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Embracing Edutainment with Interactive E-Learning Tools

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Embracing Edutainment with Interactive E-Learning Tools

Abstract

Advances in technology are changing how people access data. We are living in an Internet Revolution that will have major impacts on the lives of people. Personal computers (PCs) are the front-runners; they serve as a lifeline for some and a vital household tool for others. In many ways, however, the emerging technology is compelling Extension practitioners to compete with private enterprise and other educational institutions. Unlike synchronous and site-based learning, people can use e-learning tools wherever they are "24/7" year round. Among other things, the products can be "edutaining" for many learners.

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Introduction

Electronic technology is revolutionizing how we learn, entertain ourselves, communicate, do our jobs, and much more. What does it all mean for Extension practitioners? It means that electronic learning or "e-learning" is sending shockwaves throughout the Cooperative Extension System. It means taking advantage of a global approach to learning. Most of all, it means keeping up with strong competition and re-visioning the Extension role in an electronic era.

A shift to adopt e-learning is not universally welcomed, nor is it widely understood. A big reason why some veteran Extension practitioners are hesitant to make the shift rests with them not knowing--"What e-learning is?" and "How to do it."

Defining "E-Learning"

Today, nearly everyone has something to say about e-learning. The American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) online dictionary describes e-learning as a term that covers applications and processes such as Web- and computer-based learning and virtual classrooms. It also includes the delivery of multimedia content via CD-ROMs, DVDs, the Internet, audio- and videotapes, satellite broadcasts, interactive TV, and more. These are learning tools that many people currently use.

Valid Concerns

The evolution of the World Wide Web (WWW) is considered the "new pedagogy of learning" (Muske, Goetting, & Vukonick, 2001). A question that inevitably stirs debates within the academy is "Will ALL people have equal access to electronic information?" The answer depends on which scholar you ask. Before jumping on the "bandwagon of naysayers," let's consider this: now that prices of personal computers (PCs) have dropped, millions of people have one as well as access to the Internet (Ervin & Gilmore, 1999; U. S. Census Bureau, 2000; Fallows, 2004).

People who lack access to PCs or the Internet often go to a friend's home, work, library, school, community center, or other convenient place to use one. Therefore, they may not be at a disadvantage. The greatest drawback may be the lack of "face-to-face" contact with learners (Simeral, 2001). Some people have a need for personal attention, mentoring, and monitoring.

After three decades of outreach experience, we have observed how youth and adults prefer interactive learning rather than reading lots of technical content. A key reflection, however, is to have the content at a reading level that the target audience clearly understands. This insight holds particularly true for people with low-literacy skills (Smoak & Williamson, 2004).

Keeping Pace with E-Competitors

Can Extension create a position among our e-competitors in the new pedagogy of learning market? Yes, if we learn a few lessons from those who are already in the interactive multimedia industry (Brown, 2001). Is it necessary to put everything online? No! One way to deliver multimedia content is via interactive e-learning tools. Users get choices not even imaginable with bland print materials. Kruse (2004) cites the use of multimedia as a way to optimize all three learning styles: auditory, kinesthetic, and visual. So what are Extension practitioners waiting for? They can't be waiting for the audience--it's already there. The popular slogan "Just Do It!" is good advice to follow.

Holding on to traditional mindsets and outreach methods such as peer-to-peer or county-based programming may not be the "best" approach anymore. The preference for electronic delivery of information is going to increase for all audiences (Richardson, Clement, & Mustian, 1997). Extension can use the information age to improve the organization's role without replacing some of the traditional responsibilities of county or state level faculty (Boling & Robinson, 1999; Jackson, Hopper, & Clatterbuck, 2004). The choice is simple: either you accept e-learning and adopt it or risk becoming obsolete.

Two Prototypes

Fantasy PC adventures with lots of "bells and whistles" are more popular than ever before. But rarely do we find examples of how Extension specialists are bridging technical content with entertainment. While there are benefits to be gained from embracing e-learning tools that are interactive, effective, and fun, the challenge is not easy. Our e-learning tools are designed for ages 12 and up. They are:

- **The Water Guardian: Chopper Ride:** This flight simulator focuses on just about any risk that might challenge water supplies--wherever they are! Riders fly a helicopter over "Any County, USA" in search of 36 risks. As the pilot "sites" one on radar and on the ground, he or she has the option to look closer. Each time this choice is made, an explanation of that risk pops up. More information and a "yes" or "no" question is linked to the randomly scattered risks. The pilot's success at answering the questions is kept as a score until the end of the ride.
- **Money Does Grow on Trees:** The intent of this CD is to help woodlot owners understand key points to higher timber profits. The viewer begins with a "money tree," a germane picture, and a question about selling timber. Correct responses get dollars to fly from the tree into a wallet. Otherwise, money goes "poof" and disappears. The program ends with a brief narrative that explains more ideas about selling timber.

Both of these e-learning tools:

- Combine text, audio and animation to express research-based content;
- Provide a positive, relevant and engaging experience; and
- Blend education and entertainment to provide an edutaining experience.

The reading levels of the tools contain:

- Simple, specific, concise language;
- Sentences with eight - 10 words;
- Paragraphs with fewer than five sentences;
- Limited technical and scientific jargon;
- Text written at the sixth grade level or lower; and
- An average "Flesch Reading Ease" of 70 (the higher the score from 0 to 100, the easier the text is to understand).

Converting to e-learning Tools

Development of e-learning tools is both time and labor intensive! Most importantly, they are quite costly. For example, the "Chopper Ride," cost \$26,000 to develop. Reproduction of 3,000 CDs and "mailers" cost an additional \$7,000. We learned that similar products can range from \$2,500 to as much as \$75,000, depending on content, production values, and the programming necessary to pull it together. More than 7,000 copies of the two CDs are in circulation. Thus, the market opportunity is there. Are the benefits worth the investment? In our case--Yes! The CDs have influenced numerous social, economic, and environmental outcomes and impacts.

Keep these points in mind as you consider converting to e-learning tools.

- Start with a clear vision of the product (CD, DVD, downloadable file, etc.).
- Know as much as possible about the target audience(s);
- Select a challenging, fun-filled, interactive format for the learning adventure.
- Collect samples, outline content, map the layout, and create a storyboard.
- Be flexible. Everything will not go as planned.
- Our best advice: when in doubt, work with a reputable developer--one who views you as a valued customer!

Parting Words

The moral of this article may be best learned from the words of the late Walt Disney who said "We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we are curious--and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." We invite you to explore two new paths by requesting copies of *The Water Guardian: Chopper Ride* and *Money Does Grow on Trees*. Well folks...*that's edutainment!*

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