Specializing in executive education, Dwight Dowdell is the President of Dowdell & Associates of Chicago and runs a consulting firm specializing in web based learning. Dwight does extensive work in creating web-based training solutions for clients.

E-learning and LINKS in Corporate Education

How did you first get involved with LINKS?

Many years ago, when I was responsible for business process training for a major consulting company, I met Randy when he had a simulation product in the marketing area. As part of our Generate Demand School, we incorporated Randy's marketing simulation In discussions with Randy, we talked about making a Supply Chain Management simulation The work that we did together lead to the first version of the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation.

What's E-learning? What are the advantages and disadvantages associated with E-learning?

E-learning is a broad category, basically, any web or internet-based learning can be considered E-learning.

The advantage of E-learning is that it is a very cost-effective solution for a large and geographically-spread audience. Also, it provides a training solution that is time and place-independent. The disadvantage is that E-learning is currently not the way most adults are accustomed to learning, but that is beginning to change quickly.

In your current work with corporations, how does E-learning fit into the educational programs you create?

All companies have similar goals—how to improve job performance through improving the skills and knowledge of their workers and they are looking to do this in the most cost-effective manner.

The traditional approach to training has been classroom-based workshops but this type of training is costly both in terms of money (instructor fees, facilities, travel expensive, etc) and time away from the office, so they have been looking for alternative solutions. E-learning has proven to be a very cost-effective solution for developing certain types of skills and transferring knowledge. We are seeing companies moving from a classroom-based training program to a more blended program incorporating E-learning with traditional classroom programs.

What are the limits of E-learning? Are there occasions where traditional classroom sessions are superior to E-learning?

Not everything can be taught through E-learning. Complex skills are difficult to develop through E-learning. E-learning is a great way to convey knowledge and information and to build an individual skill. If one wanted to know how to calculate safety stock levels, I could teach you that pretty easily through E-learning. If I wanted to teach you a very complex team-use skill, like motivation, and how to work in a team, those are very difficult to do in E-learning. You would want a lot of group interaction, so a traditional classroom setting would be better.

How can a LINKS event be enhanced/supported by E-learning?

The advantage of a LINKS simulation is the group of people working as a team, which would not be able to easily be done through E-learning, but for a LINKS event to be successful, all the students should have a similar base of knowledge. That is where E-learning comes in.

Participants in a LINKS events all have a different level of knowledge and background. LINKS is the application of a set of knowledge. In a simulated environment, it implies that the participants have the same base of knowledge before entering into a LINKS event. For example, if you didn't know the basic concepts of Supply Chain Management, then you couldn't actively participate in a LINKS event. You could do it , but you wouldn't get anything out of it. You would just be playing along.

What we are trying to do with our E-learning component is to prepare people from a business standpoint—from concepts and knowledge—to apply that knowledge to a LINKS simulation.

LINKS and E-learning are complimentary. LINKS allows the student to apply and practice the knowledge they gain through E-learning.

Most LINKS-users are university instructors using LINKS in their regular classroom-based courses in academic degree-granting programs. Obviously cost and time are key constraints in building effective E-learning modules into their courses. Are they any low-cost ways of embracing E-learning supplements to a traditional classroom-based course?

To build a web-based training program takes money. There is the technical cost to develop the web-based application, the cost to develop the content and there is a cost to deliver the content on the internet. The development costs for E-learning are much higher vs. traditional classroom programs. Corporate clients usually have thousands of people to train. They also have the technology infrastructure to deliver the training, so the costs associated with E-learning can be justified.

Most of LINKS is used by university professors so if I was a professor using LINKS and I wanted to use E-learning, to supplement LINKS I don't think I would have the budget to build anything. Also I don't have the expertise in E-learning development or a big enough audience to justify the expense But, there are options. One option is to find a commercially-available E-learning product. This could be made easier if a vendor, like Randy, pre-packaged E-learning and made it available along with LINKS.

Another option is to use very "low tech" E-learning options like webinars and build them into a LINKS program. People need to remember the effectiveness of E-learning is more about the quality of the content vs. the technology used.

LINKS and E-learning for the Corporate Customer are under tremendous pressure to limit either expenses or time away from the office. Everyone is running lean on people power. E-learning allows a company to limit the costs of a LINKS event. As we noted earlier, to have a successful LINKS experience all the students need to have the same foundational level of knowledge. If the students do not have this same level of knowledge, then you must either develop it as part of the LINKS program or you can do it through E-learning prior to LINKS. So you try to compress the actual live-event to the most efficient length of time by using E-learning So with E-learning, prior to the class the students can take- E-learning classes, to build their base level of knowledge. They can take them when they choose, when it fits into their schedule, and that shortens the simulation event, which means less time away from the office, but is still as effective as before. Also, if a student already has the necessary knowledge to successfully participate in a LINKS event then they would not have to take any of the E-learning courses, making it even more cost effective.