic question. There's a little bit more here to explain. "Needs assessment is underway, and current instructor-led training (ILT) is robust. Do I start with a big entrance, or start small by providing enhancement supplements to existing courses — where do I start?"

**Marc Rosenberg:** The answer to the second part is, "I don't know," since I don't know your organization, but where

you start is with the business. It doesn't matter if your ILT is robust, and I don't know what you're doing for needs assessment. If you're trying to find out what learners need, that's the wrong place to start.

Where you want to start is, where's the pain in the organization? Where's the danger where the organization is in trouble? Time and again the e-Learning strategies that are focused on, "Let's have as many courses online as possible," these fail. It's better to have one course that transforms the business. So, where do you start?

Start with the executive suite. Start with the mission and the vision. You start with the business performance numbers, and you ask yourself, what can I do to contribute to better business results? That will drive your strategy. That will drive the strategy you put together and that will drive the technology you select. Not the other way around.

Strategy is an interesting thing. There's very little e-Learning strategy that takes place within the training department. It's got to be interdisciplinary, and it's got to

involve a discussion of the state of the business. If it doesn't, it's not the strategy.

**Ruth Clark:** Alice in Wonderland was always one of my favorite stories. Alice gets lost in the woods, and this cat appears in a tree. Alice asks the cat, "Where should I go?" And the cat says, "Where are you headed — where do you want to go?" Alice said, "Well, I don't really know." Then the cat said, "Then it really doesn't matter."

Where should we start? I think it's with alignment. We want to align to the business strategies that we're going to position ourselves to be solving important business goals.

The second thing is, we want to align ourselves to the real needs. Is it really about training, or is it about other types of interventions that would be a lot cheaper and faster. Do we really need a training intervention, and if so, is e-Learning, or some other blend, the most appropriate way to get started?

And last, it's about alignment with human cognitive interface. We want to have the technology support the people, rather than thinking that people are

## e-Learning for e-Learning Professionals...

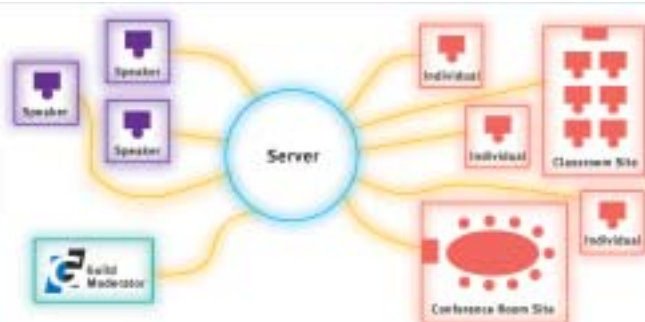
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APRIL 7, 2005

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**Target Audience:** Managers, Directors, CLO's, and others responsible for leading the e-Learning initiatives in their organization.

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going to adapt to the technology.

**Clark Aldrich:** I think we've become almost too customer focused in this industry and part of the question is what capability and internal capacity do you want to have as a team? What is it that you want your team to be "best in class" at? It's very important to align with the business, and the worst thing to have is "If you succeed no one cares."

What do you want to do? How do you want to define yourself? What you want to be when you grow up? And a lot of the decisions are going to be around proactively, rather than reactively, defining your own mission statement and your own enduring value to the organization.

**Will Thalheimer:** I agree with a lot of what's been said but I don't want us to forget the end point or the starting point is the learner. I think we have a moral responsibility not just to focus on the business results, but to focus on what our training does to the learner. One thing in particular is beginning to worry me. And that is that e-Learning is being used as an excuse to take on-the-job training and make it on-one's-personal-time-training. (Applause from audience.)

We ought to really seriously think about how we as e-Learning developers can design our courses and integrate them into the organization so that they have less of an effect. Imagine if you will, someone taking 80 hours of training normally, and all that 80 hours goes on to their personal time. I think I calculated that as adding 25 minutes per workday onto someone's personal time. That has serious implications for our society and for family values.

