

BOOK REVIEW

Marcus Bowles, *Relearning to E-Learn: Strategies for Electronic Learning and Knowledge*, 2004

Dr Marcus Bowles is well known to those interested in E-Learning. The emphasis of his latest work is not on academic based training but rather on corporate training. The corporate training market has been plagued by a failure to apply teaching pedagogy in favour of simply delivering content on-line. Bowles encourages corporations to invest in e-learning on the basis that communication, information transfer and knowledge-based attributes are the key to financial success for modern corporations. Content and technology, the foundations of e-learning can be enhanced by full recognition of *people* and *process*.

Each of the twelve chapters of the book concludes with a summary principle. Chapter 1 *What is Electronic Learning?* identifies the currently existing delivery strategies for e-learning and correctly recognises that interactivity involving the delivery stream is severely limited by network capacity. Of more importance is Bowles' refusal to define e-learning in the context of specific technologies, in favour of the e-learning process involving the acquisition or transfer of knowledge delivered or transacted through electronic means. This technologically neutral definition is to be commended.

Principle 1 E-Learning encompasses a wide diversity of practices in a dynamic rapidly changing field. It must therefore be defined to encompass all learning experiences involving the acquisition or transfer of knowledge.

In Chapter 2, *The E-learning Marketplace*, Bowles purposely avoids a discipline-based or learning-activity viewpoint to e-learning. He argues the demand for on-line, flexible learning products is likely to reshape attitudes to all forms of learning and radically shift the markets for e-learning. The shift will be from the e-learning providers marketing departments to actual user demand — whether from educators or students.

Principle 2 While global forecasts of the e-learning marketplace have suffered from a lack of comparability and reliability, e-learning seems poised for a major transformation driven less by providers' hype than by learner and educator demand.

In Chapter 3, *Promises and Pitfalls*, Bowles examines the reasons why organisations consider e-learning technologies instead of or in combination with more traditional approaches to education. The potential benefits of e-learning identified by Bowles include personal control, availability, personalisation, interactivity, richness of content, hands on instruction etc. All of these potential benefits are soon lost without good instructional design and a failure of e-learning to deliver an obvious return on investment. Of major concern is the unsophisticated training outcome expectations of small to medium sized businesses. Such businesses, it seems, lack ready access to 'credible' advice and tend to opt for experts in industry associations and alike, whatever mode of learning delivery is contemplated. The nature of e-learning makes such an approach doomed from the outset. A more viable approach — well known in the University context — is blended learning, involving the combination of e-learning and other forms of delivery, for example lectures, tutorials etc. Blended learning offers a popular and viable approach for students and instructors. This is an approach which preserves alternative methods of instruction and encourages a gradual adoption of e-learning.

Principle 3 The effective and efficient implementation of e-learning relies on complex interactions between the needs and expectations of learners, facilitators and organizations, all of which must be understood in order to maximize system-wide competitive outcomes.

In Chapter 4, *From Competence [sic] to Capabilities*, Bowles argues that effective e-learning needs to:

- Build collective identity founded on shared meaning;
- Align individual identity with the common purpose; and thus
- Improve productive capacity.

Principle 4 Old paradigms based on e-training need to be revised to ensure that a focus on individual competence related to performance is augmented by targeting identity capabilities, which build purpose, shared meaning and a culture of collaboration.

In a ‘rapidly changing economic environment, learning in general, and e-learning in particular, can be seen as playing a central role in organizational performance.’

In Chapter 5, *Dimensions of Knowledge*, Bowles argues that performance as measured by productive capacity can be increased by enhancing an organisation’s knowledge capital at all levels.

Principle 5 The efficiency and effectiveness of e-learning as a strategic activity should be measured not only in terms of performance and learning outcomes, but also in terms of its overall contribution to an organisation’s potential productive capacity and ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Chapter 6, *Generating Knowledge through Learning*, contrasts e-learning with work-based training. The use of learner-centered pedagogies and continuous self-evaluation, it is argued, can transmit a wider range of skills and knowledge relevant to organisational needs. The great advantage of e-learning lies with the autonomy of self-paced and self-directed learning. The learning process, it is argued, should be led by learner demand rather than being supply driven.

Principle 6 E-learning has maximum strategic impact when it deploys pedagogies and assessment procedures appropriate to the individual learner while enhancing situated performance and strategic thinking.

