

## USING THE TOOLS YOU ALREADY HAVE...

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**Abstract: Converting an existing classroom professional development course to an online format can be a tricky, time-consuming undertaking. The easy way out — simply moving the content and lecture portions to an electronic means of delivery — is what leads to e“Learning” at its worst: slide after slide of bulleted information and loss of engaging activities and the contributions of individual instructors. Rapid e-learning tools make it easy to create your courses, but they don’t replace instructional design. The reality for many is that you have no money and time, so the default position is to build simple, click-and-read courses. But it doesn’t have to be that way. If you want to build engaging and interactive e-Learning, there’s a way to do so, even on a limited budget and with a tight timeline.**

Two things always stand out:

There is no one way to do elearning. We use the same words, but we don’t always mean the same thing. Some people build courses, some create marketing material, and some use the rapid elearning software to create multimedia information.

People don’t have money. It doesn’t matter if you’re from a big company or small; odds are you are working on a limited budget. That means you’ve got to be creative with the resources you have.

I get a lot of questions about how to get started with building e-learning courses. I want to introduce a simple framework to help develop your elearning skills. It’s based on what I see as a common evolution in the skills of the people I meet at conferences. The rapid e-learning story usually reads something like this.

1. *Put This Course Online* - You get a PowerPoint file that was used in the classroom and are asked to convert it to an elearning course. So you clean up the slides a bit because it’s wordy and full of odd clip art. Then you publish it to quickly convert it from PowerPoint to Flash. Once published, it’s uploaded and released the world. Everyone’s happy and you’re the hero. In fact, your hands hurt from all of the high-fiving.
2. *Make This Course Look Better* - After a while people tell you that the courses all kind of look like PowerPoint slides. They want something that looks different and “less PowerPointy.” You put on your graphic designer hat and start to make courses that look really good. No one would know that the courses were ever built in PowerPoint. Once again, you’re the hero.
3. *We Need More Interactivity* - While they love your elearning courses, you start getting requests for more than presentation of information. They want courses that focus on action and help people do something better. They ask for more interactivity with a focus on performance. This means that you shift your focus away from presentation and more towards learner-centric interactivity.

### **Beyond Getting Started**

Most people I talk to are one or two person teams. They tend to work by themselves and have to be project manager, instructional designer, graphic designer, multimedia developer, and IT technician. That’s a lot to cover and there aren’t many places to get help, especially when you’re by yourself. So here are a few things to consider about what it takes to get your rapid elearning production off the ground. I like to keep things simple, so I broke it into three groups: authoring, assets, and instructional design.

#### **Rapid Authoring**

While there are a lot of choices out there, there is no right or wrong solution. The applications are just tools to help you do your job. You need to know which one is best for you considering your budget, time, and resources. When shopping for tools I recommend that instead of looking at a list of features, you build the same mini module with each tool. Then you can test three things:

1. *Software*: Using the same basic module for each application allows you to do a better “apples-to-apples” comparison. You’ll get a sense of how the applications work and what type of workflow exists.
2. *Support*: Since the software is new to you and you won’t be completely familiar with it, you’ll have many questions and may need some help. This is a great time to test the customer support. Buying software is one thing; getting support after you buy, is another. You may save money on the software purchase and end up spending a lot more down the road trying to get help.
3. *Community*: Software vendors make software, but real users will come up with the workarounds and best practices. That’s why you want to connect with the user community. It’s like having an elearning team in your cubicle. Check to see how active the software’s user community is. Post some questions and see how long it takes to get answers. An active user community is critical to your success.

The tool you already have. You can do a search online and find all sorts of whining and complaining about how PowerPoint is lame. Know what? They’re all wrong. Not only is PowerPoint not lame, it’s probably one of the most versatile and exciting applications out there. The problem is that many people just don’t know how to access all of the PowerPoint goodness. But the problem is that most people think of PowerPoint in the wrong way. They’re still stuck in the PowerPoint-as-presentation-tool mentality, which typically causes them to create boring, linear, click-and-read courses. To successfully use PowerPoint for rapid elearning, you need to do two things:

1. Rethink how you use PowerPoint. Most people approach it from a linear presentation mindset, building slides the same way they would for face-to-face presentations. That just doesn’t work for elearning.
2. Learn to use PowerPoint’s features. Once you scratch the surface of the tools available in PowerPoint, you’ll see it’s more than adequate for building great elearning. In many ways it’s the ideal choice because it offers a blend of speed, ease-of-use, and cost savings. Use a blank slide as your starting point. Step away from linear slides, think in layers. By design PowerPoint is going to publish your slides like you’d publish a book. You start at page one and keep turning until you get to the end. This works in many cases. However, when you design your courses in PowerPoint, it’s important to see your slides from a slightly different perspective. Think of your slide like a bucket of information. Your job is to connect the information. Sometimes the default linear settings work and sometimes you have to create your own branching and navigation. When I was a kid, I had an anatomy book where some of the pages were transparent. I could lift up the skin and various organs to get down to the bones. Think of your slides in the same way. Instead of linear pages, they can be like layered transparencies. To the learner it looks like a single slide, but in reality, it’s just a series of slides. The learners don’t see PowerPoint slides. They see a single screen. All you’re doing is layering information on the screen so that when they click it just looks like the same screen with some new content.

