What’s Broken About Corporate E-Learning & How Adaptive Learning Heals the Gap
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Corporate E-Learning Is Broken

In a corporate learning context, e-learning seems to be the only way to deliver training at scale. Yet, we all know that traditional e-learning isn’t effective and is far from engaging. What if that training focused only on what learners needed to know and on their hidden misconceptions? And what if it cut training time by up to 50% while increasing learner engagement and mastery at the same time?

Say Hello to Adaptive Learning

An Adaptive Learning system is a computer-based teaching system that adapts in real-time to the needs of each learner. While formative assessment (the concept behind Adaptive Learning) has been around for nearly 100 years, it is almost unheard of in corporate training, let alone used.

The research- and evidence-based algorithms in Area9’s platform constantly assess, adjust and readjust the lessons and teaching approach based on the learner’s responses and needs. Area9’s platform is even able to uncover and remediate deeply entrenched learning problems like long-term retention and unconscious incompetence.
9 Reasons Adaptive Learning Should Be Used In Corporate E-Learning

1. Adaptive Learning focuses on teaching only what is needed

Imagine two learners, both of whom know 90% of a particular topic, but for each the 10% they don’t know is different. A pre-test would probably result in both students skipping the course entirely, leaving gaps in their knowledge and risk to the business. Alternatively, a typical course would waste time—lots of it—as these learners work through material with which they are familiar. An adaptive course, however, will quickly focus in on the 10% knowledge gap that is unique to each student and ensure each becomes competent, that day and for long term.

2. Adaptive Learning is unique to every learner.

The fundamental difference between Adaptive Learning and traditional e-learning is the ability to respond in real-time to the student’s knowledge and even to their emotional state. Adaptive Learning systems determine such things as: is the student knowledgeable about the current subject or a novice in that area? Are they engaged or disengaged? Are they confident in their knowledge or unsure? Adaptive Learning takes all these factors, and more, into account on a minute-by-minute basis to produce an optimal learning experience.

3. Adaptive Learning actually teaches - each student - actively.

Today, what most companies call “training courses” are actually closer to “disengagement courses”, where a student passively receives information and is expected to internalize the material. However, Adaptive Learning is outcome-based – the entire system is geared toward the active acquisition and retention of knowledge and skills, rather than the simple consumption and completion of content.
9 Reasons Adaptive Learning Should Be Used In Corporate E-Learning

4. Adaptive Learning teaches faster than traditional methods

Compared to traditional e-learning, adaptive learning teaches faster.

“Typically 50% faster for most learners because it eliminates teaching the content they already know”

This 50% savings in time has been tracked by multiple companies using Area9’s Adaptive Learning platform, including Hitachi Vantara and the National Safety Council.

5. Adaptive Learning resolves “unconscious incompetence.”

Imagine those same 90%-knowing students we met in Reason 1. In the process of uncovering the missing 10%, the system will check the other 90%. It is likely that some things the students think they know will actually prove to be wholly or partially incorrect (our studies show that this is the case for 15-40% of key topics for any person). In other words, they don’t know that they don’t know (otherwise known as unconscious incompetence).

In a typical course the student would probably skim over those sections they believed they already knew and not learn what they needed to learn. But an adaptive system will correct those errors quickly.


Learning takes practice. Multiple exposures over time (“spaced-repetition”) are required for true internalization, understanding, and learning. Good Adaptive Learning tools do not teach in a strictly linear way; they deliberately expose learners to content multiple times (whenever the tool deems it to be necessary for optimal retention based on the learner’s history and on the tool’s knowledge of brain science). And, because adaptive tools understand the learner—what he or she found easy or difficult throughout the course—learners can (and should!) take the same course multiple times and the adaptive system will focus in on only the areas of highest need.
9 Reasons Adaptive Learning Should Be Used In Corporate E-Learning

7. Adaptive Learning - improves course design

Adaptive learning is a better designed learning platform than traditional corporate e-learning because it is a) question-based, and b) learning objectives are specific and focused to the learner. The best kinds of questions for adaptive learning are ones that are difficult to guess, easy to understand, create context for the learner, and enable the adaptive engine to perform optimally. Learning objectives need to be specific and focussed to ensure there are no unidentified gaps in the student's knowledge. Together, good questions and well-focussed learning objectives require instructional designers to be disciplined and dig deeper into the learning content.

8. Adaptive Learning generates valuable data, for free.

Questions (or probes) drive Adaptive Learning. Building an effective Adaptive Learning course starts with breaking down learning objectives in order to become more focused on teaching specific tasks or knowledge areas. Probes are then mapped to assess a learner’s proficiency with these focused learning objectives. As learners interact with the probes, their responses drive the adaptive engine and are captured for further analysis and reporting. Since this data is collected as part of the learning process, there is no need for additional standalone assessments on the part of the business.

9. Adaptive Learning allows developers to get learning content to learners, faster.

Through the use of formative assessment (teaching by asking questions), Adaptive Learning builds up a picture of the learner, tracks exactly where they are at any given time, and allows them to interact with courses multiple times without repeating content unnecessarily. This enables Adaptive Learning program developers to incrementally release parts of a course, secure in the knowledge that when a learner engages with the learning material, the adaptive engine will only focus on what is new within the course to the learner. Imagine the learning content as a map: the adaptive engine picks up the learner and places her or him on the map in a place they have never been before, so that the learner does not have to start the course again from scratch.
Are You Ready to Heal Your Corporate Learning Platform?

There is a lot to know about Adaptive Learning, but here’s what is most important:

- Adaptive Learning cuts down on training time,
- Adaptive Learning improves learner engagement, and
- Adaptive Learning guarantees mastery of the learning content.

If you are ready to learn more about what Adaptive Learning can do for your corporate learning platform, or if you want to test an Area9 Adaptive Learning pilot program, contact John Harper.

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