

## **Happy New Year!**

It seems like years are just flying by. How is it possible that we are already into 2012? Like most everyone, we experienced a busy year. While the economy has not significantly turned around, business is definitely showing signs of picking up. Organizations are becoming more open to exploring ways to improve performance and some even have the budgets to do it. Some companies that had virtually obliterated their training, development and performance support groups are now seeking ways to "tool up" again.

While client organizations were in a retrenchment mode, we began to contemplate what retirement might look like. We began exploring Los Angeles, our home town, in ways we had never had time for. We made a conscious effort to develop deeper relationships with neighbors and casual friends. We became kid sitters for three surrogate "grandchildren." We came up with new ways we can contribute to our community. No, we aren't yet ready to retire, but we've appreciated having some less pressured time to reflect and reconsider priorities. We have begun setting goals, creating timelines and "practicing" for a more balanced lifestyle. We love the results.

Wherever you are in your career, it is never too early to begin exploring the "next chapter" in your life story. We are often reminded that this is our life, not a dress rehearsal. When you are passionate about what you do, it is difficult to imagine your life without work. However, with true professionals the line between work and leisure is often so blurred that one sometimes becomes the other. Take the time to assess the quality of your life. In our case, after so many active years, we have done this. We used the tools of our trade and applied what we know about learning and performance to other areas of our lives and to supporting family and friends in their business and life endeavors. That's our next chapter. What's yours?

Our best to you in whatever you choose to do in the next year – both professionally and personally!

Erica and Harold

## **What Makes For Quality Online Learning? Harold D. Stolovitch, Erica J. Keeps & Marc Rosenberg**

A constant theme that permeates most discussions of online learning is that of *quality*. As with any form of training, one aspect of quality is that it supports specific learning and organizational objectives. After all, any course that doesn't deliver this shouldn't be offered. For technology-based learning, an important aspect of quality is its instructional soundness and versatility. How do you maintain high-quality learning effectiveness in a medium where no instructor is present to answer questions or adjust the content based on expressed learner

interests? The short answer is through well-designed instruction based on analyses that draw out, in advance, learner and organizational needs.

Poorly designed online learning hurts quality. Even when the technology works well, the screens are beautiful and exciting, and a large amount of multimedia is available, if no meaningful learning results from all of this, everyone's efforts – yours, the learners and their managers – have been wasted. The careful, systematic crafting of online instruction, complete with tryout and revision cycles using real learners, is an essential characteristic of quality online learning design.

E-learning, or, for that matter, any technology-based instruction, can be disappointing in many ways. Think of the last time you interacted with an online course. In the list below, check off any item that matches one of your experiences:

1.  The content was incomplete, incomprehensible, boring or just plain wrong.
2.  There was no alignment between what was taught and what was really needed on the job and no alignment between the course and the organization's goals.
3.  The online course was primarily a lecture on the computer, or a seemingly endless run of slides, with little for the learner to do except read pages of text, watch long-winded "talking heads," and press "next" to continue.
4.  There was more form than substance. Lots of "clicky-clicky bling-bling" (a term coined by Cammy Bean at the e-learning design firm, Kino), referring to too many animations, extraneous sounds and superfluous graphics that overwhelm the instructional message.
5.  Interactive exercises within the course were not challenging and the feedback following the exercises was not comprehensive enough to let learners know where they required more study or practice. Overall, learners received little guidance on how they were doing.
6.  The course focused more on entertaining learners than on educating them. While the course may have been fun, very little applicable learning was produced
7.  The course was of low value after it was completed. Information in the course proved too hard to retrieve back on the job, so there was no way to "refresh" without enrolling in the online course all over again – something most learners are loath to do.

8.  The learners perceived the online tests as being afterthoughts that failed to measure the most important skills and knowledge acquired from the course.
9.  The course was complicated from a navigational perspective. Learners got lost and could not locate required content. If they stopped before they completed a lesson, they had to start over. There was no mechanism within the course to track and record where a learner had left off.
10.  Little to no reinforcement or support followed the online instruction. While this is important for all types of training, it is particularly critical with online learning. Since learning online is frequently an individual experience, often learners need to talk with others about what transpired in order to confirm that they had learned correctly and had focused on what was essential.

The preponderance of online courses is not designed perfectly, hence many will show some of the weaknesses listed above. Fairly good ones, with the guidance of competent and experienced training professionals, can be much improved. However, too many online learning experiences are riddled with so many weaknesses that learning is significantly hindered and improvement is simply not practical. In these cases, the wisest choice is to start over – a sadly expensive course of action to undertake.

