Innovative Practices for Innovators: Walking the Talk
Online Training for Online Teaching

Susan Crichton
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
crichtos@ucalgary.ca

Randy LaBonte
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT
When e-learning companies initiate changes to learning opportunities for students, it is incumbent upon them to also change the learning opportunities for those expected to teach with their products. In other words, e-learning companies must learn to ‘walk the talk’ and rethink the traditional training format for site-based inservice, training and conference presentation. It is imperative that the teachers and instructors providing online learning be afforded the same learning experiences they are expected to provide students. This paper reports on inservice opportunities provided by Odyssey Learning Systems Inc. (Odyssey) and critically assesses how that training mirrored the learning environment created through use of its product in educational settings with students Odyssey Learning Systems is a privately owned Canadian company that develops computer-managed learning solutions, supports development and distribution of content for its software Nautikos™ and provides technical and professional support for customers and learning sites. There are currently over 200 sites operating around the world serving educational, corporate and non-profit organizations. Odyssey is headquartered in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada with subsidiary offices in Saskatchewan and Ontario.). In short, did the company model what it preached about its own software? In the case study presented, it is the thesis of the paper that Odyssey functioned as a learning organization and modeled the type of learning experiences for its clients it intends its clients to provide for their students. It is a further thesis of the paper that changes to a learning environment provided through technology will not occur until teachers and instructors are provided the same opportunities to learn with technology they are expected to offer their students.

Keywords
Technology training, online learning, learning organization, learning environment

Online Learning: Promise and Pedagogy

Promises of reduced costs, anytime - anywhere accessibility, and learning at one’s own pace have made online learning an attractive alternative to the traditional training format. It is estimated that technology-assisted learning will represent half of all training methods by the year 2002 (McGee 1999). Strehle (2000) predicts that to remain competitive, corporations facing rapid technical change will turn to online learning for frequent and timely training opportunities. Major growth is predicted in online training, which will soon rival traditional classroom training in popularity.

Technology, then, has opened the door to economical training, or has it? While online learning technologies have been touted as the savior for a decaying education system and the money-saving tool for corporations and organizations, it appears that little consideration has been given to the actual learning, and its underlying pedagogy, that can take place through the computer in an online environment. For the most part, the computer and online delivery methods merely recreate traditional instruction, bringing a ‘bricks and mortar’ approach to the virtual environment. The opportunity to evolve thoughtfully a deeper understanding of an ‘e-pedagogy’ that might begin to maximize the potential of new technology and tools in a new learning environment is often missed.

Some researchers, such as Wonacott, are beginning to point to the success of online, or web-based training, in education and state that for “…many educators, web-based training (WBT) is the constructivist ideal—learners can construct meaning through self-directed inquiry, guided activity, and group collaboration on the information highway, the digital library, cyberspace, the global village” (Wonacott, 2000, ¶ 1). While current technology is
permissive of constructivist learning, applying this in an online environment means creating areas for community interaction and collaboration, and entering into the knowledge construction arena of activity-based learning and knowledge-building communities of practice (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993), therefore grappling with the issues of evolving a sense of e-teaching and e-learning, and the pedagogical elements to be considered to support them.

**Online Learning Models**

Online learning generally takes two distinct approaches – asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous learning allows the learner and instructor to communicate about the learning experience at different times. E-mail, online forums, bulletin boards and list serves are some of the tools used in this approach. Synchronous learning is more reflective of traditional face-to-face learning approaches, with the instructor and learner online at the same time. Virtual classrooms and online video conferencing are the tools used for this type of learning approach.

Asynchronous learning favours the development of a learner-centred approach, in that asynchronicity can stimulate both learners and instructors to think more reflectively, leading to a more student-centred framework (Jonassen, 1995). The information feedback loop of asynchronous discourse supports the reflective process, allowing learners to see and analyze how they are developing understanding of a concept. It is this thinking about thinking that enables learners to construct personal knowledge, and the asynchronous online environment supports this type of reflective discourse.

Most of today’s e-learning software supports an asynchronous learning approach, enabling instructors to adapt professional practice from a teacher-driven curriculum to learner-centred. However, Laurillard (1993) points out that learning involves both discursive and interactive processes, and while computer-mediated online instruction can support both, most technology-based learning has focused on discursive instruction. Online learning has merely replicated the pedagogy of the face-to-face classroom (Turoff, 1995 in Jonassen, 1995) and ‘correspondence school’ delivery by typically generating content for students to work through. A learner-centred approach requires the learners to create multiple perspectives on issues, constructing their own representations of knowledge. Therefore, to be learner-centred, technology-based online learning requires a collaborative environment in which learners interact and communicate while constructing personal knowledge.

**Walking the Talk**

For companies in the e-learning space, online training is a particularly viable and appropriate alternative to traditional seminars and in-service training they promote. But while providing products and services for online instruction, do these companies ‘walk the talk’ and practice what they preach? In other words, do the companies providing tools for online learning model appropriate use of that technology in their own training, or do they simply stick with traditional face-to-face training and not use any online approach?