**Marc Rosenberg:** You probably won't agree with this, it's sort of a pet peeve of mine. I'm really concerned about this phrase, "the learner." I'm getting to a point where I think we should not call them learners. Call them what they are — engineers, salespeople, customer care people. If we continually refer to everybody who comes into our realm as learners, we lose sight of what they're doing. We lose sight of the differences between them, what the skills are. If you're an engineer, if you're a sales rep, or you're a customer care person, and I call you learners, I'm not thinking about what you're doing, what kind of environment you're working in.

Now, I don't mean to disparage the term "learners." Of course they're learning. But I think it would be beneficial for

us to start thinking about the people in our classrooms, or the people online in terms of the jobs and the roles they perform, and not the role that they're in for that short period of time that they're with us. It may be philosophical and semantic, but I think it's very important.

## Getting people to use asynchronous offerings

**David Holcombe:** All right let's launch another question. "How do you get people to use asynchronous e-Learning, when they're too busy, or have higher priorities?"

**I think e-Learning should be spelled with "e" in the exponential position. So it's "learning" to the "e" power. I think the biggest mental mistake we make is thinking we're changing how learning happens, which we're not at all. What we're changing is how we're enabling learning to happen.**

— Lance Dublin

**Clark Aldrich:** I think you care about the results. You track it, you have the boss track it, you report it somewhere, and you have it be measured or impacted. If you don't care that someone took it, they're not going to take it.

Somewhere along the line, it has to be something that matters, at some point in the process. If you care, the learner — or the job role, I don't know, generically speaking — will care.

**Marc Rosenberg:** That's a no-brainer. Give them asynchronous training that they would value, that they would want to spend their time on.

I'll tell you a quick story. I did some pro bono work for UNICEF many years ago. They had all the e-Learning courses you could imagine — time management, leadership development, supervisory training, diversity — you name it, they had it. No one was taking these courses. They were very upset that no one was

taking these courses. I said to them, "What's the most important issue in UNICEF today?" Without question, they all answered exactly the same way: curing AIDS in Africa. So I asked them, "Where's the e-Learning on that?"

The point is, you're not going to force people to take this stuff if it's not valuable. People make judgments about how to use their time. Give them stuff that they want, that they need, that's valuable. The rest will take care of itself. (Audience applause.)

## Simulations and effective behavior modeling

**David Holcombe:** We have time for one or two more questions. Let's see how this goes. "In using simulations to teach languages, how can we have a failure scenario with intrinsic feedback or negative results, without appearing to model ineffective language behaviors?"

**Clark Aldrich:** I think that person was in my session, and I appreciate that question, the way that was structured. I think just keeping the feedback real is a lot of the key, but if you have a real situation where people honestly say, "I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you said," model the situation as accurately as possible. If you say, "Ich bin ein Berliner," and someone says, "You're a jelly doughnut? I don't understand," then that's a real response. I think the philosophy that it really is possible gets away from the mawkishness. What would someone really say if you mispronounced something? What would someone really say if you said the wrong thing? They would probably look at you in a strange way, and ask you to repeat yourself.

So I think keeping it as honest and real as possible is the right way of doing it.

**Thiagi:** I think that we all tend to be frightened of telling the engineer or the doctor that he's stupid and that's not the correct answer. One of the things that I have been doing online and in a face-to-face situation is to tell people, "Failing is a gift. Getting feedback that your answer is not up to our standards is actually a wonderful thing for you to have happen." I kind of desensitize people. That's one approach.

The second approach, anytime I give feedback, I say, "Here is feedback from Thiagi. And here is feedback from Igaihi, Thiagi's evil twin brother. Thiagi's feedback is wishy-washy, wonderful, and pos-

itive. Igaht's feedback is constructive, realistic, and real-world-based. I have had very few people object to being told, "Here is how you can improve it, and here is something that is not up to the quality that we are expecting."

