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# *Learning Light's* Quick Guide to Rapid e-Learning

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*Quick Guides are a series of short guides about learning technologies and trends written by experts in the field.*

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**Quick Guide to Rapid e-Learning**

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## About Learning Light

Learning Light is a non-profit organisation that builds relationships between learning technology researchers, suppliers, buyers and learners providing learner-centric information to encourage the growth of learning technologies. By sharing comprehensive research, highlighting successes and failures, Learning Light helps to promote the learning technologies community.

Learning Light provides bespoke and individual services to help both buyers and suppliers of learning technologies (e-Learning). Its current services include:

**Research Services** : Providing access to expert insights, advice and guidance built on in-depth research. Helping organisations to effectively implement learning technologies (e-Learning) and integrate them within their workflow processes.

**Membership Services:** Partnering with leading thinkers in the industry and providing a network for all interested in the field to share information, knowledge, insight, experience and expertise, through utilising online community tools, networking events, conferences and guru seminars.

**Professional Services:** Our highly experienced team offers organisations access to range of competitively priced consultancy services supporting buyers with the effective implementation of their learning technology (e-Learning) requirements. And, for suppliers, helping to provide a range of services to assist market awareness and generate growth.

In addition, Learning Light provides a comprehensive Professional Development programme to help Learning & Development professionals understand the significance of learning technologies in the workplace today and how to effectively implement them within the workflow processes of their organisation.

Sheffield-based Learning Light is supported by Yorkshire Forward, the regional development agency for Yorkshire, and the Humber and Objective 1 South Yorkshire.

## About the Author



Mike Alcock is Managing Director of rapid e-learning software provider Atlantic Link Ltd and is a member of the Committee of the eLearning Network.

He has been involved in the e-learning industry for over 12 years and is personally responsible for the design and development of Atlantic Link's current product range, from conception through to deployment.



## What is rapid e-learning?

Rapid e-learning is the one of the hottest topics in the e-learning industry at the present time. The need for a rapid learning response to changing business needs is driving this sector of the market to increasing prominence.

For the purpose of this article, the definition of the term 'rapid e-learning' is restricted to the traditional understanding of the term e-learning, i.e. computer based learning courseware, for delivery over the Internet or CD, either for self learning, classroom or blended delivery. This article does not extend to technologies such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and other technologies that are now falling into the e-learning sphere.

There are numerous definitions of rapid e-learning, and the definition of the term 'rapid' is a debate in itself. Some public sector organisations would consider 3 months to be a rapid timescale, whereas 3 weeks can be too long for some private sector companies.

We believe that anything that can be created in less than 3 weeks would fit into the 'rapid' category, but there can still be huge variations within this timeframe.

At the sharp end, there is the production of short nuggets of content (10 – 15 minutes at a time) that can be created in a matter of hours. Slightly more ambitious, but still falling within the rapid category, is the creation of larger volumes of content within the 3 week limit. With modern authoring tools, concurrent development technology and rapid production methodologies, these could easily stretch to tens of hours of content.

Another definition could be the ratio of production time to the amount of content produced. If an hour of software simulation training can be produced in 2 hours, this is certainly rapid. For more complex courses, an hour of interactive content produced by a single specialist in less than a week would probably also fit into the rapid category.

Once you have defined how long rapid is, there are a number of other characteristics that often define this type of content:

- It can be developed by subject matter experts, often alone or in small teams, without the need for a large support team of IT specialists.
- It usually does not require any programming skills.
- It utilises automated software that creates content and learning sequences in minutes.
- It can re-use existing content and re-purpose it for e-learning automatically (PowerPoint, Word, graphics, sound, video etc.).



- It is often template driven, using pre-defined learning objects and graphic assets to speed up the production process.
- It is extremely cost effective. By its very nature, rapid e-learning is produced in weeks rather than months, meaning a much smaller investment in time and resources. With automated tools, there is also no longer a need for a heavy investment in IT skills or resource. This is leading to price points as low as £1,000 - £2,000 per hour of delivered content. This represents a sea change in an industry that has lived off charging anything from £5,000 - £25,000 per hour over the last few years.

### Why is rapid e-learning important?

The pace of change in modern business is driving the need for rapid e-learning. Organisations now need, or want, their learning as quickly as possible. Three months is now too long to wait when you have new product launches every six weeks.

For this reason, the rapid e-learning market is classified as probably the fastest growing market sector in the e-learning industry, with growth of over 80% reported in 2005 (Josh Bersin, Bersin Associates). The author's own company grew at over 500% in 2005, on the back of sales of rapid authoring software.

