

It's Not the Technology

Darcy W. Hardy

What is it about technology that causes distance educators to make poor decisions? Do we get so excited about the latest and greatest application that we forget about design and pedagogy? Or, are we still on that tired mission to find the "killer app" in the form of technology for distance learning—the one that will make learning *better*?

How we select appropriate technology to deliver education and training has always intrigued me. As I thought about my column for this issue, I thought I would revisit an article I cowrote in 1994 titled,

"Motion vs. Non-Motion Curricula in Distance Education: Technology Selection Reconsidered." That article addressed the mistake of selecting a particular technology to deliver instruction simply for the sake of the technology, as opposed to selecting appropriate technology based on the content being delivered.

I'll admit I hadn't read this article since it was accepted for publication in the *Canadian Journal of Educational Communication* (volume 24, number 2), yet I have always felt it was a timeless piece. Imagine my surprise when, upon reading it 10 years later, I came upon these words: "Most distance education providers agree that the ideal distance learning classroom is one that is completely live two-way video and audio delivered via fiber optic technology, with a small number of students."

We said that? As my kids would say, LOL! Here we were writing an article about how to select appropriate technology for distance learning (or so we thought), and this statement appears on the first page. I suppose this makes my current column even more important. In 1994, we (as distance educators) were high on live two-way videoconferencing as the ideal technology. I am not by any means knocking ITV. I think it is an excellent delivery system, and I'm sure my colleagues at

Tandberg, Polycom, and VTel would heartily agree. But, so is the telephone, fax machine, satellite, printed paper, videotapes, and of course, the Internet! We thought we were writing a ground-breaking article but fell into the same old trap while we were writing. It's not the technology.

So now that I have aged and somewhat shamed myself (and my coauthors), let me go back to the real reason behind the writing of that article and why it's still important today.

Our article categorized instructional content into two categories: motion and nonmotion. This is how we defined the categories: "A course contains motion curriculum if the instruction requires motion in its presentation to the student. In other words, if motion is a mandatory part of the delivery in order for the student to understand the concept(s) being presented.... On the other hand, non-motion curricula are those that can be taught without motion *in the delivery*."

Within the article, we provided a means by which to select appropriate technology based on whether or not motion was required in the instructional delivery. We emphasized a focus on content and learning outcomes first, and delivery method second. Let the content drive the technology decisions, not the other way around. And yet,



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today—just as it was 10 years ago—we find ourselves talking the talk but not walking the walk.

Using the Web to deliver instruction has taken over. This is not necessarily a bad thing. As far as electronic delivery, the vast majority of learners can now access the Internet from home, work, school, or a library. But just as distance educators earlier adopted microwave, satellite, videotape, and interactive videoconferencing, we've done the same thing with the Internet. Throw streaming media into the mix and you can get some in our profession so excited they can't wait to develop their next course as a completely streamed series of lectures over the Internet! Bleah!

If we are going to retain the high quality of distance education, we have to focus on the quality of the instruction, not how it's delivered. The delivery is important, and there

are many factors that will influence decisions, but the content must be the driver in the process. Even if a course is developed completely for online delivery, the selection of appropriate technology still applies within. We are a creative profession. We shouldn't be taking the easy way out by just picking a technology (1) because we already own it, (2) we already know how to apply it, or (3) because it's the new "thing." Having a choice is what distance learning is based on—why not extend that to development?

It's not the technology, it's the content. Sorry, my vendor colleagues. We do need all of the technologies you offer, but we must let the content—not your products or services—drive our decisions.

To summarize the issue, here is what my brilliant communication manager, Jennifer Rees, had to say:

No one talks about what kind of paints Pollock or Matisse used. No one asks John Grisham what PC and version of MS Office he uses. No one asks about Francis Ford Coppola's camera. Because ... they are communicating ideas and concepts and what's important is the communication strategy. People do care what car NASCAR drivers drive, what plane Lindbergh flew, etc. because they were not communicating ideas and concepts (at least not primarily), they were/are about the technology. We aren't talking about how fast our videos can stream, we're talking about what they teach. We aren't talking about what CMS our expert faculty house their course in, we are talking about their content. It's not about the technology, it's about the teaching and learning.

Couldn't have said it better myself. Wish I had, though. ☺

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