One company in the e-learning arena, Odyssey Learning Systems Inc. (Odyssey), provides professional development and training for users of its software. During a provincial professional development day (The province of British Columbia, Canada, for example, legislates 4 non-instructional days for teachers and staff. Students are not in attendance, and professional staff must attend organized training workshops or conferences, typically hosted in urban centers across the province.) in October 2001, and again over a two-day online training event in February 2002, virtual training was held where speakers, presenters, and participants collaborate and interact online. Educators in eight regional education centres across Western Canada were linked together via telephone, streamed audio, and video over Internet for training. The purpose of the professional development was to communicate with users about advances, applications and uses of Odyssey’s learning and content management software, Nautikos. To set a context for use of the software a keynote presentation on e-learning began each session.

The costs for the training were minimal, particularly in comparison to the costs of hosting a conference or conducting a training session in a central location, the usual practice for such professional development and training. Participants in the remote communities of Western Canada simply had to wake up in the morning and log on instead of making a two-day trek to an urban center, thereby saving travel and substitute teacher costs. While some participants remained at their local worksites, choosing not to travel to a regional center, the longest commute for those who did was less than sixty minutes. It should be noted that many of the participants that chose to commute to a regional centre did so for the collegiality and social interaction.
Online Training: Did the Promise Match the Pedagogy?

During the Odyssey training workshops, participants went online to attend an Instructional Design workshop through a virtual conference and seminar, and discussed and shared ideas through a combination of real-time online collaboration, chat and telephone. Feedback from the event indicated that participants found it to be highly rewarding, with comments such as “…the explanation of activity theory was clear and there was an excellent introduction to course development” and “I think the medium has great potential, especially the combination of audio and computer conferencing. Let's do it again!” The sessions started with keynote presentations and included training on course development, coupling educational theory with actual practice. This was followed by group sessions whereby each group worked together on developing courses in a focused collaborative environment.

The organization of the two online training workshops was consistent with the literature surrounding learning organizations (Senge, 1990) and knowledge building communities of practice (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1994). This was evident in the sustained communications participants enjoyed with Odyssey staff attending the sessions, and the fact that Odyssey staff participated in the keynote presentations and online discussions throughout the two workshops. School-based participants, Odyssey staff, and presenters operated within the constraints of the three principles of organizations for learning (Crichton, 1997) as they were given opportunities (1) to develop personal mastery, (2) function in an environment that promoted innovation, and (3) were encouraged to engage in holistic thinking and understanding concerning e-learning.

In the first instance personal mastery was achieved as all participants were encouraged to ask questions, engage in social interaction with their peers and colleagues, and build personal knowledge from the information presented. Second, participants were required to actively use conferencing software to attend. There was little direct instruction (lecturing) in the sessions as individuals were working at their own computers rather than sitting passively in a conference room. Third, the event and the content were publicized well in advance with opportunities for modification and interaction. The conferencing software was permissive of questions, both text and voice, and because it was archived, participants could replay the sessions at a later time.

In analyzing the online training sessions it was found that Odyssey, as a company, functioned as a learning organization and modeled the type of learning experiences for its clients it intends its clients to provide for their learners. Jacobsen & Goldman (2001) point out that, “teachers have the right to experience the type of learning environments that they are called upon to provide for children” (p. 105), and it is generally accepted that educational change will not occur until teachers are given the same opportunities to learn with technology as they are expected to offer their students. Odyssey, indeed, modeled the learning approach for successful online learning and the intended use of its software. And through that modeling, Odyssey provided a catalyst for change in learning approaches through the use of computer-mediated learning technologies.

When educators are provided opportunity to work with the tools they will be asked to use with students, it appears that a different relationship is formed with both the tool developer and the tool itself. Through direct application of the online software and tools, and by allowing the participants to be students, teachers are able to experience the student view and experience the type of learning they are expected to provide. Many participants commented (through subsequent email) that the sessions increased their understanding of the importance of pacing and presentation of content, causing them to reflect on the “shovel-ware” potential of presenting too much content in relation to the opportunity to engage in social interaction.

The value of collegial sharing in a supportive learning environment also cannot be undervalued. As no one individual “owned” the training session, or had the responsibility of being host for the day, all participants were equal and fully able to participate in the activities instead of concerning themselves about conference arrangements such as coffee, meals, etc. Therefore, participants were able to relax and enjoy each other’s contributions to the actual content.

The conferencing software used allowed for presentation materials to be archived and accessed asynchronously by participants. In three cases, individuals approached the keynote speaker for presentation materials as they felt it would be of value in their own presentation to school boards and colleagues. As well, the entire sessions were recorded for use later. This notion of archived, synchronous, online training as asynchronous resources for future learning objects is beginning to be explored as part of the evolving e-pedagogy of online training.
Innovative Practices for Innovators

The efficiencies and reduced operating costs afforded through online, collaborative approaches are often enough of a reason for moving training online. However, given the experience attested to in the study, how that training is constructed in an online environment is crucial. The notion of online interactions as both subsequent learning objects as well as the opportunity to ‘walk the talk’ of software tools is important for further research. Online training, such as the case presented here, can support the three principles of organizations for learning whereby participants gain mastery on timely topics, more freely, while actual costs are reduced – and the actual learning is the same or better.

The case presented here is only an example of the match between training and software promise. While efficiency and cost will probably be the motivation to explore online training further, the need to explore and support evolving e-pedagogy is essential. As online learning tools develop and their potential is determined, the lessons learned from initial online training efforts should begin to inform our practice and cause us to reflect on an emerging e-pedagogy needed to fully utilize the online learning potential.

References


