

QUALITY STANDARDS FOR E-LEARNING?

By Patrick Lambe

Everybody wants to be assured of quality. Most HR and training managers have so little experience of commissioning or buying e-learning for their organizations, that anything that promises some independent, objective assurance, looks attractive. A recent set of documents on quality e-learning courseware issued by Singapore's E-learning Competency Centre (ECC) seemed to promise such an assurance. Yet all is not as simple as it seems.

The E-learning Industry

It's an anxious time for e-learning companies in Singapore. Markets are very unstable and uncertain. Even well-funded players in the field are burning cash faster than the contracts come in. Some have cut back on staff, others shut down.

Singapore is an expensive place to operate in. Some of Singapore's e-learning companies no longer even bother to do business here. They are looking to Malaysia or China for their deals. The costs of creating e-learning content are still high. The market here is still uninformed, cautious, and slow to sign cheques. A number of Indian content houses have set up small sales offices in Singapore, they under-bid local players by large margins, and have the content produced back in India where costs are much lower, and skills readily available.

When Straits Knowledge recently interviewed eighteen local e-learning companies on how they saw the market, 40% of them said they were disappointed with the performance of the past year. 45% of them thought the past year had been okay, and only three companies said it had been good. Only a third of respondents expressed optimism for next year. US company VNU Learning, who have run Online Learning Asia here for the past two years, have cancelled the Asian version of their flagship event for the foreseeable future.

Nervous about Quality?

Some of these anxieties erupted briefly to the surface in September 2002, when the ECC (www.ecc.org.sg) published a consultation document entitled "E-learning Quality Criteria". The criteria were ostensibly aimed at improving awareness of quality standards in e-learning content, but the thing that alarmed many players was that the draft criteria seemed extremely prescriptive, and they were to be used by the IDA in evaluating e-learning courseware for subsidy under its E-learning Early Adopters Programme (eLEAP). So standards-fixated are Singapore companies, that the same week the draft document was circulated, one e-learning provider reported that they had just visited a client who had shown him the draft Quality Criteria and said "Does your courseware fit these standards?"

You can understand the concern. eLEAP is a subsidy programme designed to make it cheaper and therefore more attractive for local companies to buy e-learning. If the Quality Criteria are being treated as de facto standards even while they are still in draft form, then this puts an additional burden on an already hard-pressed industry. It's not so bad if the standards are agreed and represent commonly accepted practice. But the problem was that the criteria as they stood were highly debatable.

Yes, the need to secure eLEAP contracts will incentivise e-learning companies to conform to the criteria. What alarmed all of the players we spoke to – without

exception – was the rigid, over-prescriptive form of the criteria, some of which could not avoid subjectivity, and all of which assumed a narrow kind of information content delivery. It looked as though many quite legitimate forms of e-learning delivery, including simulations, game- or case-based modules, hybrids of face-to-face and self-paced, or online collaboration or classroom modes, would all be penalised by these criteria in their draft form. As one elearning expert told me at the time, "Attaching such guidelines to official recognition (eLEAP funding) will lead to the production of high quality boring courses".

The ECC clearly hadn't anticipated such a response. From their point of view, they had compiled a draft document for discussion by the industry, based on highly reputable recommendations from the American Society for Training and Development, e-learning research firms Brandon Hall and Lguide, and Michigan Virtual University. From IDA's point of view, they have a public accountability to ensure that subsidies go to quality content and effective e-learning, and they have the further mission to promote Singapore as a regional hub for quality e-learning content production. It is in Singapore's interest to disincentivise "fly by night" companies who don't really know what they are doing, but who can persuade the still-learning HRD manager or training manager that they can do a good job.

Over a hundred and thirty people attended the session hosted by ECC to discuss the draft Quality Criteria document. The audience was unfriendly, the discussion fragmented. Lim Kin Chew, Director of ECC, reported afterwards, "Most of the feedback were random shots at criteria that they either wanted to champion or criteria that they don't want to use. Some others were totally against this set of quality criteria. They were worried that we were trying to standardize all the courseware."

In an attempt to build more constructive feedback, the ECC subsequently hosted a series of smaller focus groups among industry practitioners to try and get a better sense of how the criteria could be improved. Three key concerns emerged: all assuming that once you attach funding support to a set of quality criteria, they become a de facto standard for the industry to follow, whether designated standards or not.

Stifling Innovation?

Focusing on over-prescriptive standards according to a narrow conception of what e-learning should look like, would hamper innovation in a still-emerging discipline. Mahboob Mahmood, CEO of Knowledge Platform, drew a parallel with the finance industry. "If you turn these quality criteria into evaluation guidelines for state subsidies, then you are effectively turning ECC into an e-learning regulator. This goes against every other trend in Singapore's approach to regulation as it seeks to become more flexible in a changing economy. Even MAS is gradually divesting its regulatory role, and allowing more freedom in how companies offer products and services in the marketplace."

