Tailored e-learning modules at the BBC

Background

Given its reputation for innovative broadcast communications, it is not surprising that the BBC has adopted a considered approach to e-learning. This case study concentrates on the production of an online course on 'Editorial Policy' and demonstrates their comprehensive approach to e-learning. However those involved in e-learning at the BBC emphasise that they have developed their thinking over time and adopted a pragmatic perspective on what e-learning can offer.

The BBC were early adopters of both e-learning and the more general use of portals for employees to access information on learning opportunities at their desktop. A learning website portal, learn.gateway, was established in 1999 and it currently contains the following:

- a wide variety of web based modules produced in-house
- purchased content, such as Harvard Management Mentor
- learning stories and journeys
- information and guidance on informal learning
- details on (including the facility to book) face to face training courses

The amount of content has increased periodically since learn.gateway was set up. Initially the content tended to follow the form of 'electronic paging-turning with a quiz at the end'. In 2001 a major review of e-learning at the BBC took place and new staff were recruited to form an 'Interactive Products and Services' team. Of those recruited, some had an educational/instructional design background but others came from the commercial web world. This resulted in a new approach based on learner centred design. This has developed from the interchange between those who came from a commercial web background and those with a learning/training background. Both groups formed part of the new team. Over time a new shared vocabulary has developed - for example learner profiling, navigation, architecture, and learning outcomes.

In 2004 a tailored module on workplace health & safety ('What happened to Max?') was released. Previous mandatory Health and Safety training had been designed and delivered on a CD Rom. The BBC's e learning team learned a great deal from the deployment of this module, which received some criticism. It was made compulsory for all production staff (some 16,000) but did not always have the management support to ensure compliance. At eight hours it was too long and many users complained it went over material which was inappropriate or they already knew.

The success of the Editorial Policy module outlined in the remainder of this case shows how demanding the requirements are for a high profile tailored or bespoke module. It also shows how effective results and savings can be made if the necessary resources are invested.

The requirement

As a public corporation, the BBC is required to observe standards in a whole range of activities across its broadcasting coverage whether television, radio or the Internet. These standards are set out in a hard copy document known as the 'Editorial Guidelines' which must be observed by all staff at all times and in all locations. Previously staff were trained in these
guidelines in off-the-job courses held in the Regions with a member of the Editorial Policy team in attendance. By 2002 (it was a gradual realisation) it was recognised that this approach was no longer appropriate, because

- the approach was ad-hoc, it was variable in its effectiveness and was not mandatory
- the corporation was recruiting more staff from outside, increasingly on contracts and learning essential production values by 'osmosis'
- could no longer be guaranteed to ensure sufficient awareness and judgement. Moreover increasingly output broadcast by the BBC was made by independent companies
- the enquiries received by the specialist editorial policy teams were often from people who were unaware or insufficiently familiar with the policies

The need for a new approach was given added impetus by some high profile cases where the standards had not been applied in programming making. On a day time discussion show two actors had appeared purporting to be sisters with a problem they wished to air; this impersonation led to negative publicity for the Corporation across the tabloid newspapers.

A decision was therefore made to commission an e-learning course of two modules on Editorial Policy and to make it compulsory for 16,000 members of the BBC staff - half of whom were journalists. The demanding requirements of this and the other bespoke modules mean that only a small number of such initiatives can be resourced. Subsequently the e-learning team have produced a similar sized course on shooting skills called The Good Shooting Guide which has been very positively received both internally and externally with praise received from countries worldwide. The following quotations illustrate the user reactions:

"Great stuff! Thanks for having put this online. The guide is put together very nicely, with the proper use of flash and html, clear navigation, visuals and audio. Very nice! I wish we had BBC in Holland"

"Thank you so much for your brilliant shooting guide. It makes difficult and complex concepts seem simple and basic. The interactive aspects (adjusting Iris to observe changes) are ingenious."

The team's latest challenge is a course on legal issues for programme makers (working title Legal Online).

**Learner needs**

According to Rachel Simnett, the team leader who developed the learner centred approach within the department, in 2001 the BBC "started designing e-learning with both the organisation and the learners preferences in mind". The assumption that there is a need for training needs to be tested - training solutions are not always appropriate - and, at the outset, information must be assembled, on the approaches that will engage the learner. This is not a matter of flashy and seductive graphics - indeed these may be a barrier if the user is accessing these in the module at home or at an office without adequate bandwidth. What is important is to produce illustrations or scenarios which will make sense to the user in their context. Rachel Simnett suggests that for example, it is important to recognise learning aspirations ("where they want to be not where they are") so scenarios describe the problems encountered at the next level up the promotion ladder.

The subject matter expert (in the example under review, the Senior Editorial Policy Staff) will always specify the policy content. The team will undertake interviews, ideally of 15-20
end-users to identify what they know about current practice; how comfortable they are with the e-learning approach and the past circumstances in which they learnt best. The resulting module produced will therefore be tailored but Rachel Simnett is not committed to any theoretical textbook module of learning and is pragmatic and exploratory in her approach. The product is the same for all the potential users, but if designed using this degree of care, will meet their different needs. In her view "A well-designed course caters for different preferences".

**Elements of the module**

Once the requirements had been determined by Editorial Policy, the e-learning package was co-produced by the BBC and Line Communications. It consists of two modules, both of which contain highly relevant and engaging material - which resulted in an external award for best e-learning material.

Module one: is designed to give users an overall appreciation of the issues involved in meeting the required standards. It uses a tutorial-based approach but has clips drawing on relevant actual BBC output. All these clips contain a set of questions: for example, learners are invited to 'pull the plug' when they think a cookery programme has over promoted a book authored by one of the guests. They are given feedback and questions many of which require multiple answers. There are links available at all stages to relevant text in the guidelines - in this way the need to recognise the Editorial Guidelines as the prime source of information is reinforced.

Module two: has more detailed sections on aspects of editorial policy: privacy, impartiality and accuracy, harm and offence and the commercial world. Each section contains two or three scenarios often based on media clips. Learners are, for example, invited to choose a balanced panel for a question programme at the time of the Iraq war and deal with a subsequent complaint on the composition of the panel. In another example the extent to which subterfuge can be used to obtain a journalistic scoop is explored.

In total the time taken to work through both modules amounts to some three hours.

**Results feedback**

Almost all the 16,000 staff identified have completed this course. Minimal opposition has been encountered. In some senses it could be argued that relevance has driven out resistance. However the design of the project has required, and been given, strong senior management support. This has also been reflected in the marketing and promotion which is necessary even for a compulsory course.

Feedback has been obtained through a variety of means. Having undertaken both modules, all the BBC's 8,000 journalists were required to subsequently attend a half-day classroom workshop. At that stage they offer their views. There is also a free text feedback form at the end of the modules. The comments here have been favourable with many users stating that they did not realise that e-learning could be as engaging and affective.

The most powerful indicator of success is the request to the e-learning team from other parts of the BBC for similar modules. As Rachel Simnett recognises there is a need to maintain standards of production but only so much can be done. However as she puts it
"If you need 16,000 people to go through specific training in a tight timetable at less than £20 per head there is no other way of doing it. The BBC has saved up to £2 million of licence fee money by using this approach".