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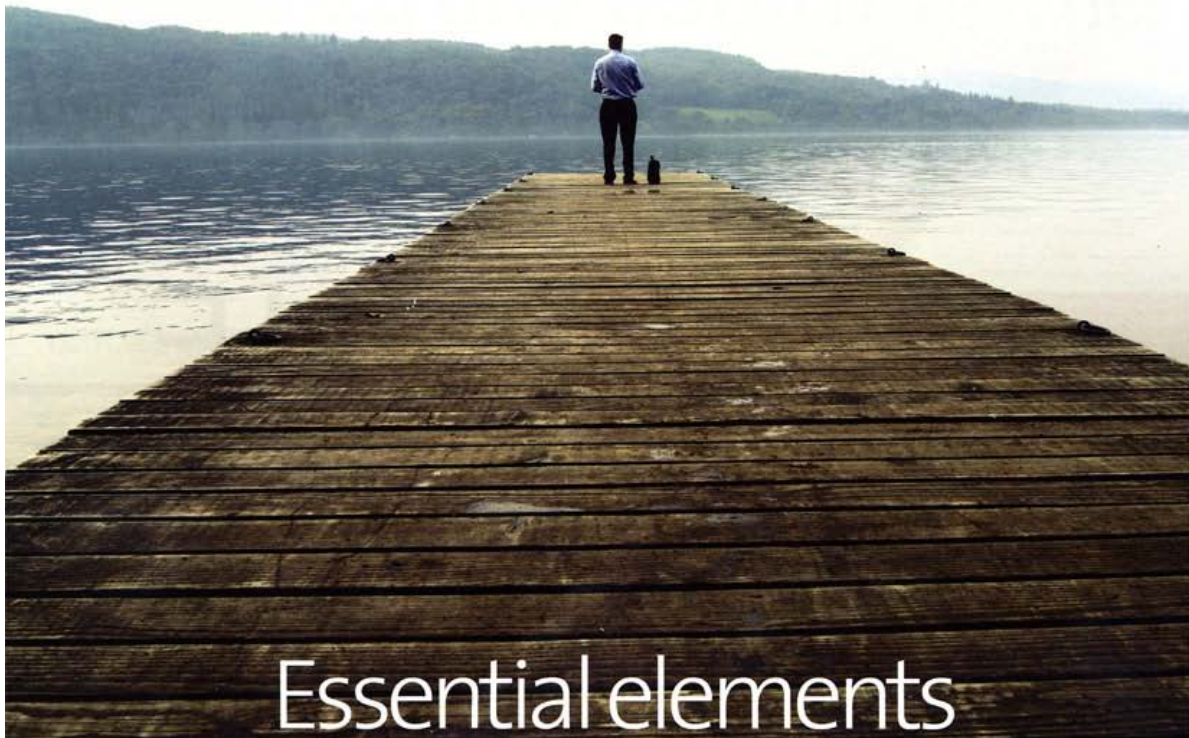
# Lost and confused?

A solution is in sight

october 2008

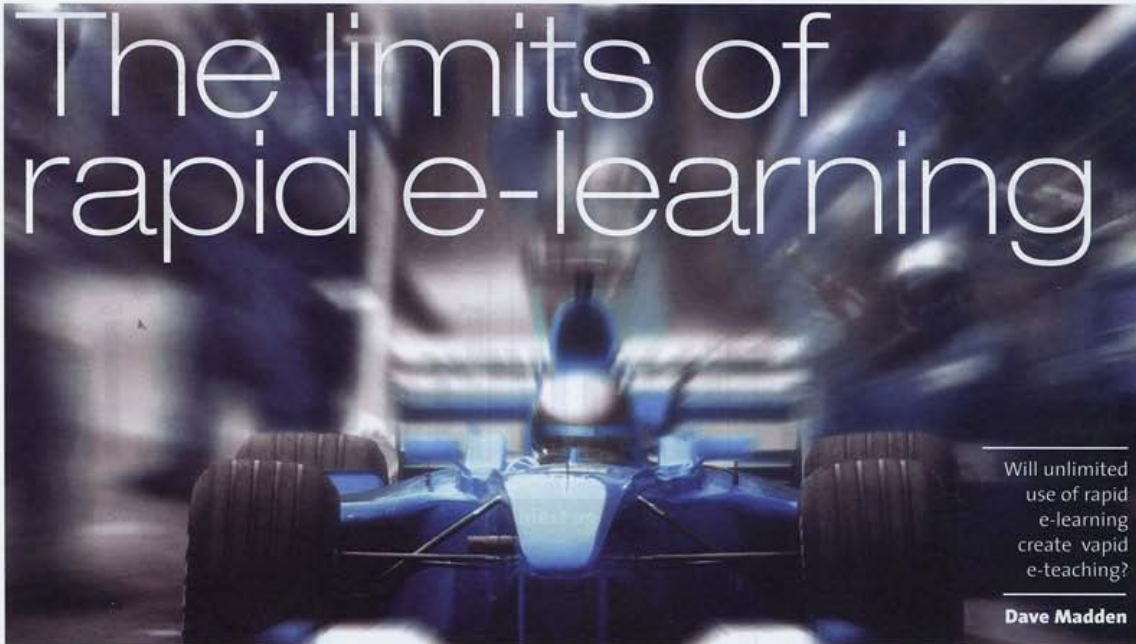
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# Essential elements