**Ruth Clark:** A quick "bottle" here. You don't always need simulations. You don't always need simulations for effective learning. In fact, sometimes, depending on the design of the simulation, it will actually set the learning behind.

Sometimes a very simple straightforward old-fashioned method of approaching learning is much more cost-effective and much more learning-efficient than a simulation.

**Thiagi:** May I rebut to that?

It all depends on how you define simulation. My contention is, instead of saying, "What is the pluperfect of 'stolen'?" or something like that, instead of that you set up a very simple situation. This again, I learned from Will. You set up a little situation. You're in Paris, you're being arrested for shoplifting. How will you explain to the gendarmes that you are not really shoplifting? So you're still asking the person to use the pluperfect mode, but in context rather than as an abstraction. So I call it a simulation.

### How much blending?

**David Holcombe:** Okay, another question: "Getting the recipe right. Components of blended learning. How much is too little or too much?" This was a highly scored question — 23.

**Lance Dublin:** I have a common theme, which is we are very poor in our use of language. All learning is blended, we didn't just invent blended learning. A book, a pen, and an instructor is blended learning. A book and a videotape is blended learning. Getting the mix right, when people keep using this phrase, I keep on remembering a phrase from Mike Hammer, who comes from Boston, he says "Why are we paving cow paths?" If you're in Boston, you know Boston, you're on a road that ends up nowhere, because they didn't build roads for the real city, they just paved whatever was there.

So I would say getting the right mix is not just saying here's my instructional design, I'm now going to apply some technology to it. It's stopping and asking, "Should I even be building this? Does this really matter?" And then, "What do people need to do as a result of this

learning and what's the best way to provide it?" Sometimes a pen is better than an animation. You can learn more from a picture than you can from a book. I think it all has to do with your mental model, not with your toolset. That's not research-based either.

**Will Thalheimer:** I actually went from like a Hindu rap song to silence between the songs and I heard you say, "Everything's blended."

I'm just going to agree with that. That sounds good. Everything's blended. It's

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**Where should we start? I think it's with alignment. We want to align to the business strategies... we want to align ourselves to the real needs... and last, it's about alignment with human cognitive interface. We want to have the technology support the people, rather than thinking that people are going to adapt to the technology.**

— Ruth Clark

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true that it's not about the blending. Blending is like this abstract concept we've created. It doesn't mean anything, really. What matters are the learning methods we use, not the learning media. Now some learning media enable different learning methods. But we really need to focus on what's needed in that particular situation, what are we trying to get across? What do we want our learners to be able to do? I'm often asked, "What's better, Will, e-Learning or blended learning?" And I get choked up on that one because it's irrelevant.

### Performance metrics best practices

**David Holcombe:** All right, we're going to do our last question now. "What are our best practices for capturing performance metrics?"

**Lance Dublin:** One of the interesting

things about performance metrics is, are you capturing metrics that matter? What I mean by metrics that matter is, every organization has metrics that matter. Typically training people aren't really related to those metrics, because those metrics are sales, profits, loss, customer numbers, and customer satisfaction. It all has to do with the business.

So when people talk about performance metrics, I don't know whether they're talking about really measuring the business impact of what they're doing, or whether they're measuring the activity impact of what they're doing. Registrations, time, this is where LMSs have unfortunately made it terrible, because we collect all this data that's completely irrelevant. (That's my one moment diatribe on LMSs.)

We don't focus on how what we build and what we do impacts the actual business and the business metrics. So I guess the answer to the question is, are we thinking about performance metrics or should we be thinking about business metrics?

**Marc Rosenberg:** Number one, establish your performance metrics before you do anything else. Decide what the end is before you spend all your time and money figuring out a path that gets you to the wrong place. So that's number one.

Number two — Your client decides what the performance metrics are, not you. Your customers or your clients, they'll tell you. Work with them. They decide what's important.