It is also important in the way that it is changing the e-learning industry, by handing control of e-learning development back to the trainers and subject matter experts. E-learning development is now no longer purely the preserve of the e-learning development companies.

Users, consultants and e-learning providers will all have access to software which allows them to easily create sophisticated e-learning. The user friendliness and the flexibility of the software is such that it will be the excellence of the training solution which professionals will be selling in the future. If users think they could have produced something better themselves and the software is available for them to do so, they might cut out the e-learning specialist entirely. Knowing the software available, users will expect rapid development times and will certainly expect that they will be able make continuing amendments and refinements themselves to a core offering supplied by an e-learning company.

Training professionals will in future dictate the content of e-learning packages and the IT technician's role will be increasingly peripheral. Once those commissioning e-learning understand the power of the software tools now available, e-learning will certainly be delivered back into the hands of professional trainers.

The effects of this change can be seen in the recent shakeout of e-learning suppliers. Those organisations that are reliant on creating e-learning content as their primary business stream are struggling, as customers wise up to the idea of bringing this development in-house. In the past month, we have seen AdVal appoint administrators, and a number of other bespoke providers reporting serious losses.



## An historical perspective

Historically, e-learning has increased the ability to provide learning to people in a range of educational and business situations. Before rapid e-learning, this opportunity has, however, come at a cost:

- **Development costs** – e-learning has always been a major cost item with dedicated programming resource being expensive
- **Long development lead times** – the interactive process between client and suppliers, together with the checking, quality assurance, amendment and live implementation issues, not to mention the actual programming time, would always mean that a project from start to finish would be a lengthy process
- **Tailoring content to programming capabilities** – the development of e-learning often involved compromising learning objectives in order to meet technical or cost constraints. Because of the mystery surrounding e-learning programming clients were often left wondering whether what they were asking for was really impossible or just rather inconvenient for the programmer
- **Extra costs/time for amendments and upgrades** – the constant source of tension between clients and developers. Requests for changes or extra work would lead to the sucking of teeth beloved of garage mechanics when they have your car on their ramp. Any movement away from the brief would be likely to be expensive
- **Commitments to particular technologies** – The running environment would very often be determined by the development environment meaning that a high degree of co-ordination of IT resource would be required to ensure that the resultant e-learning product could be widely used within a company over a reasonable period of time

Companies came to accept the compromises that e-learning forced upon them, recognising that there were things they would like to do better but because of the high level of technical know-how that authoring e-learning required, they accepted that they had to bow to a certain level of IT tyranny.

However, advances in personal and web computing have accelerated over time. The technological changes that are affecting everyday computer use in homes and offices are having a significant impact in the authoring of e-learning courses. It is now time for training professionals to reassess whether any level of IT tyranny is now necessary in delivering e-learning.

The reducing cost of remote web space together with the increasing speed and penetration of broadband connections, combined with more powerful client machines in the offices of users, allows non-programmers to interface with collaborative development projects in ways which were unthinkable just a few years ago.

All of these recent changes have led to the emergence of the rapid e-learning industry.



## What does rapid e-learning look like?

Here are some examples



Optimum contact solutions IT training – 4,500 screens in 10 weeks (more than 3 weeks, but still rapid in terms of the amount of content produced in the timescale).



DaimlerChrysler: Two weeks for entire IT training course development.



## How to create rapid e-learning: the tools

The first requirement for creating rapid e-learning is the software that is used to build the content. There are a number of rapid authoring tools in the marketplace and my advice to any prospective user of these technologies is 'try before you buy'. Rapid e-learning is becoming a bandwagon and a number of seriously outdated technologies are now being badged as 'rapid authoring' software.

The features that now allow rapid authoring tools to be used by the typical IT literate trainer include:

### Ease of use

Authoring tools should have easy to manage Graphical User Interfaces which allow users to manipulate e-learning screens easily and intuitively. An absence of programming languages will allow users with the most basic IT literacy to create attractive e-learning content.

Tools should have easy integration with common software, particularly Microsoft office products. This will allow existing content to be re-purposed for e-learning quickly and cost effectively.

Software automation is allowing tasks such as writing flash animations, which were once the preserve of programmers, to be undertaken by non specialists. Graphical user interfaces have improved beyond all recognition allowing users simply to point and click to create content just the way they want it to look.

These technological developments are being built into authoring tools and there is a growing realisation among those commissioning e-learning that the factors which used to make authoring the preserve of IT experts no longer apply.

