



Interview: Marc Rosenberg Is Positive about the Future By Ryann Ellis

Last fall, I interviewed e-learning expert Marc Rosenberg at an eLearning Guild event where he was speaking. Here's his advice on how to manage e-learning successfully in your organization.

RE: What's your definition of e-learning?

MR: I think that *definition* is the wrong term. While there have been several terms over the years, everyone has pretty much settled on the idea that e-learning equals putting courses online. It's training delivered electronically.

However, I think it's more important to understand the concept of e-learning. That means that the definition of e-learning really needs to go back to how training professionals define their role. If professionals define their role narrowly, as in "we do training," then that definition is fine. If professionals expand their role to believe that their role is to improve performance, impact the business, and support knowledge workers, then the technology around learning and information becomes much more broad than delivering training electronically. There's knowledge management, collaboration, communities of practice, and performance support. All of those things look nothing like training, and they're not developed like training.

So, if we have a broader definition of our role, then we need find a broader definition of e-learning, which is using Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that impact learning and performance. To do that, we need to think like architects. For example, carpentry doesn't give you a house, plumbing doesn't give you a house, electricity doesn't give you a house. You need to combine and use all of these disparate resources in some kind of cohesive way to build a house.

RE: Is that blended learning?

MR: For some. But because there's a narrow definition of e-learning, there's also a narrow definition of blended learning. For most people, blended learning equates to blending instructor-led courses with online courses. A broad definition of role leads to a broad definition of e-learning, which leads to a broader definition of blended learning that includes knowledge management, online resources, Google, and so on.

RE: But a lot of practitioners are confused about knowledge management. People use the term and don't know what it means.

MR: Yes. One of the problems with knowledge management is that it's not clearly defined. Here's a simple definition: getting information from those who have it to those who need it. I think **that** is the role of trainers. The way we currently do that is by designing instructional sequences and deliver them in classrooms or online. Now

there are new tools: the Web, portals, and online repositories. For example, when you Google, you're looking for information. There are no learning objectives; there are no pretests and posttests. There's just content. Because we're better at designing content, we should be better at directing people to content more readily.

Here's the point: Sometimes you have to internalize information or learn a specific procedure. Some information is too critical to be left to chance, so you need training. But sometimes you just need to look something up. Therefore, you need to teach people how to look something up—learn to learn, in other words. In that case, the broad definition of knowledge management becomes creating, archiving, publishing, and distributing intellectual capital in a way that allows people to access it and share it in real time.

RE: How do you get people to embrace these expanded roles and new definitions?

MR: If you're new in this business, you get a ton of mixed messages. First of all, we use the words *learning* and *training* interchangeably. If learning and training are the same, then *e-learning* and *e-training* are the same—but they are not the same. So, it becomes important to use terms consistently. I think that there's a hierarchy. Performance improvement is at the top. Learning feeds into performance improvement, and training is just one way for people to learn.

Something else that bothers me: We call everyone who comes to a training class, learners. They aren't learners; they're programmers, sales associates, line workers, etc. We lose focus on what these people really do by putting them in this big bucket and calling them learners. Yes, they learn, but who are they? I don't mind calling them learners for the purpose of understanding how they learn, but I would rather say employees or customers. We need to start thinking about learners in the role that they occupy 95 percent of the time.

I think that this has to start at the top. If you're a training director or training manager, your goal is to train the workforce. I think that's very noble—and very critical to the business—but if you define your role as just training, then you're missing some great opportunities to educate people. If you say your focus is learning rather than training, then you have more tools to develop people. Once you develop people, then you might need to say that you're in the knowledge business, which means you train, you develop organizational learning, and you're interested in innovation and business transformation.

The further up the food chain you go, you need to understand how other fields and other functions work.

RE: Do you think the difference between narrow and broad definitions creates a disconnect between what managers say they want and what they need? In other words, when managers have a performance issue, they want training because that's the only definition they know?

MR: Sure. Many progressive managers will consider the idea of a Website or a collaboration tool. At the end of the day, they revert back to what they know. It's hard for training professionals to go to executives and say, "Training is not what you need. You need knowledge management, or a community of practice, or a performance support system." They'll look at you like you're from Mars because they

don't understand it. And, trying to explain it to them in our own jargon isn't doing any good.

The way you sell this stuff is to find one executive who is willing to let you play in the sandbox. Build something, and then you show it to other executives. When they see it, they'll understand. An example: When I was asked to develop a course for a certain company, I told them I would develop CBT, but what I was really going to develop was performance support. If I had tried to explain to them what I was doing, they wouldn't have let me do it. It was a risk, but when I finally showed it to them, they got it immediately.

I can remember at another organization, the executives were sitting around a table talking about the future of training. They were talking about courses and catalogues. So, we brought in an outside consultant to show them a multimedia, blended solution that had instruction, a knowledge base, a case study, a simulation, etc. These were things that the executives had never heard of before. They only wanted courses and nothing we said could convince them—until they saw it. Then, they said, "That's what we need."

My recommendation for people is that the direct sell isn't going to work. They need to create a small success story. Just make something that executives can see. If they see it, they'll get it.