While most e-learning vendors involved cited concerns over the disincentives to experiment or be creative, Lim Kin Chew of the ECC was sceptical. "Honestly, from my experience with many of the e-learning courses that I have seen so far, there is not much innovation in the e-learning content design. By this I mean adopting new approaches to the teaching and learning of concepts, e.g. using a learning object approach - small chunks of knowledge, frequent reinforcement of learning, activities, using reusable learning resources, etc. Many courseware designers confuse

innovation in e-learning content design with interface design. In the end we end up getting a lot of 'bells and whistles' that tend to give the impression that the courseware is highly innovative!"

Product or Process?

A second theme was that the criteria seemed more concerned with the technical specifications of the courseware, to the detriment of a focus on outcomes of the learning. Stuart Tan of Trans-Neuro Technologies asked "whether the quality assessments ought to focus on the outcome of the courseware developed, rather than physical specifications. We still want to know that e-learning fulfills its objectives." He pointed out that quality management is effectively about processes rather than products.

Francesco della Casa of the IDA supported this perspective. "At the end of the day what we ought to measure is that the learning resource developed for the benefit of the learner actually achieves the objectives for which it was developed, and that there is a mechanism in place to ascertain that. This requires that a 'proper' process was followed when developing the learning resource: to identify the learning needs, analyse the target audience (their learning style, profile etc.) as input to the instructional design (here I think there is a lot of room for creativity and experimentation)."

Stifling a Struggling Industry?

Underpinning much of the emotion in this debate was a sense of the fragility of the Singapore e-learning industry. Brij Bagga of Zenith Infotech expressed his support for the work that ECC has done on technical standards, to ensure that e-learning content and e-learning systems are inter-operable – different pieces of content and different systems can all talk to each other in consistent ways. However, when it comes to "soft" content design issues, the industry itself is too immature for clear, agreed standards to emerge. To try to impose standards, even in the guise of criteria, before the industry has reached a "critical mass" runs the danger of adding a burden to the local industry that it might not survive.

"How much time will it add to the production of content, to have it evaluated according to these criteria?" asked Mahboob Mahmood of Knowledge Platform. "How competitive can we be on time or cost against our regional competitors who do not have to follow these guidelines?" Brij Bagga proposed that the more objective criteria could be maintained as standards, but the less objective ones, should be published as "desirable guidelines" rather than strict standards with financial incentives attached. There was a chorus of assent. Most vendors felt that the draft criteria made an extremely useful outline of desirable features in a certain type of e-learning content. Take away the "standards" label – whether implicit or explicit – and people were suddenly much happier about subscribing to them.

The Cart before the Horse?

Things have moved on since September 2002. After a further round of consultation, the ECC has now published two documents: "Quality Criteria for E-learning Courseware" and "Recommended Processes for E-learning Courseware Development". Many of the suggested amendments have been incorporated, and the new guidelines recognise a wider range of e-learning approaches and techniques. The hoops that vendors have to jump through to qualify for eLEAP status have increased, however. One consultant clapped his hand to his forehead when the two documents came out. "We wanted a *simpler* evaluation mechanism, not a *double*

evaluation, on both courseware and process!" Meanwhile, companies continue to seek contracts, some of them successfully, others with increasing disillusion and despair.

When all you want to do is to buy good courseware, this may all seem like a storm in a teacup. But this story and the issues it unearthed highlight the difficulties of the market, and a fixation with standards even where standards may not be yet appropriate. Maish Nichani of the highly respected elearningpost.com points out that in analogous emergent fields such as web development, widely adopted standards are never decided so quickly: "Mature industries such as the web development industry did not start out by laying down heuristics, rather they spent years conducting field tests and then collating the general findings into a common heuristic set. E-learning on the other hand is a growing industry and field tests are only just beginning."

Los Angeles technology venture capitalist Henry Lichtstein agrees. In a recent article for Taskz.com, he writes: "The iron rule in the story of standards is that standards *follow* practice, they don't *lead*... What eventually becomes a standard typically begins as limited practice that is nurtured and then promoted. Once a practice gains traction, it is subjected to the give and take of a marketplace, and is eventually accepted by a community of users. A community grows up around a practice, and the community influences and then controls its evolution. Some form of committee process is created, within certain boundaries. It is a process fraught with peril: defined too tight, a standard cannot grow; defined too loose, a standard does not yield sufficient benefit. A standard will survive and evolve over time only if it attracts adherents and offers them value."

What does this mean to the HR Director or Training Manager who wants to buy good quality, reliable e-learning? Like the IDA, you are accountable for your investments. You want some sense of rigour and good practice. Like Lim Kin Chew of ECC, you want to be sure that your e-learning courseware provider is working to scalable, sustainable, best-known practices, not just aiming for a quick sale and a bit of ready cash. So download the ECC documents, and use them to educate yourself about pretty good practices. But don't take them as absolute, final truth.

As buyers who have specific learning and performance objectives for your organization, you are the drivers of innovation and creative response. If current standards don't deliver what you need, then commission e-learning that will generate better ones. Join the standards community as a driver of quality. Support Singapore's e-learning industry by challenging it to innovate faster than its competitors overseas, with a constant eye to quality of outcomes and quality of learning. And never treat a standard as a safe haven when it comes to e-learning content. Standards will get you started, but we're still a long way from a true understanding of what quality in e-learning looks like.

Patrick Lambe is Principal Consultant of Straits Knowledge, a Singapore-based consultancy working in knowledge management, e-learning and innovation.