And number three — If it's measured or captured by an LMS, it's probably not important. (Audience laughter.)

**Thiagi:** This is a philosophical, epistemological statement. I hate the word client. We should call them engineers,... (Audience laughter.)

### Conclusion: Sharing visions

**David Holcombe:** Well, that's it for the questions part of this session. The other thing I've asked all of our panelists to do is to give a little thought to sharing their vision of where they think you should go forward from here. One thought they can send you out of here with to think about, to reflect on, about your profession as e-Learning producers.

**Clark Aldrich:** There's a quote from the guy that founded Xerox. He said people vastly overestimate what they can do in the short term, but underestimate what

they can do in the long term. For some reason we're in a constant panic state of meeting short-term client needs that are often unreasonable. And we really do have to think of ourselves, think in terms of months and years, think in terms of capacity, think in terms of what we want to be good at.

In some cases we have to find common ground with the customer, but not necessarily do everything that the customer wants. I think that's a challenge for all of us, to say, "Who do we want to be?" What capacity, what competency, whether it's simulations or whether it's performance support or whether it's whatever. Truly, we can grow tremendous capacity but we can't always be in a hurry. We had to think about it strategically, take our time, plan it, and work slowly towards it over six months. You'll be amazed at how more powerful you can be. I talk to so many people who are so panicked day-by-day, and don't do anything for years. It's such a tragedy — we really do need to turn those two around.

**Marc Rosenberg:** I don't think the development of e-Learning is akin to "Name That Tune." Which is, "I can develop e-Learning in five days." "I can develop it in four days." "I can develop it in three days."

This desire to do it quick, fast, and cheap, there's some positive things to be said for that. But this is not the ultimate measure. If we continue to do bad things faster, we're not getting anywhere. So I think, revisit the quality side of this stuff, and do what it takes to do it right, and you'll find the compromise between those.

The other thing I will mention is a mantra that was taught to me a couple of years ago which I think is very, very apropos. Think big. Think about what you can do in the long term. But it's OK to start small. It's OK to do little things if you have that big vision. Then be ready, when you're successful, to scale like hell.

**Thiagi:** I want to share with you what I consider to be one of the most important words in the English language. It is "learner." I hate when people call me a guru, because I'm not. I feel among all these great chiefs, I'm the token Indian. (Audience laughter.)

Thinking back to my simple concept, I am a learner, I want to be a learner, I want to constantly keep learning. The best way for me to become an expert e-Learning producer is for me to be a

learner. I go online, take some of the world's deadliest, dullest classes on e-Learning, and I take some of the exciting classes, so always keep putting yourself in a learner's position and in a learner's frame of mind. So that's something for you to meditate on.

**Ruth Clark:** I'm going to join Thiagi, as the token woman on the panel. I want to make a quick comment here about why gurus disagree. The reason gurus disagree is that they don't know what they're talking about. Before that sounds too disrespectful, let me just qualify that.

If we're talking about simulations, if we're talking about graphics, even if we are talking about e-Learning, and we're

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**...we have a moral responsibility not just to focus on the business results, but to focus on what our training does to the learner. One thing is particular is beginning to worry me. And that is that e-Learning is being used as an excuse to take on-the-job training and make it on-one's-personal-time training.**

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— Will Thalheimer


doing very quick back-and-forth discussion, we may think we're having a conversation, but we're not. My mental model of e-Learning could be quite different from what you're saying. In our field we do not really have a common definition of the different terms, so therefore we often think we're communicating, but we're really talking about totally different realities.

My hope for us as we move forward is, when we start to have these dialogues with each other, we'll take just a minute, so when I say a "simulation," when I say a "graphic," we'll take a minute, as Thiagi did earlier, and say, "This is what I mean by a simulation." That way I think we can move forward in a more productive way.

