

Third Generation eLearning – not for the faint hearted

Before speaking of Third Generation approaches to elearning, we first need to differentiate First and Second Generation approaches. Once we've got a clearer picture of what came, and what still comes, before, it is much easier to embrace the value in Third Generation.

In a nutshell, First Generation elearning solutions were (and still are) characterised by:

Lots of text...spread over lots of pages (screens)...delivering lots of information that can be (it is thought) assimilated without recourse to devices that enable learners to (really) learn – like reflecting on content more deeply; annotating a key point to help it 'stick'; being given reasons why their answers to questions are incorrect; and having someone (like a virtual 'mentor') to offer 'tips' and hints to solve a problem.

In this approach the learners (staff) complete a 20 minute page-turning 'highly interactive' (read, lots of pages to turn) course. The course content is usually found to focus on compliance, health and safety or induction issues. The assessment? A Multiple Choice Quiz comprising 10 'closed' questions, each with 3 options to choose, one of which is the correct answer. Completed at the end of the course, without any chance to 're-enter' the course.

First generation elearning is not necessarily a product of the past – there are still lots of examples around and no doubt, many of our competitors will find a market in companies that know they need some elearning but don't have the vantage point or maturity as yet, to make informed and strategic decisions about what they need and why.

But then again, this type of elearning does (and did) solve one major problem: how to deliver the same learning experience, and more importantly the same content, to large numbers of learners (staff) without disrupting the working day. The argument used here, is that it reduces costs (over classroom instruction); controls the learning experience (same vanilla style for all); and enables the company to meet their compliance requirements ("yep, all 4500 staff now know how to talk to our customers – they must do, they've successfully completed our Customer Relations course").

The only problem with this approach? It doesn't work.

It turns learners away from elearning; it fails to realise its objectives (people don't adapt their performance or behaviour as a result of 'doing' the course); and consequently these sorts of experiences become a barrier to rather than an enabler of, learning. The worst thing about this approach is that no one wins – time, money and enthusiasm are all wasted.

Second Generation elearning remains focused on content and intends to deliver the same learning experience to a large number of learners – but in this approach, the learner will often find more variation in the experience. The content is multimedia and certainly more visual. This approach also breaks content into more digestible 'chunks', each chunk accompanied by some form of interaction – a question for which the learner chooses from a range of possible answers. As with First Generation approaches, Second Gen is a linear experience – the learning pathway is laid out by the learning designer and there is only one 'right' answer. All paths lead to Rome, as they say – or in this case, one path leads to the only correct answer.

Third Generation elearning is not so much focused on content but rather on the learner. The learner is first presented with a complex question (it has a number of parts), a problem of sorts, that needs solving. They are given various resources (documents – in

the style and form of authentic artefacts – the sorts of documents they would expect to find and use in the real world) to support them in their quest; and one or more interactive ‘tools’ to help create or resolve the solution.

More than this, the problem is based in the learner’s workplace – it is immediately relevant to their everyday job (that is, it is ‘situated’). So here content is not so much presented to the learner but rather the learner seeks out the necessary information to solve a real-world (or real-work) problem – making decisions on relevance and appropriateness along the way - just like they do in real life.

The best forms of Third Generation elearning also recognise that in reality, learners usually solve problems with others rather than independently, therefore learning collaboratively, with others. Where companies struggle with collaborative learning, (as many do, especially in areas where compliance is at stake), then learners can be given ‘virtual’ colleagues to ‘talk’ with and importantly, to help inform a different perspective on the same problem. Finally, Third Gen elearning provides multiple paths to different end points – learners can solve the problem in a number of ways, constructing solutions that work but that differ to solutions created by others.

An overview of the characteristics for each generation of elearning is given in Tables 1-3, below.

