

**An important challenge for e-Learning is "stickiness," or getting users to willingly return. YouTube is a service that seems to have solved this problem, along with a few other sites. Read this column for a precise summary of the factors in their success, and make your e-Learning stick.**

*Dave Burta is a senior consultant for Latitude Consulting Group, a Saline, Michigan-based e-business consultancy. Dave is also the program manager for LatitudeU.com – Latitude's peer-to-peer e-Learning portal. Prior to joining Latitude, Dave served for 12 years as president of ProVent associates, a business consulting and training organization for information technology services companies. Over that span, he has coached and trained more than 5,000 consulting and information technology professionals. Contact Dave by e-mail to Dave.Burta@latitudecpg.com*

## Borrowing from the YouTube Playbook for Training

It is no trade secret that the half-life of formal learning is measurable in barely more than clock time. And the Holy Grail of trainers and learners is how to expand that half-life in meaningful ways (i.e., how to make learning "stickier"). A part of the answer to "stickiness" may lie in borrowing a play or two from the YouTube playbook.

YouTube has enjoyed mass acceptance and adoption rarely seen around the globe, and across many subject areas. What is it about their approach to communications that has caused its amazing reception and "stickiness," and how can that be applied to training and learning?

I would suggest that it is some combination of the following YouTube attributes:

- Ease-of-use and access
- Sound-bite-level learning of low-density content
- Variability of content
- Informality of media and messages

The last attribute, the informality of YouTube, perhaps has the greatest impact on what it is that makes YouTube so habit-forming. Together, these attributes make a YouTube-like environment a remarkable candidate to help the learning community extend the half-lives of learning events and delivery technologies. These same attributes applied to learning would make it far more inviting to learners, and thus have them readily returning for more opportunities to learn.

### Ease of use and access

Learning management systems (LMSs) all face the same challenge. They trade simplicity and ease-of-use for functionality (or vice versa). The more substantial the content, and the enterprise requirements for administration and delivery of learning, the more inherently complex the LMS environment must be to accommodate those requirements. This often adds layer upon layer of rules, criteria, and complex pathways of learning. These complexities are an inherent turn-off to students, so who can blame them for looking for more comforting content and ease of use and access?

YouTube is the "fast food of content" and the beauty of it for users is that it provides instant access to limitless "comfort content," with the user having to do nothing more than virtually point, click, and use. Removing any administrative, technical, and pedagogical burdens from e-Learning content delivery may just be one of the insights gleaned from the YouTube experience.

### Learning bites and low density content

How many trainers have witnessed (when training was instructor-led) students nodding off? We aren't able to witness the same "nodding off" outcome when training is e-delivered. Even if distance-learning students are not nodding off, there are many other distractions that can disrupt longer lessons. When unobserved, students may feel free to multitask with only peripheral attention to an e-Learning lesson.

To maintain attention and enhance retention, many trainers have learned (if they are successful) to deliver messages in bite-sized portions, hitting students with many variations of the same theme, instead of beleaguering them with long boring sermons on a single subject. Political campaigners have learned the same thing. Sound bites "stick," while dry, lengthy diatribes and pontifications are rarely retained for long (if at all).

YouTube has mastered the art of video sound bites as the basis for producing and delivering content. Short, low-density snippets attract YouTube users. Low density means content is highly focused on a single thread. Similarly, you can repeat learning bites (SCO's for some) in multiple variations. Such low-density content is all it takes to find and keep someone's attention, and have them remember what they saw or learned.

### Variability and many options to choose from

Every YouTube experience varies significantly, even in the same subjects and venues that users frequently browse. This occurs because it draws content from a large, diverse population. This diversity allows one to see many things from many vantage points, and, frankly, is the perfect prescription for short attention spans. As trainers, and even students, know from the most primitive rules of learning, repetition works; it works so much better when it is not boring and adds new perspective with each iteration.

When users get bored with a piece of content on YouTube, they have the ability to instantly move on and choose from many other options. Providing avenues of escape might not seem to serve the objectives of training professionals in their quest for stickiness, but students weaving in and out of a training program should be preferable to students completely tuning out on the content provided or the content provider.