To avoid the necessity of having to begin again, do it correctly the first time. Here are 10 ways to increase the probability of developing your online learning so that it produces desired results right from the start:

- **Right content.** First and foremost, make sure you are training on the right content. This means that the information you include should be accurate, relevant, complete and interesting for the target audience. You achieve this by conducting a proper front-end analysis or needs assessment and gaining access to one or more truly qualified subject-matter experts. Testing the content with actual learners can go a long way toward eliminating problems before they become embedded in the course and, thus, much more expensive to fix.
- **Strong alignment.** Assuring strong alignment between the course and business goals is essential if the learner is to gain the value that was intended from the course. Vetting the course with key stakeholders will help here.
- **True interactivity.** Making the course truly interactive is a hallmark of excellent online learning. From simple, well-thought-out knowledge quizzes to complex simulations, taking the time to create a highly

interactive experience that requires the learner to exercise the brain in addition to the mouse button-finger provides large payoffs in learning gain. Remember, in a simulated, e-learning environment, the learner can try out techniques and ideas that might not be practical in the real world. This “safe failure” capability can be a powerful interactive approach, helping people learn from their mistakes without risk to others. Our best advice here is to provide as much opportunity for practice as you can. Then, find ways to provide even more. Just remember: Telling ain’t training.

- **Valued experience.** Making a course fun is not necessarily bad. However, focusing on “edutainment” at the expense of learning is a growing problem. Learners appreciate value – online courses that give them what they need, in the shortest period of time. If they get that, whether or not they had fun will not be an issue.
- **Few distractions.** Moderation and purpose are key when considering what “special features” of your authoring tool to use and how often to use them. Bear in mind that just because you can use exciting animations, doesn’t mean you should. The test question is always, “Will it contribute to the learning process?”
- **Useful on the job.** Design the course so that the learner can easily refer back to specific, application-oriented parts of it once back on the job. If the course has job aids and other tools embedded in it, create simple and easy ways to access those tools once the instruction has ended.
- **Powerful feedback.** Always keep in mind that the online learner usually has no one at hand to assist in case of a problem or a lack of understanding. That is why your feedback and model answers for every activity should be as comprehensive as possible. If the learner can understand where a problem lies and remediate it quickly, learning and retention skyrocket. The probability of transferring back to the job what was learned also increases significantly.
- **Valid assessments.** At the end of an online experience, most learners want to know how they’ve done. If an end-of-course assessment is going to be used, make sure it’s designed well and measures what’s truly important. Tie test items closely to the objectives of the course.
- **Good human factors.** Create a great user experience. If learners become frustrated with the interface or navigation within the course, they may leave and never come back.
- **Integrated follow-up.** When learners have had a good learning experience and feel both competent and confident that they can apply what they acquired, support at their worksites is essential to ensure they

try out what they have gained. Therefore, when you launch your online learning programs, make certain support resources in the form of immediate supervisors or knowledgeable colleagues, who are familiar with the content, and who are able to serve as post-training coaches, are available to help learners integrate new skills and knowledge into the job.

**This article is an excerpt from Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keep's bestselling book, *Telling Ain't Training – Updated, Expanded and Enhanced*. For more information, visit <http://www.hsa-lps.com/To%20order.htm>.**

## **Myths and Myth-Conceptions in Learning and Performance**

We're working on a new book with Dr. Steve Condly of Westpoint Academy entitled It Ain't Necessarily So - Science Versus Lore in Learning and Performance. Where do learning and performance myths come from? We all hold beliefs about what works and what doesn't. But are they based on scientific evidence that support them? This new book will examine commonly held beliefs in learning and performance and present evidence to support, invalidate or nuance them.

Does intelligence play a powerful role in training success or performance results? Are happy employees more productive? Is e-learning more effective than classroom training? What's the scoop with learning styles? Is the Net Generation of learners and workers significantly different from previous ones? These are only a few of the questions the book will explore.

Help us on our hunt to determine which assertions about learning and performance are based on solid scientific evidence and data-based empirical results and which are either blatantly false or extrapolations and overgeneralizations from narrow sets of scientific findings. You can contribute by submitting so-called myths or truisms. We will investigate them, determine their origin and explore the research and theory literature to uncover evidence to confirm or refute them. Please send your contributions to Erica Keeps at [ekeeps@hsa-lps.com](mailto:ekeeps@hsa-lps.com).

## **About Us**

At HSA Learning & Performance Solutions LLC, we've seen a lot over the years. We know the business of learning. We know the role human performance plays in business success. We know how to uncover and address needs, then create appropriate solutions. We pride ourselves on helping organizations achieve high levels of performance - and success. HSA is a leader in workplace learning and performance improvement. Our proven learning and performance solutions have helped maximize employee performance at dozens of organizations throughout the world. Our principals, Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keeps, share a common passion - developing people. Together they have devoted a combined

total of over 80 years to make workplace learning and performance both enjoyable and effective. Their dedication to improving workplace learning and performance is reflected in the workshops they run internationally on training delivery, instructional design and performance consulting. Together, they are co-editors of the first two editions of the Handbook of Human Performance Technology and co-authors of the best-selling, award-winning series of books *Telling Ain't Training - Updated, Expanded and Enhanced*, *Training Ain't Performance*, *Beyond Telling Ain't Training Fieldbook* and *Beyond Training Ain't Performance Fieldbook* published by ASTD Press. They are also co-authors of the Wiley/Pfeiffer Learning & Performance Toolkit Series. To learn more, visit [www.hsa-lps.com](http://www.hsa-lps.com).