**Lance Dublin:** I'm going to take a different tack. I think that our biggest challenge is what we already know as the "mental model problem." It's the problem of being older, and all the stuff that you have in your head that you think is true, which therefore gets in the way of your learning anything new. That's also one of the problems with gurus. We know way too much.

Here's what I would suggest. Take a 14-year-old out, buy him or her a cheeseburger, and ask them what they do. Go and immediately buy Xbox, or SimCity or get involved in some multi-user domain, and see how people are learning rapidly using technologies, and never using the word e-Learning. How many of you have \$25 that you could spend, either from your company or from your own pocket that will change your life?

There was a great quote from Denzel Washington in the movie "Philadelphia" when he was trying to have AIDS explained to him. He said, "Tell it to me like I'm a sixth grader." If you want to know what the future is like, go meet some sixth-graders.

**Will Thalheimer:** It's about human learning. Go out and learn as much as you can. Read these folks' books. Read my stuff. Read other people's stuff, read the research. Find out as much as you can about human learning, and then integrate that into your e-Learning design, and push back, gently. Don't get yourself fired, but push back — make the right choices. Take what you've learned, and integrate that with your experience and use that to make a difference. 

## The panelists

**Clark Aldrich:** Clark is president of SimuLearn, an analyst, entrepreneur, speaker, consultant, and one of e-Learning's most influential and productive leaders. He is the author of *Simulations and the Future of Learning*. Clark led the international team that created SimuLearn's Virtual Leader, named Best Online Training Product of the Year by T+D Magazine in 2004.

**Ruth Clark:** Ruth is president of Clark Training & Consulting. She is a past president of ISPI, and the author of three books that apply research results to the design of learning: *Building Expertise*, *Developing Technical Training*, and *E-Learning & The Science of Instruction*.

**Lance Dublin:** Lance is president and CEO of Lance Dublin Consulting. He is

I am a learner. I want to constantly keep learning. The best way for me to become an expert e-Learning producer is for me to be a learner. ... always keep putting yourself in a learner's position and in a learner's frame of mind. So that's something for you to meditate on.

— Thiagi

an independent consultant who specializes in corporate learning and change management. He is co-author of *Implementing e-Learning*, published by ASTD in 2002. Lance has over 30 years of experience in adult education and training, communication, and motivation and innovation.

**David Holcombe:** David is president and CEO of The eLearning Guild. Over the last 20 years, he has organized more than 100 events across North America and Europe that have collectively provided tens of thousands of participants with information, ideas, and knowledge to enable them to leverage various information technologies to improve knowledge and performance.

**Marc Rosenberg:** Marc is president, Marc Rosenberg & Associates, and a leading figure in the world of training, organizational learning, e-Learning, knowledge management, and performance improvement. He is a past president of ISPI, and is the author of *E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*.

**Will Thalheimer:** Will is Principal Researcher, Work-Learning Research, a company he founded in 1998 to compile and disseminate research on learning and performance. He has worked as an instructional designer, simulation architect, project and product manager, trainer, consultant, and researcher.

**Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan:** Thiagi is Roving Mad Scientist at The Thiagi Group. He has designed, developed, and used a variety of computer and online

training games, simulations, and interactive exercises. His current interest in interactive learning is the integration of studying and learning through his library-playground approach.

#### Author Contact

This article was transcribed (using speech-to-text software) from a tape recording of the closing session of The eLearning Producer Conference & Expo 2005, and then reviewed, corrected, and lightly edited by Bill Brandon, the editor of The eLearning Developers' Journal.

While he made every effort to accurately reflect the comments of the panelists, mistakes or misunderstandings may have arisen in the process — all of which are Bill's responsibility and not any fault of the panelists, all of whom made their contributions during the session with impeccable professionalism and expertise, not to mention flawless good taste and judgment.

Corrections and tongue-lashings may be delivered to Bill via email at [bbrandon@elearningguild.com](mailto:bbrandon@elearningguild.com).

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