Before doubting this power in providing variability and options, consider how many different teaching

modes exist in automobile driving lessons, and the ways in which they're delivered. If driver education simply resorted to lectures, or only placed kids in a driver's seat and said "drive," it would produce horrible results. It would give student drivers an incredibly limited perspective and understanding of what is involved in driving, and what they need to learn and understand on a permanent basis. Also, think of the prospect of providing one role-model driver as the exclusive provider of driver education. Now, what if this singular role model only demonstrates cutting off other drivers, or weaving in and out of traffic at top speeds? The permanent orientation (dysfunction) to learning to drive that was provided exclusively by that one mode of driver education would produce catastrophic consequences.

Creating diversity of options for both the content and the modality of delivery (text, video, blended instruction, etc.) for learning provides far greater stickiness than more traditional and monolithic methods.

### Informality

There is a quality of immediate familiarity with most YouTube content segments. This familiarity exists because many content providers offer a semi-intimate slice of their own lives, perspectives, or even a moment of personal creativity that they wish to share with the world. Such intimacy and familiarity is due largely to the informality of both the content and the ease-of-use and access environment provided by YouTube.

Content on YouTube comes from virtually anyone and anywhere on almost any subject. The "authors" don't always put great effort into their productions, and yet most of the material is highly informal and generally "feels good." On YouTube we peer into someone else's life or perspective at will, and most of us enjoy it immensely simply because it is intimate, familiar, and informal.

The learning appeal of this electronic version of informality and teaching intimacy is little different from our college experiences. The "stickiness" of the learning experience increases significantly, as students progress from formal lectures with hundreds of students to small seminars and even workshops where everyone is on a first name basis. These small, intimate, informal learning forums are the ones that have a long-term impact that will stay with someone decades later. Whereas, Psych 101, Eco 101, PolySci 101, and other lectures with up to a thousand other students tend to be a blur. So why wouldn't these same informal, more intimate conditions help someone e-Learn what someone else has to e-Teach? YouTube provides just such an environment.

Some training Websites that have embraced many of these YouTube attributes:

- LatitudeU ([www.latitudeu.com](http://www.latitudeu.com)): An open public marketplace of diverse content, knowledge, and training. (Editor's Note: Requires registration to access, content is free. The author's company sponsors this site.)
- CWERTY ([www.cwerty.com](http://www.cwerty.com)): Inexpensive Executive Presentations from top business execs. (Editor's Note: Previews are free, videos require joining and paying a fee.)
- E-Learning for Kids ([www.e-learningforkids.org](http://www.e-learningforkids.org)): Free content and training materials for kids, educators, and parents. (Editor's Note: Free, no registration.)
- Average Betty™ ([www.averagebetty.com](http://www.averagebetty.com)): "Home cooking and culinary comedy" – instruction for the nutritionally-challenged. (Editor's Note: Free, no registration.)
- eLearning Pulse ([www.elearningpulse.com/videos/featured](http://www.elearningpulse.com/videos/featured)): Content from a variety of Web sources. (Editor's Note: Free, no registration.)

### Achieving stickiness

The YouTube phenomenon and the attributes described above are not new. They have existed in various forms of public communications from radio to TV to the advent of cable and satellite TV, where users can pick from hundreds of content options. While academicians can argue about the pedagogical virtues of these media as constructive learning environments, there is no argument that their appeal is potent. The YouTube model applied to training and learning is simply the next generation of electronic media creating new glue for achieving effective transfer and acceptance of knowledge.

Perhaps a powerful bit of evidence that a YouTube-type model works is the recent Presidential Debates "powered by" YouTube. The debate forum reflected the public's YouTube-expressed desires to be more directly educated by the candidates about themselves and the issues they (the public) care about most.

### Conclusion

This article does not suggest in any way that all systems that support training and learning should push content through a YouTube model. Not all subject matter is applicable to such a model. (Who would want their cardiologist to have studied at YouTubeU?) What it does suggest is that training professionals all keep one eye on the YouTube playbook as they provide content, learning systems, and training services. And, as the situations present themselves, training professionals can embrace these YouTube attributes wherever applicable. Each of us has a lot to learn, many have things to teach, and all can learn from the YouTube model how to improve teaching and learning in many areas *and* make it stick.

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