# The limits of rapid e-learning



Will unlimited use of rapid e-learning create rapid e-teaching?

Dave Madden

It is unusual to open an e-learning journal without being presented with advertisements, endorsements and articles espousing the merits of rapid e-learning (REL). Pragmatically, REL can be defined as the speedy creation of courseware, often by those without the more esoteric e-learning design skills. Its proponents make compelling claims about cost and time savings, fully functioning prototype developments and resulting seamless rollout. Its opponents question the validity of these claims.

## The case for REL

The need to develop e-learning products more quickly is uncontested on several fronts. Things move fast these days and change quickly. Critical corporate information has to be urgently formulated and disseminated, whether for the upskilling of internal audiences or for competitive advantage.

This is particularly true for large, distributed organisations that, for example, need to broadcast critical data on new products or product versions to sales people and support staff. Follow-on training may be required for demonstrations or simulations. Distributed educational organisations also need to reach remote learners regularly with new information, courses, or updates. For these clients, REL must seem like a godsend.

But how do costs pan out and are there savings to be made in REL development? That is a question with no specific answer and opinions differ on development costs for bespoke products, depending on the amount and quality of multimedia elements, the intensity of interactivity, the integrity and exactitude of simulations, and so on. What is certain is that a cost of £10,000 is not unreasonable for an hour's e-learning incorporating significant elements of obligatory audio visual and interactivity. Essentially, the more you save on development time, the more you save on costs.

Prototyping is another issue in the value of REL. The main purpose of developing a prototype is to show the client what the product will look like, before it exists – a preview, if you like, of the interface and key elements within the product. The idea is to get sign-off on the fundamental design features and metrics, so that the decks are cleared to focus on the best content representation.

The problem with prototypes is that they can go either of two ways. The first way is to develop a genuine prototype that truly represents the major screen types and their corresponding functionality. This is high risk for two reasons. It will cost a lot of time and money; and significant elements may be modified or rejected by the client. What the client sees as a few tweaks here and there, the developer sees as weeks of development time. And the tweaks

have an irritating habit of becoming iterative.

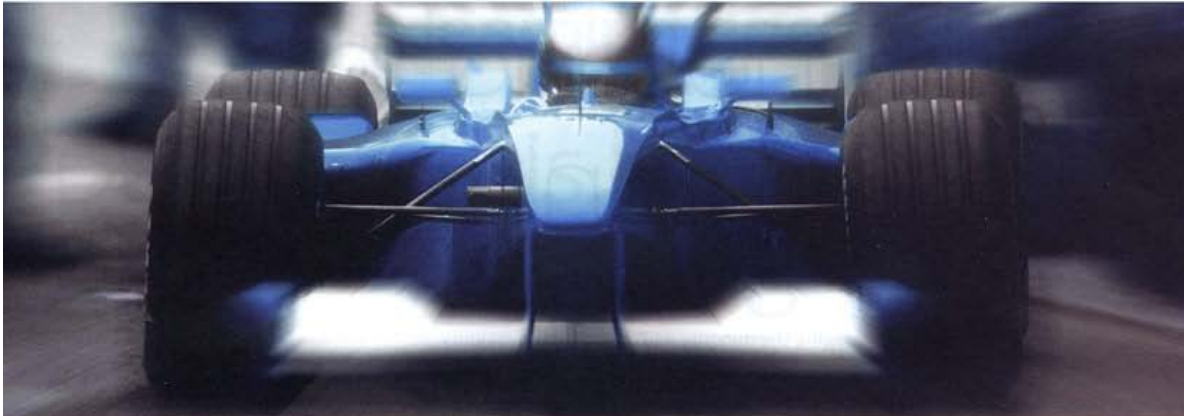
Because of these risks, many companies are tempted to take the second prototype route, cobbling together a set of screens with little or no functionality.