### Collaborative Development Environments

One very obvious way to produce e-learning rapidly is to throw lots of bodies at the task. However, many old-school authoring systems were never designed with collaboration in mind, and introduce high levels of complexity when content needs to be assembled.

Modern elearning systems, especially server based development environments which create their content 'live' on the Internet, allow unrestricted collaboration with colleagues across the globe, permitting all users to see amendments as they are made, so changes and additions can be easily facilitated. Workflow based development and multi-stage publishing allow rapid implementation of on-going projects.



## Quality features

A number of modern rapid authoring tools now have in-built quality assurance features, which allow users to focus on quality learning, not technology, by automating many of the steps where quality problems typically occur. If these are designed to guarantee quality at all stages throughout the development process (rather than moving bottlenecks from one stage to the next), significant time savings can be made in the development process. The best technological solutions map onto the entire production process. In doing so, they provide time saving, quality improving enhancements throughout the production process.

The typical e-learning production process is comprised of 4 phases:

- Analysis & setup
- Design, specification and content gathering
- Development and Quality Assurance
- Deployment

With rapid e-learning, in the initial stages of a project, the rapid production of a fully navigable prototype – usually within days of project start-up - allows all key stakeholders to sign off the design and structure very early in the project. All too often, in the past, this has been delivered late, requiring major content or delivery mechanism revisions.

The content gathering and quality assurance stages have often made projects spiral out of control, in terms of cost and time. Rapid e-learning provides fast, reliable and accurate content gathering, often with simultaneous scripting and automatic annotation (especially for IT training), avoiding the problems of this phase spiralling out of control.

Traditionally, screens and text have been captured separately, which makes matching these 2 components together both time consuming and prone to errors.

If the capture process can avoid these problems, then the Quality Assurance cycle can be drastically reduced. Errors are engineered out of the courses by the rapid e-learning software. The vision is to ensure that scripting of content is as accurate and complete as possible to streamline the QA process later on.

Collaborative development techniques allow developers, clients & test users see the same content, as soon as it is available. With the right permissions, content can be tested and modified by a team of people, speeding up the QA process.

Again, rapid e-learning software will allow even non-technical staff to edit and modify complex content. SME's can now be given responsibility for making content changes – improving efficiency and reducing the chances of mistakes caused by poor communication. Why spend 10 minutes explaining the typing mistake in paragraph 5 on Slide 42 when it can be corrected in seconds by the tester?



## **How to create rapid e-learning: Tips and Techniques – templating for rapid development**

One of the easiest ways to speed up the production process is to use pre-defined templates, and these can be applied in a number of areas:

### **Graphic assets**

Most rapid authoring software comes complete with a series of pre-defined graphics assets (backgrounds, buttons, navigation tools etc...). The best allow existing assets to be converted into templates for future re-use.

### **Course structures**

Avoiding re-inventing the wheel can save hours. Many courses have a similar basic course structures, and rapid authoring tools can create the most common of these in a matter of seconds. These should cover 90% of typical e-learning courses, with the 10% requiring some additional manual intervention.

### **Learning objects**

Most rapid e-learning toolkits come with a series of pre-defined learning objects which cover most of the common e-learning interactions. These typically include quizzes, drag and drop exercises, games, simulation tools, content display objects and more. These will be instructionally sound and fully tested. The best of these are infinitely configurable, to allow design creativity and avoid the problem of all the courses looking the same.



## How to create rapid e-learning: Tips and Techniques – re-use of existing content

Perhaps the easiest technique for creating rapid e-learning is to re-use existing training content. Most organisations are not starting from a baseline of zero. They will often have a range of training materials that have been used prior to the implementation of e-learning. These can range from Word documents, classroom handouts and training videos through to complex PowerPoint presentations that have been used in traditional classroom training sessions.

Good rapid e-learning software can convert all of this content into an on-line format in minutes. In many cases, not much manual intervention is then needed to produce a perfectly serviceable course.

### Recommended resources

A quick Google search can reveal lots of articles and links to vendor's web sites, but here are some of the author's favourites:

- <http://www.bersin.com/index.asp>
- <http://www.e-learningcentre.co.uk/eclipse/vendors/authoring.htm>
- <http://www.trainingzone.co.uk/zones/elearningzone/>
- <http://www.trainingreference.co.uk/index.html>
- <http://www.elearningage.co.uk/>
- <http://www.itskillsresearch.co.uk/public/news.shtml>
- <http://www.kineo.co.uk/rapid-e-learning/rapid-e-learning-3.html>