They’re just tools that build multimedia. Vendors design tools with features. But if you can step away from what the vendor calls the product and how they present the features, you’ll learn to get more value out of the tools.

### **Rapid Assets**

Rapid elearning is attractive because you can create effective elearning courses with little or no programming required. That’s great for the programming part of the course. But what about everything else? Who’s going to design the look and feel? Where will you get your graphics and any of the other assets you need for the course? In the same way, rapid authoring helps you not be a programmer, rapid assets is about acquiring the multimedia assets you need without being a multimedia developer or graphics artist. Here are a few resources and ideas to help you with the assets:

Microsoft Office Online. If you’re a licensed user of the Microsoft products you have free access to the many templates and media assets they make available. This is a good place to start especially since they’ve recently updated the site.

**Stock Image Sites.** There are a dozens of stock image sites where you can buy low cost images. For elearning courses, you don't need to buy the high resolution images. I usually buy the \$1-\$3 versions and they work fine.

**Free Assets.** There are many sites that give away open source content or images under creative commons licenses. The key is to understand the agreements so that you can make sure that free use is really free use, especially for commercial products.

**Interactive Web Sites:** Today you can find all sorts of free content creation tools online. They'll provide an embed code that you can place in your courses.

**Connect with the Community.** A great resource for free content is by connecting with your user community. Take advantage of your user community.

**Create Your Own.** You can modify the clip art images or take your own photos. If you have advanced skills you can use illustrator or even PowerPoint to create your own media assets. If you do have some skills, consider sharing with others in the community. They'll appreciate it.

These are a few resources to get you started.

Most of us are in the same boat. We have authoring software that's easy enough to use. But an elearning course is more than authoring software. So when it comes time to design the course with a budget of \$1.17, we need to find easy and cost-effective ways to build stuff that looks good. If you're working with limited resources, it's important to be scrappy. You never know what you'll find that you can use for your elearning courses.

Keep it simple. Since most of us aren't graphic designers it helps to have a few simple rules to keep us from creating a mess. At a minimum find the right type of background that lets you craft a visually immersive screen. Just changing a background can do wonders. Then limit yourself to two fonts. One for the titles and one for the body. Determine your color palette before you start building. You probably only need three or four. Determine how you'll use them and then be consistent throughout the course. A few simple rules applied with intention go a long way.

## **Rapid Instructional Design**

Building courses is becoming easier. And finding the right assets to build them is becoming easier. However, these by themselves don't build effective elearning. You still need to apply some sort of instructional design. And that's not always easy. The challenge for many tasked with building elearning courses is that they don't have the formal instructional design background. So what are they to do? A while back I watched this video about deploying inflatable concrete shelters. What struck me is that the person who set the structure up didn't need to be an engineer. Basically, all he needed was a way to move, inflate, and hydrate it. An engineer designed the structure for rapid deployment. But someone else actually deployed it. Seems we could do the same for instructional design. Build a few instructional design models that people can use to build their courses. Treat them like modular pieces that can be moved around and assembled. They won't build flight simulator training with these models, but they'll be able to build decent elearning courses that will be more than click-and-read.

Your subject matter experts will always give you more information than you need. But, you don't need every piece of information they have to share. As an instructional designer, your job is to determine what to keep and what to leave out? As you sort the content, you'll end up with two piles. One pile has "need to know" information and the other pile has "nice to know." The "need to know" is used to build learning activities to help change the learner's behaviors. The "nice to know" is resource data to provide additional information if the learner wants or needs it. Have the learner use the "need to know" information in a real world context. Instead of doing an information dump with multiple slides of bullet points and text, create a situation where the learner needs to use the new information. Generally, you'd do something like this to share the information with the learners: Set up the real-world scenario and then provide critical background information. The learner will go through a decision-making process. At that point you can provide additional information. After the learner makes a decision, you can provide even more information as feedback. As you can see, this simple approach gives you three ways to pump information into the course that you might have previously just put on a few screens with bullet points.

