

The Age of E-ducation

Much has been made of taking education out of the classroom and onto an electronic platform, but what can building an e-learning program teach project managers? Plenty, **Glyn Davies** tells **Adeline Teoh**



Glyn Davies

“WE HAVE ALL THE CORE E-LEARNING THINGS NOW, WHAT CAN WE DO TO LIGHTEN THINGS UP?”

Applying project management principles to a product that is designed to teach project management principles may seem like a circular kind of project, but it's a method that works for Glyn Davies, product development manager for ILX Group, a global training organisation specialising in PRINCE2. While ILX offers face-to-face instruction in the classroom, it is in the blended learning and e-learning space where Davies and his team excel.

MAKE MINE ELECTRONIC

The premise for developing an e-learning course may seem a simple one, but it isn't about just replacing the classroom environment with a virtual version, says Davies, it's about taking a more strategic approach in understanding how people learn. “For certification courses we want to take what are the best bits from a traditional classroom model, what are the ways that people learn, what is the learning process and make it work in an e-learning environment,” he explains. “And then we could take the best of e-learning into the classroom.”

ILX's popular PRINCE2 course, for example, features a video of a presenter and a dashboard of the different modules users work through at their own pace. Supporting the educational material are exercises ranging from animated scenarios, where users control the project manager protagonist to deliver a project, to revision tools and exam practice areas.

Compared to the product, however, development of an e-learning course isn't always so straightforward: a lot goes into ensuring the product meets both formal requirements and user satisfaction levels. Like many IT product development projects, the process tends to form a loop of feedback and changes over the three-to-six-month development period.

The process begins with analysis of the syllabus—for example, the PRINCE2 methodology handbook—and a comparison with other types of training available. At this stage, Davies says he and his team talk to subject matter experts about what to include, and how best to present the material to scope the requirements. “The subject matter expert is central to the development process.



Their input is very important in the creation of the course design," he says.

Then the design phase kicks in, where the scope becomes more detailed, right down to the scripts required to present the material. The development stage then puts those scripts into a user interface, which is then reviewed and approved. It is in the implementation stage where the product development team needs to show it met the project's objectives. "The completed course content is assembled and tested and then packaged to meet specific delivery requirements," says Davies. "The development department would also assist with the promotion and marketing of the product at this point."

Crunch time is at evaluation, which involves a formal review of the course from an accrediting organisation, and a pilot phase with key customers. The subject matter expert also plays an integral part in the review and approval process. Feedback is more than welcome at this point, says Davies, and the team has a formal process for incorporating any required changes to the product. "We have a reasonably mature change management process in place which is based on ITIL [Information Technology Infrastructure Library practices], so requests for change are reviewed by our change advisory board which decides whether changes are made or not."

Although PRINCE2 undergoes revision every few years, with the last major revision occurring in 2009, Davies says the e-learning courses automatically undergo constant change as part of the natural evolution of the e-learning courses. "We generally continually review the course and content, though we would obviously carry out a full review and update of the product on the release of a new manual," he says. "We also spend quite a lot of time updating exam material, as we continually review our exam statistics and amend content to further support particular syllabus areas."

AHEAD OF THE GAME

ILX was an early adopter of the blended learning approach, and an e-learning pioneer in other respects, but because the medium continues to present new

opportunities, the courses need to keep ahead of other training providers. Constant evolution of the e-learning courses therefore forms an important part of product development for the business to have the best selling proposition for its courses.

"The way our courses function and the style and level of interaction continues to develop and evolve," confirms Davies. "Feedback from customers is fed back in to the design process for all products under development. Sometimes changes involve removing features we thought were a good idea but, following evaluation, we've found are rarely used. Often it's the simplest of ideas which strikes a chord with the end users."

One such idea was a game developed using the structure of Snakes & Ladders with revision questions as the basis for progressing along the board. ILX have an app designed for iPhone and iPod Touch that supports its courses in PRINCE2, MSP and ITIL. As well as being a revision tool, it allows users to be competitive or play in a team with others who have the app, and integrates with social media such as Twitter and Facebook where players can post their scores.

"It actually started out with a subject matter expert that I was developing with. I said 'we have all the core e-learning things now, what can we do to lighten things up?' It's good for practice, for people to relax before the exam," says Davies.

While selling the app isn't exactly a money-spinner, he says it has turned into a value-add for ILX. "As a training organisation, of course there are only a small number of potential users of a product so it's to our advantage to offer the game. There's no financial value, but it has created an interest because people will look at it. In that sense it's hugely valuable."

The range of these supplementary offerings makes e-learning more effective than just a Powerpoint presentation delivered online. In addition to apps like Snakes & Ladders, ILX courses also include multimedia elements such as podcasts, exam simulators, and animations, some of which participants can take away on portable devices so they continue to learn outside the 'classroom' environment.

"A person who fronts up to a classroom who has been given the option of e-learning is much better prepared than someone who has just been given manuals to read," says Davies. He adds that, to work, e-learning needs to provide access to the trainer as well as "lots of opportunities to communicate with others".

The essential ingredient to e-learning, however, is the participant and in that regard e-learning isn't for everyone, Davies admits. "You might be doing an online course but are you dedicating the time to it as you should? Are you doing your shopping, reading the news? We're not just using technology for technology's sake; it's all about the user experience and giving them the best opportunity to develop. It's about making a dry subject area more appealing."

And since you can't stop the advance of technology, you can be sure Davies and his team haven't stopped either. Their next challenge is tackling the iPad and the iPhone 4, which both work on Apple's new iOS4 operating system and, says Davies, more games: "It's amazing to hear how the games have been received." ❖