



Exploring the Definition of "Rapid e-Learning"

A Whitepaper by Bill Brandon

The eLearning Guild conducted a poll in February, 2005 on the topic of Rapid e-Learning, and the results tell an interesting story. Despite the level of buzz associated with the term, the largest single response to the question, "Is your organization focused on 'Rapid eLearning'?" was "What is Rapid eLearning?" We were curious about this result, and assumed that you would be too, so we've done some thinking about the state of rapid e-Learning and we'd like to share our thoughts and observations with you.

These days, using a word like "rapid" to describe a product, process, or service is guaranteed to attract attention. Unfortunately, everyone puts his or her own spin on the meaning, and recently many of us have been busy spinning away with the notion of rapid e-Learning as fast as we can.

Last summer in an elearnspace weblog entry, George Siemens observed, "We have a unique problem in the learning/technology field of giving every small nuance in a concept a new name. Then we declare the old name/concept 'dead' almost as if we are constantly struggling to stay with the 'in crowd'." George goes on to say, "Rapid eLearning simply means – we have limited resources and time – how can we get this stuff done faster?" This is probably true enough, but what "stuff" are we talking about? It seems to be in the eye of the beholder.

e-Learning professionals may understand "rapid" to mean that there has been some advancement that will facilitate their work or serve their clients more efficiently. Decision makers may see "rapid" as an extension of whatever promise they understand to be inherent in the brand "e-Learning." Learners may rejoice in the vision of "caffeinated courses" that can be completed in practically no time at all. Cynics and jaded practitioners may suspect it's just the Marketing Department having another go at product differentiation.

So what's "rapid" in rapid e-Learning?

Does the term refer to A) fast, and perhaps cheap, development of e-Learning applications, or B) methods that increase the speed at which people learn, or C) technologies that speed up the connection between SMEs and learners, or D) services that enable organizations to add e-Learning offerings to their online curriculum quickly?

Rapid e-Learning has some antecedents and cousins in our profession that go as far back as the 1970's. For example, if you came to e-Learning from teaching, you may have experience with what are termed "accelerated learning" approaches. If, on





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the other hand, you came from the systems and programming professions, terms such as "rapid design," "rapid programming," and "extreme programming" may be familiar to you. All these concepts easily transpose to e-Learning and blend into the way the idea of rapid e-Learning is now presented in ads, white papers, and Web site copy. There is nothing inherently deceptive or dishonest in the use of "rapid e-Learning" in this way – but its use does tend to be imprecise and inconsistent.

Frequently, the title of a white paper, presentation, product, or service will just fly the buzz word past the reader without qualifying the context. You should not assume that the context of one organization's use of the term is the same as the context of another's use. You must pay close attention to know whether rapid e-Learning is being presented as a design/content development strategy, as a description of how quickly people learn online as a result of delivery using particular products or services, or as a way to refer to rapid conversion of content to e-Learning by outsourcing the project.

A recommendation for clarity

The eLearning Guild encourages practitioners, writers, and vendors to always be careful to insert a qualifier with the term "Rapid e-Learning" when they use it. That is, be clear whether the reference is to "rapid e-Learning development," "rapid e-Learning delivery", "rapid e-Learning deployment", or "rapid e-Learning outsourcing", or some other "rapid e-Learning thing". If the reference is to improving the speed at which people learn, you might even want to use a phrase like, "rapid e-Learning uptake."



As a case in point, The eLearning Guild's upcoming [Rapid eLearning Development Online Symposium](#) is about development processes. It is focused on a set of strategies to speed up and make your design and development processes more efficient.

Some of the 21 sessions will also address delivery processes but only in light of how that delivery is enhanced or enabled by rapid design and development.

Guild Research is conducting an in-depth [Rapid eLearning Development Survey](#) through Friday, March 4, 2005. You can help further define this important term and how people are using it. Please take a couple of minutes to complete the survey so that your input and views can help practitioners everywhere understand what rapid e-Learning is.



Why is this important? As a global professional organization, The eLearning Guild would like to lead the way to clarity and precision in our shared vocabulary. Using the term "rapid e-Learning" too loosely simply adds to confusion and tends to reduce the term (and the notion of e-Learning itself) to the level of noise.