This, too, has risks. Following a sign-off that is uncomfortably tentative, full development starts. This means it is very late in the day when the client has the chance to sign off on true functionality. Looking at these prototype options, traditional, bespoke development can become a case of 'damned if you do, and dammed if you don't', with time consuming tweaks being demanding early or late in the process.

Basically, REL is a suite of templates for presentations, quizzes, animations and interactions. The templates are easily customised, so the same template used to illustrate, say, a process or a knowledge hierarchy, can look very different when customised to different individual client preferences and corporate cultures. Further, client tweaks are easy to do and functionality is built in from the start.

This suggests that REL makes cost-effective prototyping possible. Rollout is correspondingly quicker because speedy feedback from stakeholders and end users is possible before serious development begins.

Some REL enthusiasts suggest a more active role for the subject matter expert (SME) during development, with the expert taking an active part in



the design and content collation process. Traditional development defines the role of the SME as the person who brain dumps stream of consciousness data onto the instructional designer who, in turn, imposes structure and design. A developer then programmes the interactions and animations, and all are quality assured by a specialist team.

The new role in REL development suggests that the person who knows the content could also develop it quickly and easily by simply pouring it into well designed instructional buckets. The intention, effectively, is to cut out a middle person, or two. The instructional designer is hardly needed, the argument goes, as the tools themselves have been well designed to capture the instructional imperatives. As functionality is fully built into the templates, the role of the developer can also be appropriately downgraded and, perhaps, eliminated.

#### Challenging the claims

Using an REL approach may deliver savings, but are those savings a false economy? We can assume there is a training need and that current, or imminent, performance deficiency is costing enough to embark on a serious training intervention. This means we would look for a return on investment, which will depend on two of Kirkpatrick's levels, learning and the application of learning. If the intervention does not deliver on these, then the investment should not be made.

Suppose you save £50,000 by creating training using the REL approach, but three months down the line you find you have made little, or no, impact on the performance issue. Will your attitude be, 'Hey, we got it out quick and cheap, let someone else worry about whether they learned and how to get

people to apply the learning'. Surely not, this scenario is more than a false economy, it is money down the drain.

There needs to be measurement of learning, evidence of learning and evidence of learning application. Is '21 days or less', as one vendor claims, enough time to collate content, structure it, design around it, devise learning measurement strategies, build implementation services and facilitate the application of learning?

Of course, SMEs are a key cog in the development wheel. But are they really good at issues such as: identifying learning outcomes, conditions and standards; catering for different learning styles; presenting material in an engaging way; suggesting core graphics, visual themes and metaphors; specifying multiple choice, matching, sequencing and other question types; writing plain and simple English with a Fog Index score that suits the audience; designing and writing scripts for drama and voiceovers for best practice video; and assessing learning?

Perhaps we should extend the model and let everybody multiskill. We could suggest that the graphic artist tries her hand at defining the learning outcomes, the project manager writes the tests and the instructional designer has a go at creating the graphics.

The fact is that many SMEs do not know a great deal about teaching. We need to remember what the letters SME stand for and why the instructional designer was put in place to work with the subject matter expert in the first place.

A while ago, Spitting Image showed a good sketch. A young musician entered a recording studio and said he had an idea he would like to try out. He was immediately peppered with questions: is it a remix – no; an up-tempo version of a Robbie


Williams song – no; a rap version of a Bee Gees number – no. When the musician eventually explained that he had written a completely new song, he was greeted with blank, uncomprehending, faces.

#### What price creativity?

Sometimes new things need to be created as not everything will fit into a template. If design is restricted to templates, by definition, creativity is limited and there is a risk of squeezing content into an ill-fitting structure.

There is no denying that REL offers huge savings in time, money and rollout. The templates usually provide a good instructional, functional, human computer interaction and visual standard, and there is no point reinventing the wheel when templates can be used for short and straightforward e-learning products.

However, we need to heed Dempsey and Van Eck's warning about mastering the tools of creation, while ignoring the science of learning. As they write in *Distributed Learning and the Field of Instructional Design*, 2007: "If we do not embrace this challenge [of educating clients about the value of good instructional design], we run the risk of abdicating the design of online learning to those who master the tools of creation and ignore the science of learning."

We cannot afford to let the financial tail wag the instructional dog. REL that does not deliver demonstrable, measurable learning and learning application should be avoided. 

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