

A Topic-Centric Approach

by Garry Nordenstam – President, ThinkWorks

The Approach

To utilize a Learning Management System, you must develop content that works with the system. Many buzzwords capture the philosophy and approach of topic-centric content. Learning Objects, Knowledge Objects, and Content Objects are terms used today which refer to topic-centric content. It is all about ensuring your training content becomes a manageable asset. To do so, you may want to consider the following:

- Develop training using a topic-centric approach that allows learners to begin and end training sessions in a reasonable period.

That is, instead of creating a stand-alone course, create a series of stand-alone topics that you can combine to create a number of courses. This allows more learners and more courses to use the same topics.

- Use the Learning Management System to “assemble” courses from the topics to meet the needs of individual learners.

This typically requires that you utilize one or more of the emerging eLearning standards (SCORM, AICC, or IMS) when creating content.

- Focus on the reduction of duplicate content by looking for overlap between topics in existing courses.

The Methodology

At ThinkWorks, we use a two-phase approach to content development. Using two phases allows the content to be accurately analyzed, the scope of work precisely defined, priorities established, and the total cost to be accurately estimated. This also ensures compatibility between the technologies, business strategies, training content, and business culture.

Phase I – Design It

In Phase I, we identify and validate the topics. We create a Design Document that describes the overall approach, each major topic, its lessons, and the appropriate instructional methodologies for each topic. The Design Document details:

- The sequence for developing the topics
- What learning should take place
- How learning should be evaluated
- Graphic design
- Overall look and feel

Phase II – Build It

In Phase II, we create the topics. We begin by creating a script and program-ready-material for each topic using information in the Design Document created in Phase I. As

topics are completed, we can make the training available to learners through the Learning Management System.

The Technologies

A topic-centric approach requires a robust data structure to ensure content is available across courses, business units, and computing platforms. The technologies employed should support:

- Learning objects
- Separation of the Presentation and Content
- Individualized learning plans
- Flexible and reusable content
- Efficient updates to content

The Advantages

The advantages of a topic-centric approach are numerous. Some of the advantages of this approach include:

- A topic-centric approach:
 - Allows for new applications of content (reference/resource material, performance support, etc)
 - Maximizes the Learning Management System's capabilities
 - Eliminates the redundancy that occurs in a course-centric environment
 - Results in lower overall design and development costs than a course-centric approach
- The overall approach provides a great deal of flexibility in meeting learner's needs:
 - Individual Learning Plans are created on a per-topic basis, rather than a per-course basis, which ensures learners receive the training they need
 - Ensures the integrity of evaluations by assessing learners on a per-topic basis
 - Learners begin and end training sessions in a reasonable time frame
 - Short, focused training sessions meet an adult learner's need for a sense of completion and success
 - All learners have immediate access to the most up-to-date content
- The Learning Management System can link learning objects to specific job competencies
- A consistent training experience for all learners
- Reduced or eliminated print and distribution costs

Summary

To manage your content as an asset, you must treat it as an asset. Planning for and implementing standards, helps ensure your assets are reusable and manageable.