

## talking point

### Evolution not revolution:

#### The commercial argument for online learning

by Alan Nelson



Most of us involved in education have for some time been aware of the 'elearning revolution' and no doubt you have all been busily deciding what this means for you and your organisation. In this article I want to dispel some of the hype around elearning and set out how organisations can successfully embrace online learning without destroying what already exists.

There is now a widespread acceptance that over the next few years there will be a significant shift in education from face-to-face delivery and paper based distance learning to online provision. Nowhere is this clearer than in professional education, both in the preparation of learners for professional qualifications and in continuing professional development. Students have demanded an end to mumbling in cold lecture theatres as the primary mode of instruction and a move to something more learner-centred.

And this message has been heard. Training organisations and educators everywhere are aware of the need for significant change. Their concern is that of every organisation in a dynamically changing marketplace: if they help to change the model, will there still be a role for them?

There will be a role for those organisations that do three things:

- Focus on the customer – the learner
- Start small – It's evolution not revolution
- Invest wisely – your central business model is still the same.

#### Looking Ahead

As Winston Churchill said:

*"It is always wise to look ahead, but difficult to look further than you can see."*

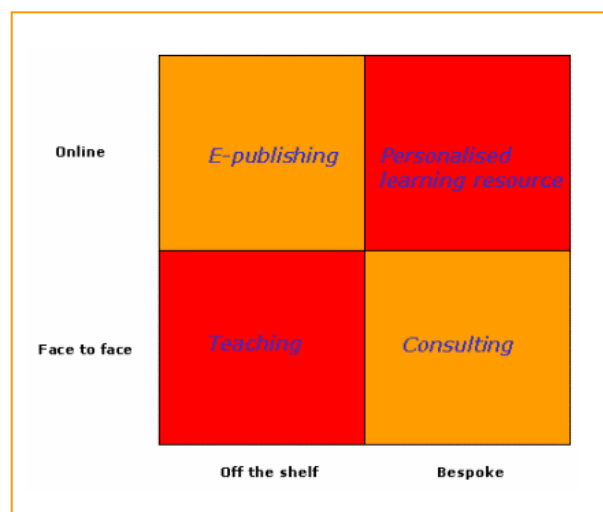
Looking at the online education marketplace, you can categorise different organisations' approaches by looking at 2 things:

**What** do they provide? – an off the shelf product or a bespoke service

**How** do they provide it? – face-to-face or online

Wherever you place yourself on this diagram, the chances are you have spent time thinking about whether you would rather be somewhere else.

HE and FE institutions are firmly in the bottom left hand box and with a few honourable (and some less honourable) exceptions, seem happy to stay there.



Publishers are desperate to move from bottom left to top left.

Many elearning providers have adopted a standard publishing approach of building products and then selling them to as many people as they can. That puts them firmly in the top left segment – an expensive place to be if you make any mistakes. This probably explains their enthusiasm for moving towards the top right.

Training organisations are in the bottom right-hand corner and are keen to move north.

If students in the professional development sector are to be satisfied, then it won't be by current provision, stuck as it is down in the bottom left corner. The online environment makes possible a much higher degree of personalisation than either print or multimedia CD and offers the Holy Grail of the truly personal learning resource: the top right-hand corner of this diagram.

What is interesting is that everyone seems to be focusing on where they want to be rather than where they are.

### Conquering the World

As an old colleague of mine from publishing once said:

*Remember, you are not Alexander the Great*

The point being that maybe you are unlikely to conquer the world and would perhaps be better advised to look a little closer to home. So you know where you want to get to? Big deal – that's the easy bit. When something new comes along we can all turn our hand to being the visionary: the hard bit is plotting your migration path.

