

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Allen's *e-Learning Annual 2009*

Reviewed by **Bill Brandon**

Everyone likes to be up-to-date, professionally speaking. Don't you? There are many ways to do this, from professional development activities such as courses, certifications, and seminars, to reading Weblog posts and trying to keep up with Twitter streams.

Sometimes, though, you want a snapshot of the state of the art at a particular (recent) moment. Professional development takes time, commitment, and money, courses too often prepare you for a world that no longer exists, and with Weblogs and Twitter it gets hard to tell what's significant or lasting and what's evanescent or just the "fad of the day."

This is where publication series such as The Pfeiffer Annual Series come to the rescue. Pfeiffer (a division of Wiley Publishing) began producing *Annual* compilations in 1972, to present "never-before-published materials contributed by learning professionals and academics, and written for trainers, consultants, and human resource and performance-improvement practitioners." These books provide, year by year, a compilation of the best current thinking in their respective topic areas: Consulting, Leadership Development, Management Development, Training, and e-Learning.

To begin at the beginning

Michael Allen, the editor of the *e-Learning Annuals*, is a pioneer in multimedia learning technologies, interactive instructional paradigms, and rapid-prototyping processes. Michael is well-known in the e-Learning field. He is the Chairman and CEO of Allen Interactions, Inc., and the author of many books and articles, as well as being a popular conference speaker. In 2008, Michael, with Pfeiffer, launched the *e-Learning Annual* series. He says that his goal with these books is to present "the most current explorations, thinking, insights, case studies, challenges, guidelines, and other helpful aids for the e-Learning professional."

However, *Michael Allen's e-Learning Annual 2008* started the series with a retrospective. The papers in that first volume looked back to some of the earliest non-military computer-aided instruction systems, such as TICCIT and PLATO, in the late 1960s. Other chapters addressed the development of learning technology over the succeeding decades. The last half of the 2008 *Annual* attempted to assess the lessons learned to date, and the future directions in which e-Learning may

be going. This was a logical start, giving context and history to current-day efforts, although (for me personally, at least) it was more a trip down memory lane. I suspect that for readers whose careers in e-Learning started in the last dozen years, the archaic systems and concerns discussed in the first half of the 2008 *Annual* must have seemed, shall we say, quaint.

The 2009 e-Learning Annual: Controversy, diversity, failure, and success

The 2009 *Annual*, on the other hand, is truly up-to-date in its coverage and concerns. It does not shy away from controversy or from presenting a diversity of viewpoints. In fact, these seem to have been Michael Allen's selection criteria for the papers included in the book.

Allen's diagnosis

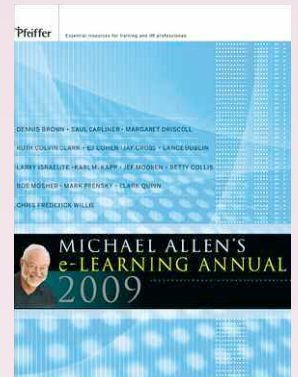
At the outset, Michael Allen says of the history of e-Learning, "multiple approaches have been successful, but far more have failed and continue to do so by almost any measure of performance." He offers two justifications for this statement:

- Low delivery costs promote use of e-Learning whether it fits the needs or not. Too often, the result is e-Learning that is unable to produce learning or to produce improvement in behavior or performance.
- The most expensive instruction is instruction that does not work. Allen feels that most of e-Learning today is in this category, and wastes time, opportunity, and good will.

Allen's prescription

The diagnosis above will not be surprising to anyone who has read Allen's more recent books or heard him speak on e-Learning and instructional design. He offers a half-dozen quick ideas on what to do about it, ideas that the selected articles in the book support:

- Good design and development, supported by skill, creativity, and time, is the answer, not improvement in delivery systems.



Pfeiffer has published the second in a series of Annuals edited by Michael Allen. This is an essential reference for e-Learning professionals who are interested in the most current thinking about instructional design and management.