Use the "nice to know" information as a way to augment the course content. Some learners like to know more before they make decisions. They'll want some of the information you pulled out of the course. There are a number of ways you can provide access to the additional content without dragging down the course or interfering with the learning process. Here are a few ideas. Link to a help line. This could be a link to an intranet site or if you

want to get creative you can create a virtual helper like an HR assistant who can provide more information. It could be as simple as a clip art image of “Sally the HR Manager” that links to a screen with additional information. Compress the data into resource tabs. Create additional documentation that the user can access. You can put it online as a simple web page or publish a PDF that the learner can download and use as a resource later.

You’re always going to have more information than you need for the course. Clear learning objectives (tied to performance expectations) provide a framework for filtering out the critical information from all of the extra information. Keep focused on how the learners use the course content and build activities that let them get the information in a way that’s real to their world. In this way, you’ll streamline your course content and build courses that have a positive impact on your organization.

### ***Learner Motivation***

Those who design elearning courses are the bridge between the client who has specific expectations and the learner who has to take the course. Ideally, the learner has expectations but sometimes they take the course because they have to and not because it’s what they want to do. Building the bridge for performance-based courses is a little easier. Because the client has performance expectations, you’re better able to build the learning environment around performance. So they tend to be more relevant to the learners. Ultimately, the learner knows that the measure of success isn’t in the course, but instead in improved performance. So their motivation is a different. It’s more challenging when you build information-based courses. I’ve found that the client is almost exclusively focused on the information rather than the learning. This is where the instructional design comes in. How do you create a learning process when most of it is focused on information? The good thing is that motivated learners require less effort on your part. For example, I was doing a home improvement project and need to learn how to put up crown molding. I did a search online and found the information I needed. It was bland information with boring old text, no multimedia, and interactivity. However, I didn’t mind, because I was motivated to learn.

So the key to success is to influence the learner’s motivation. This works for performance or information-based courses. To do this, put yourself in the learner’s perspective and answer these three questions.

*1. Why am I taking this course?* It’s important to develop learning objectives and then build the course content around meeting those objectives. This is good. However, what that usually translates into is a bullet point list of “You will learn this…” type of objectives. While showing a list of objectives to your learner isn’t bad, what you really want to do is convince the learner that this course is valuable and will make a difference in what they do or know. When the learners understand that the course has value, their motivation increases. And motivation translates to a better learning experience. So when you craft objectives for the course, it’s less about presenting a list and more about getting the learner to perceive value and understand how the course helps them. That’s why scenarios and case studies are so effective. They show the learner the course information in a relevant context. This helps them perceive its value.

*2. What am I supposed to do with this information?* No one likes to waste time on irrelevant elearning courses. When people commit their time to a course, they want to know why it’s important and then what they’re expected to do with this new information. That’s why you build your information around what you expect the learner to do. Even compliance training is built on a foundation of performance expectations. You don’t prevent hearing loss because your employees know they need to wear ear plugs. Instead, you prevent it because your employees are actually wearing the ear plugs.

*3. How can I prove what I know?* Everything centers on what actions you expect. When people know what the expectations are, they’re diligent to achieve them. Let’s go back to the argument in a previous post about why people just click through the course. The reason they click through is because they perceive that the content is not relevant. In that case, the only performance expectation they have is to complete the course. So they are diligent to demonstrate that they can complete the course. In a sense, because we haven’t answered the first two questions, our course design incents them to click through to completion. You can prevent this in several ways: 1. Make the course relevant to the learner. 2. Help the learner understand how they’ll use the information. 3. Create a way for the learner to prove they understand it. The closer you can get to how they would apply the information in the real world, the better the learning experience. Quiz questions are fine, but the reality is that we rarely have to make multiple choice

decisions outside of elearning courses and the occasional Cosmopolitan survey. Ideally we design a way to measure the learners understanding that is more than selecting correct answers.

I read of a school that was teaching about nutrition. They could have given a quiz to measure understanding. Instead, they had the children design a week's worth of menus for a summer camp. The menus had to be healthy and they had to explain their choices. As you can imagine, based on the menus designed, you'd get a better sense of the learner's understanding than if you just had them select from a list of correct answers.

I've been in this industry long enough to know when and why we make the courses we do. The reality is that a lot of times the courses are pointless and don't warrant a lot of extra effort. In fact, you might actually save the organization money by making them as simple as possible and letting people get back to work. I also know that it's a lot easier to make courses centered on the information rather than the learner. They require less effort and time. And to get around learner dropout (which can be anywhere from 25% to 50%), we'll do things like lock the navigation and make courses compulsory. However, if you really want to bring value to your courses and make them meaningful to your learners, answer these three questions:

1. Why I am taking this course?
2. What am I supposed to do with all of this information?
3. How can I prove I know it?

How would you design your courses to answer these questions?