RE: But I hear many practitioners say that there's just no way they can get resources to build these types of solutions. How can we change that?

MR: The "Woe is Me" syndrome. It's the same thing that we've been hearing for years, whatever the technology. The difference is that in previous years, we were dealing with corporate universities and companies paid themselves for courses. It was an internal transfer of dollars. Now, it costs \$2 million for an LMS, thousands for a course catalogue, and we spend money for outsourcing to India. This is real money going out the door. Everyone is taking notice of what you're doing, so the "woe is me" gets worse.

Meanwhile, many of us don't have any clout—a seat at the table. The reason we don't have a seat at the table is because we haven't earned it. The reason we've never earned it is because we keep defining success in our own terms—student days and posttest scores. If we went to a business unit and showed them how we made them \$5 million, we'd get a seat at the head of the table.

So, when people say we don't have resources or we're not allowed to do this or that, I have the same response as earlier: They need to go all over their organization and find that one person who will let them create a small demo project. Do it really well, and then show it to people.

RE: Is part of the problem that people get overwhelmed by the marketplace. They don't even know where to start?

MR: Sure. The marketplace is overwhelming and changing all the time. Companies go out of business. Companies are acquired. New companies enter the market. I tell people that if they don't have someone in their organization with the main

responsibility for making sense of the market—understanding what's happening and what's changing—then they're in jeopardy. The market is very much buyer beware, and there's massive competition.

In addition, I think that a lot of people are working backwards. I hear consumers say that they have to buy an LMS. When I ask them what they're going to do with it, they say, "We're going to do e-learning." Before you buy an LMS, a course catalogue, authoring tool, or anything, you need to step back and say what's your role. What do you want to achieve? What will have the biggest impact? Is the best way to do that a course, knowledge management, or something else. The answers to those questions will drive your technology and purchasing decisions.

Instead, I see people buying huge infrastructures, and then everything they do is to feed that infrastructure. People buy an LMS, so they need courses to fill the LMS, so they need authoring tools to build courses. If later, they decide they need a community of practice, they can't do it because their LMS doesn't support it.

Now, it's not that these people are making bad decisions or bad purchases. Their thinking is traditional, and not everyone is industry savvy when it comes to the marketplace.

RE: How do people go about becoming industry savvy?

MR: Again, they need to decide what they want to do first. Then, they determine which tools will support that. Then, they do their homework. You wouldn't buy a car without due diligence. To buy a car, you go on various Websites and compare prices and features. You go for a test drive. You talk to people who have cars. Yet, when I ask people who have bought a certain technology or a course catalogue whether they've tested it, most haven't. They just bought the catalogue.

RE: Another question about the marketplace: Other than companies coming and going, I haven't seen many changes. Where's the innovation?

MR: Things seem a bit stalled. I hope that's temporary. If you go back several years and you look at the Mom-and-Pop shops, there was more innovation. What I thought was going to happen was that some of the bigger companies would buy some of the small, innovative shops and keep them separate. Like Toyota and Lexus. It hasn't happened, though.

I think that this is more of a reflection of the business cycle and business environment. It goes back to people having to choose between fast, cheap, or good. People have to choose fast and cheap right now. People are outsourcing or using basic templates to be able to churn stuff out really quickly. It's a compromise, and not everyone is asking whether this stuff teaches anything. At the same time, though, you can look at some of the work coming out of the simulation companies like SimuLearn, Socratic Arts, and Allen Interactive. It's incredible and innovative, but it costs more.

Part of the problem may be that the suppliers aren't making a good business case and the consumers aren't always making the best decision. Is it better to have 200 courses that don't make that much difference or one course that changes

everything? Granted, you can't make that choice all the time. But every once in a while, you need to take a risk on something that is expensive but promises to be really good and might transform your business.

Also, it seems like a lot of suppliers sell their products by saying, "Ours is easier than the competition." I don't know if that should be the main selling point. Development of good learning **is** rocket science, and making it easy may be too much of a compromise. We need to find the right balance between affordable, easy, and innovative.

The good news is that I think consumers are starting to demand more and that will drive the business cycle back around to some innovative options. Eventually, consumers will say that quality matters.

RE: In general, you sound upbeat about the business. Is your vision for the future positive?

MR: I think things are getting better for the industry. I think the key to the industry improving is for trainers to consider themselves as part of a business problem-solving team. Trainers need to go out there and try to figure out how to get sales people to sell more, programmers to program better, and so on. If we put ourselves into the worker's environment, we start to have many more tools and approaches at our disposal. There are challenges, but it's time to start looking at them in terms of opportunities.

Published: March 2005

Dr. Marc J. Rosenberg is a management consultant, educator, and leading expert in the world of training, organizational learning, e-learning, knowledge management, and performance improvement. He is the author of the best-selling book, *E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age* (McGraw-Hill) and has a new book coming out this fall. Rosenberg has spoken at The White House, keynoted numerous professional and business conferences, authored more than 30 articles in the field, and is a frequently quoted expert in major business and trade publications.

You can reach him through his Website, www.marcrosenberg.com.