- Meaningful learning comes from experience.
- Practice is essential for readiness to perform.
- Bored people are crippled learners.
- The primary advantage of e-Learning is its ability to individualize the learning experience.
- Success must be measured in terms of behavioral change.

It's time for change, and of course there are many views about what change is needed. Each of the papers in the *Annual* reflects a different view, and these are sometimes at odds with each other.

The content

The book comprises a baker's dozen of papers. Eight of the thirteen appear in pairs that tend to deliver divergent points of view. I summarize these in terms that do not appear in the *Annual*.

Schlimmbesserung

Schlimmbesserung (sometimes *verschlimmbesserung*), as I understand it, is a German word meaning, roughly, "an improvement that makes things worse." The first pair of articles aren't quite at odds with each other, but both certainly address ways in which advances in technology may not give the wonderful results we expect.

Larry Israelite, who is vice president and manager of human resource development at Liberty Mutual, explains his affliction: e-Mentia. He describes this as a loss of brain function, specifically, the "inability to or lack of interest in learning about, remembering, using, or communicating with others about the uses for and value of new technologies purported to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of, or otherwise have an impact on our day-to-day lives." He is not particularly happy about the experience.

Ed Cohen, another long-time practitioner in e-Learning development and design, and the current chairman of the Aviation Industry CBT Committee (AICC) Training Infrastructure Subcommittee, provides the second opening shot across our bow with his paper on the ways that the Internet damages learning. The Internet, he observes, gave us low cost, global distribution around the clock. At the same time, the limitations of the Internet set design back to the primitive level. He offers his analysis of the situation, and his recommendations on where the learning world should be heading.

Is there a "science of instruction"?

This is the first pair of articles in which there is a serious difference of views, each presented by a well-known and respected authority. The difference relates to whether there are true differences between "Gen Y" (the "digital natives") and previous generations with respect to the optimum support for human learning.

Ruth Clark, past president of the International Society of Performance Improvement and an advocate for application of cognitive research to instructional design, presents her views and supporting evidence on the use of digital technology to accommodate human learning processes. She also identifies her differences with the approach advocated by Marc Prensky.

Marc Prensky, a renowned speaker and writer in his own right, disagrees strongly with Clark. He believes that there is no "science of instruction." Prensky lays out his recommendations, supported by his observations of successful e-Learning applications and thinking.

The differences between these two authorities are deep and significant. I would recommend careful and thoughtful reading of both papers. Every reader will have particular biases, based on personal experience and training, but it would be a mistake (in my opinion) to simply follow your personal bias. It may well be that you will find your views (and your practices) changed once you take the time to understand what both Clark and Prensky have written.

Does instructional design provide value?

The differences between the writers of this pair of articles are not as sharp as in the previous pair. The question is about roles in development, rather than about learning theories. With the rise in popularity of rapid development tools and methods, many wonder if there is still a place (or a need for) instructional designers.

Margaret Driscoll, an associate partner in IBM Global Services (Human Capital Practice), and Saul Carliner, associate professor in the Graduate Program in Educational Technology at Concordia University in Montreal, provide an extended analysis of the instructional design function and the way it is changing in the face of increasing competition. This is an excellent article for consideration by managers and educators, as well as by instructional designers. The bottom line is, instructional designers do offer value, but unless they can present their value proposition effectively, they will continue to find themselves marginalized.

Dennis Brown, co-founder of SkillSoft, agrees that instructional designers provide value, but if designers do not actually measure their contribution to business success, it doesn't matter. However, rather than leave designers hanging, Brown offers an excellent and practical summary of methods for obtaining measurement data. He also makes clear that this data must be presented in a way that makes it clear that instructional design is focused on solving business problems, not on solving training issues.

Is course-based e-Learning still relevant?

The fourth pair of articles may be the most controversial, especially for readers who are committed to what

When you are putting together new projects in the next couple of years, get the Annual down and refer to it as you do your methods and means analysis. There are concepts, strategies, and techniques in these pages that will serve you well.