Table 1: Characteristics of 1st Generation eLearning

Premise:	Faster, cheaper delivery of individualised training – an extension of distance learning methods
Value proposition:	Save training dollars by delivering ‘one-size-fits-all’ instruction to learners
Technologies:	LAN, computer work station, HTML
Delivery:	Computer based, individualised instruction.
Design:	Simple sequences of learning, represented in single paths comprising multiple pages of text and illustrative graphics.
Assessment:	End of course Multiple Choice Quiz (MCQ)
Learning Theories:	Behaviourist (Operant Conditioning)
Theoretical perspective:	Skinner, Thorndike

Table 2: Characteristics of 2nd Generation eLearning

Premise:	Rich reporting on compliance requirements; just in time training; individualised instruction
Value proposition:	Training (skills focused) anywhere, anytime on demand
Technologies:	Web, computer work station, Shockwave, HTML
Delivery:	Computer based, individualised instruction,
Design:	Complex sequences of learning, multiple learning objects
Assessment:	In-course questions over a number of question formats (MCQ, Short-answer, Drag to Order, etc)
Learning Theories:	Cognitive theories (i.e. Dual Coding, Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive Load, Conditions of Learning, Multiple Intelligences, Information Processing)
Theoretical perspective:	Piaget, Miller, Paivio

Table 3: Characteristics of 3rd Generation eLearning

Premise:	Adds strategic value to an organisation, and focuses on improving performance across all competencies – administration, sales, marketing, management
Value proposition:	Learning (knowledge focused) anywhere, anytime on demand, integrating work and learning practices
Technologies:	Web, Wireless (laptops, mobile devices), Flash, XML
Delivery:	Blended, primarily Face-to-Face (Classroom) with Online
Design:	Exploratory, adaptive, collaborative
Assessment:	Formative assessments; self-assessments. Opportunities to use various means to demonstrate learning
Learning Theories:	Constructivist (Situated Learning, Social Learning)
Theoretical perspective:	Bruner, Vygotsky

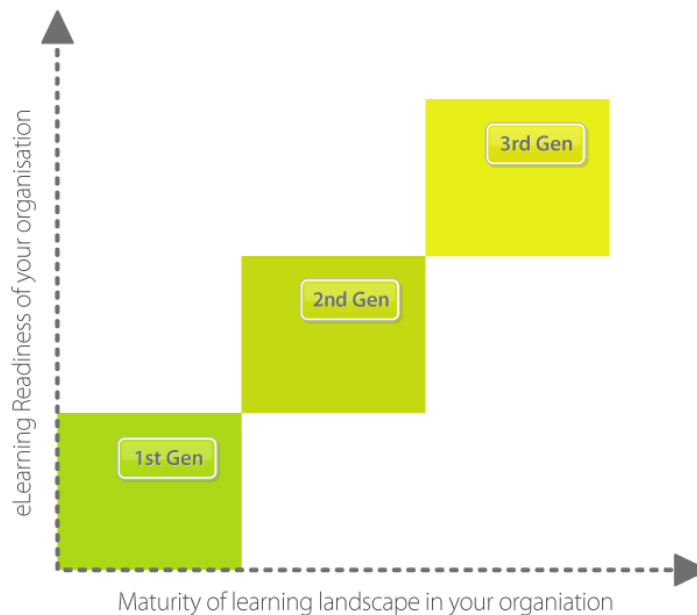


Figure 1 A Generational Model of eLearning

Where does this leave you?

This model of generational elearning does not imply an organisation can simply nominate to start its elearning initiatives at the 'third level' – well, not usually anyway. Creating learning experiences in an organisation for the development of its staff has everything to do with the wider culture of that organisation and in particular its readiness to embrace communicative approaches to learning as well as the learning technologies that are required to enable these approaches. It is really not possible to consider changing the approach to learning without first changing the learning culture of an organisation and the investment key stakeholders make into growing that culture.

In most cases, organisations will have to travel across each of the first two generations (albeit perhaps, very quickly) before evolving third generation implementations of elearning. Although it is also possible to develop systematic approaches that are highly

targeted to specific and limited outcomes and that do not align with third-level approaches. These may in fact, be centred on specific *types* of knowledge (i.e. declarative knowledge). But all this needs to be done with care and warrants a whole new discussion and set of considerations before proceeding.

Just because you might witness competitors who are increasingly embracing third generation elearning does not necessarily make it applicable to your organisation. Just where any one organisation might place itself in the generational model will depend upon a series of readiness factors as well as the degree of learning maturity in that organisation. These are experiential things – you can't just import them, you have to live them, to live through them.

What is clear, though, is that the earlier you start, the easier it is to realise the full benefits of elearning – which can only be found when you enter the third phase.

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