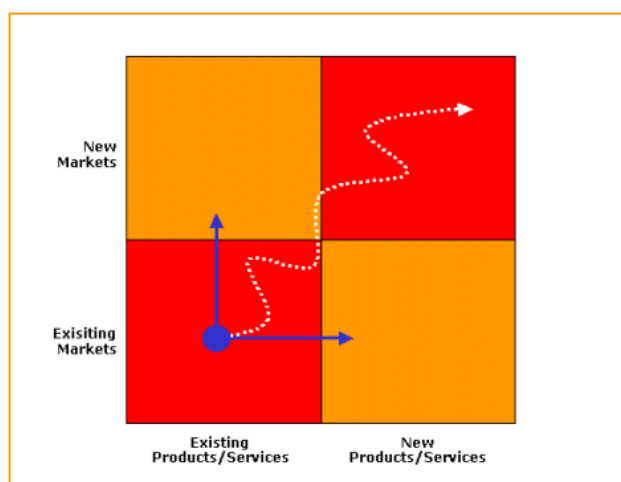
*"How do I get there from here without messing this up first?"*

There's no simple answer but if you try to make a big leap all at once, you are likely to get yourself into trouble. The web has changed much of the way we do business and offers fantastic opportunities, but let's not forget a few basic business truths:

A new technology application can help you to improve the product or service you are offering.

This can be part of a successful strategy to reach new markets with your existing products or services.

Alternatively, it can enable you to introduce your existing customers to new products or services that you can provide.



But the route to new markets that you do not understand with new products or services that you have not worked with before is likely to be windy and difficult. You could end up spending a lot of money and not making anyone very happy at all.

### Evolution not revolution

We work with clients to help them to see opportunities close to home. CIMA (Chartered Institute of Management Accountants) asked us to develop 5 online CPD programmes. They were priced so that the organisation broke even when less than 100 people had signed up.

Pearson shortened their sales conference by one day and used the money to pay for online product training. They achieved better product knowledge, improved the face-to-face sessions and saved money.

Neither of these examples is revolutionary, but both organisations came out the end with money to finance their next step and a rich experience of having worked with learners in a new way.

The Market Research Society showed us a short course on Questionnaire Design that is always over subscribed. Development of an online version is already teaching them valuable lessons about where to go next and will pay for itself in the first financial year.

Learning from your own experience, rather than from what someone else tells you is crucial. There is no substitute for finding out for yourself how your organisation and its customers will react in practice.

The Publishing Training Centre asked us to develop online pre-course and post-course resources to add to their two bread and butter programmes, proof-reading and copy-editing. They saw it as a great way to create a wow factor for their learners and increase enrolments.

The golden rule is:

*"Use new tools to help you do even better, what you already do well."*

Put your trust in words like these:

<i>Enhance</i>	<i>Broaden</i>
<i>Improve</i>	<i>Complement</i>
<i>Expand</i>	<i>Elaborate</i>
<i>Supplement</i>	<i>Deepen</i>

Be suspicious of anything that requires that you start from scratch. You know what you do well. Keep doing it.

“**The concern (of the training organisation and educator) is that of every organisation in a dynamically changing market place: if they help to change the model, will there still be a role for them?**”

Providing things you don't understand to people you have never met is rarely smart. So next time someone says excitedly, "China is a big market" – try smiling and moving on.

Here are some suggestions:

#### 1. Phased development

Look for ways in which you can take a first step and build towards a final goal. If possible, make the first step pay for itself and fund the second. If not, then make sure you learn a lot. Be prepared to change all your plans before you start the second stage.

#### 2. Spread your investment

Look for opportunities to develop something that can support several different programmes or groups of learners at once. This maximises the pay back and ensures that you get lots of feedback from diverse sources.

Make sure that you know what you are trying to achieve.

Here are some possibilities:

- Create new programmes that will generate additional income
- Use online provision to reduce existing costs by replacing other activity
- Use online provision as a marketing tool to increase student numbers on existing programmes

These may seem obvious but it is critical to be very clear about your objectives. If you are not aiming for any of these, then you will almost certainly end up wasting money. More importantly if you start by stating your objectives, you will define your budget by looking at the expected outcome and valuing it rather than by asking someone for a quote.

Above all do get involved – you are right to be excited by the possibilities – but stick with what you are good at and make it even better.

Alan Nelson is co-founder of Nelson Croom. Before setting up Nelson Croom, he was the CEO of Thomson Learning's activities in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Alan had spent the last 15 years in educational publishing. He has been at the forefront of the development of learning materials on the web.

#### **Versions of this article have appeared in the following publications:**

*City & Guilds Newsletter*

*Elearning Age*

*Inside Learning Technologies*

*PARN Spotlight Newsletter*

*BIFM Member Bulletin*

*Marchmont Flash*

*BAOL Bitz*

*T-Mag*