Chapter 7, *Individual factors in E-Learning Performance*, examines the debate concerning whether e-learning can be perceived as ‘more democratic, collaborative, interactive and driven by personal learning style and preferences than class-room based instruction.’ For this to be true such processes must be designed and implemented. The e-learning environment must be crafted to build strong interrelations between e-learners. Effective e-learning should not be content driven. Bowles argues, ‘To have maximum effect, e-learning processes must encourage self-efficiency, self-reliance, flexibility, reflection and strategic thinking’ by accommodating individual differences and perspectives.

Principle 7 Effective e-learning requires innovative approaches to the design and delivery of learning programs to accommodate individual differences and actively engage learners in developing their ability to acquire knowledge.

In Chapter 8, *Toward Collaborative E-learning*, Bowles argues that productive capacity can be maximised by identifying connections between human beings, infrastructural and social capital resources and capabilities. This is perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from this book. Knowledge thrives from interaction and communication of shared experiences. Such communication needs to be planned in the e-learning environment.

Principle 8 E-learning can be intentionally designed to facilitate collaboration and build shared identity and meaning, thereby establishing a virtuous learning circle of knowledge transfer, innovation and adaptability to organizational change.

In Chapter 9, *Forces of Transformation*, Bowles argues that ‘As electronically mediated interactions stimulate collaboration, old institutional and organisational barriers are being bypassed, producing an unprecedentedly rapid movement of knowledge. This can extend to promoting the convergence of industries, communities and whole societies to encourage massive innovation and change.’ E-learning it is argued can be a catalyst to massive change by enabling exchange of ideas and skills across organisational networks assisting the process of adaptation — and ultimately perhaps organisational survival.

Principle 9 A holistic e-learning strategy can increase an organisation’s responsiveness to change while also acting as an agent of continuous innovation and transformation.

In Chapter 10, *Organisational E-learning: Principles and Pressures*, Bowles argues that e-learning can maximise relationships across internal and external knowledge capital ‘networks’. Each relationship or interaction builds knowledge capital. E-learning can help foster a culture of learning within an organisation. Information can also be captured from other interactions, for example with clients, which in turn can strengthen the knowledge capital of the organisation and its ability to adapt to changing market needs.

Principle 10 E-learning combined with capability reporting can strengthen organizational learning, help to establish a learning culture and facilitate the development of effective learning networks that extend beyond the boundaries of the organization.

Chapter 11, *Transactions and E-service*, refocuses the book squarely on client needs — the importance of the organisation communicating to clients how client needs will be satisfied. The rise of e-commerce has also led to a change in client expectations and the requirement for clients to transact in an electronic environment. E-learning it is argued enables ‘individuals both inside and outside the organization to provide an environment for communication, collaboration and commercial exchange.’

Principle 11 By enhancing the e-learning component of electronic service exchanges, business can build staff and customer capabilities and improve their own responsiveness to customers’ current and future needs.

In the final Chapter, *Building Effective and Efficient E-learning*, Bowles draws together the themes of the book by emphasising that e-learning has a role not only in transferring existing knowledge but more importantly a value-adding role of generating new knowledge, which ultimately builds knowledge capital. The content, tools and the e-learning environment creates purpose amongst individuals and groups internal and external to the organisation. Such interactions build knowledge capital and the ability to adapt to new market conditions based on a learning culture. The task now is to use more effective techniques to evaluate diverse technological and pedagogical approaches to e-learning towards a cycle of improvement — perhaps best perceived as an action research approach rather than a ‘virtuous circle’ as Bowles describes it.

Principle 12 To implement e-learning efficiently and effectively, a quality instructional design process (eg ABBI) must ensure a continuous cycle based on rigorous evaluation at all levels.

The book is disappointing in only one respect, its failure to provide concrete examples to illustrate its central themes. In this sense many readers would view the work as more theoretical and abstract rather than practical. This would be a shame as those more familiar with the content matter can readily think of practical applications for the principles discussed.

The production quality of the book is high. An option to receive the book electronically is commendable. Melbourne University Press in adopting digital print on demand (POD) and on-line access for *Relearning to E-Learn* provides us with a cutting-edge delivery strategy which serves as a useful example of the future of publishing.

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