

The Oxford Union Debate – A view from the balcony



The motion:

This house believes that the e-learning of today is essential for the important skills of tomorrow

At 16:10, following introductions from Epic's CEO, Jonathan Satchell, and Director of Learning, Naomi Norman, the debate started. Chaired by Rory Cellan-Jones, the BBC's technology correspondent, 8 speakers put forward their views on the motion, **"This house believes that the e-learning of today is essential for the important skills of tomorrow"**.



First up was Professor Diana Laurillard speaking for the motion, stating that the use of the internet to share and build knowledge will have the same impact as the invention of writing had on the development of knowledge and enlightenment. Its ever-increasing usage demonstrates society's desire to build and share knowledge co-operatively.

Next was world-renowned learning consultant, Dr Marc Rosenberg, who surprised many in the audience by speaking against the motion and suggesting that e-learning as it stands at present is not sufficient to meet the skill demands of the future. He pointed to the fact that although e-learning has been around in some form for several decades, it's yet to make a truly significant impact on the training and development market.



The opening views were then supported by a number of well-respected learning and development professionals.



Major General Tim Inshaw, responsible for individual training and education policy across all 3 military services, stated that above and beyond the arguments about online learning being both effective and efficient, it's an expectation of tomorrow's workforce ("Generation Y"), to be trained this way, much the same as previous generations have expected training in the classroom. Such expectations mean tomorrow's learners will engage much more with online learning than any other medium.

Claire Little, from SHL, suggested that although e-learning does have a place in training and development it is only for unambiguous, knowledge-based topics. It is, at present, unable to deliver on essential problem solving and interpersonal skills.



Andy McGovern of Reuters, well known for his support of the e-learning cause, supported the motion using examples from his own company to show that online learning is working effectively now and will help meet the requirements of tomorrow's skills. Reuters has 3,000 course completions per month, achieving huge, demonstrable ROI, not just in cost savings but also through skills development.



Wendy Cartwright, Head of HR, Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA), had a less enthusiastic view of e-learning's place in skills development. She noted that a recent CIPD survey showed that e-learning in its current form is not a high preference for learners, useful only for what she termed "shallow learning" such as compliance. E-learning will only deliver more "profound learning" when it has been blended effectively with other approaches.

Kirstie Donnelly, Director of Products and Marketing for learndirect, countered this view stating that a number of wide ranging studies in the US showed that online learning beats classroom training in almost every area of defined benefit. She suggested that traditional approaches no longer work in today's society. The learners of today and tomorrow need and want to be in control of their learning, having it available on demand, any time and anywhere.



The final contribution came from David Wilson, founder of Elearnity, speaking against the motion.

His view is that the arguments on efficiency or usefulness do not support the motion. Compliance, product knowledge, and induction programmes provide short term benefits but do not help deliver the skills of tomorrow. To do so, e-learning must adapt and embrace other developments, such as Web 2.0, rich simulation and serious games to name but a few. Click and learn is not the way forward.

To complete the debate, both Professor Laurillard and Dr Rosenberg returned to the floor to deliver their concluding remarks in the hope of convincing the audience to vote with their feet and follow them through the door of their conviction.

Professor Laurillard suggested that those speaking against the motion were using 'scare tactics', focusing on what some perceive as the worst aspects of e-learning without recognising the advances that had been achieved over the last decade. But this is only the start; these steps forward will continue to take place, advancing e-learning to where it will make significant contributions to the development of tomorrow's skills.

Dr Rosenberg stated that at present, e-learning can be delivered quickly and cheaply but it's not good for today's skills, and certainly won't be for tomorrow's. To rise to the challenge, e-learning needs to embrace wider technological advances and blend them into a rich and stimulating experience.



His final comment summed up the mood of the audience and no doubt swayed the vote.

Paraphrasing Shakespeare, he said, "we are not here to bury e-learning, but to save it".

The result - 90 votes for the motion and 144 against. The conclusion was that whilst e-learning continues to play an important role in skills development, the e-learning of today needs to embrace wider technological advances, particularly in social learning and networking, to truly deliver the skills of tomorrow.

Want to know more? Want to continue the debate online? Like to suggest a motion for the next debate? Please visit www.elearningdebate.com