Visions:
The Death of the Course

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Our Chief Technology Officer just returned from a three-day training session full of grumbles about the "course" she had taken. Her course began where the textbook began. Problem was her knowledge of the subject began halfway through the textbook. Our CTO's plea: Can't someone make a course that begins and ends where my knowledge begins and ends?

The answer is "Yes." But truth be told today's best e-learning products have little in common with the historical course. E-learning companies are churning out fewer structured, one-size-fits-all courses, creating in their place a fresh generation of educational events that run at the same speed and in the same direction as the unpredictable intellects of real adult learners.

Knowledge can be packaged in many ways. The historically most common knowledge package "the course" is dying. We have the Internet to blame – or to thank, depending on your orientation.

Adults learn by doing. Knowles' andragogical model established this. Research has confirmed this practical preference. Universities use formal courses to teach 16 million Americans every year. But more than four times this number -- 90 million adult Americans -- learn without the aid of formal courses each year.

In 1997 The Education Development Center of Massachusetts quantified the amount of career knowledge that the average adult learns not in formal courses or degree programs but from co-workers: a shocking 70%. The Academy of Life enjoys a body of alumni much larger than the Ivy League.

Adults crave education they can grab onto and put to immediate use. They take a pluck-n-play approach to knowledge. They pluck what they need to know from books, online discussion lists, Web sites, and the brains of their co-workers. This contrasts to the historical orientation of the formal course, where stress is laid on learning everything from A-to-Z, step-by-step, just-in-case one might need it later. E-learning programs can and should cultivate the native each-one-teach one principle that is the adult's preferred and richest knowledge conduit. Formal courses are optional under this approach.

The Internet has changed the way knowledge is packaged.

Formal courses are akin to printed books. We -- authors, publishers, educators -- pretend that people pick up books and read them from the first page to the last. This rarely happens. People pick up a book and thumb through it. They selectively read *only* the sections that cover what they need to know -- ASAP.

It may be weeks, *if ever*, before an adult devours a book in its entirety. We pretend that learning is linear. We package it as if it is. Adult learners stubbornly insist on accessing information in what we professional educators puzzle over as a most uneducated manner. They don't play by the book.

Knowledge has a shorter shelf life today than a century ago. The packages we wrap it in should come in a corresponding array of shorter, quicker and more accessible sizes.

One new company, MeansBusiness.com, is founded on the principle that long, formal courses are inefficient ways to transmit knowledge these days. "Eighty percent of what most managers need to learn today does not exist in any course," says MeansBusiness' CEO David Wilcox.

New ideas exist more commonly in books. "But," says Wilcox, "there is a lag between when a book is published and when these ideas get made into courses. There is a tendency to develop courses for established skills. Courses are two or three years behind where professional knowledge needs to be."

Wilcox has a point. I developed my first online course in 1989. The first time I encountered a formal course on developing online courses was seven years later, in 1996. In 1999 I took a series of courses and became, at long last, a Certified Online Instructor. The intellectual stuffing of courses is not fresh ideas. Fresh ideas travel in smaller, swifter packages.

SkillSoft, a business skills e-learning company, offers a library of online courses. While formal courses form the spine of SkillSoft's instructional system, the New Hampshire company believes that a spine alone is no longer sufficient. SkillSoft also offers a library of practical job aids, a bank of concept papers that cover topics too new to be found in formal courses (courtesy of MeansBusiness and Knowledge@Wharton), e-mail mentoring, peer discussion boards, and much more. These new shorter more accessible educational offerings form the central nervous system of SkillSoft's knowledge system.

Our CTO has little time or patience for a formal twelve-week course in network security. She frequents online knowledge communities where her peers congregate because this is where JIT fixes can be found and put into action the very same day. The Net, at its native best, remains Everyman's Harvard, Everywoman's Yale.

"Courses" need no longer be static or protracted. If a learner needs to master a topic she can take a test online to establish her competency level. Internet guides can then boot our learner to the exact place within a "course" that is on par with her knowledge base. The result is a curriculum that never ends, courses that neither begin nor end. For the first time learners can enter and leave "courses" on a native JIT basis.

The best e-learning is broadly referred to as "adaptive" because the lessons themselves elastically adapt to the student's knowledge level and academic strengths and weaknesses. All good e-learning will someday leverage the adaptive abilities of databases. Courses will begin and end where one's knowledge begins and ends, instead of the old way, where they began in September and ended in December.

The Internet's memory is not fixed, as with printed books, but fluid, capable of changing with a few keystrokes or when one learner bumps into another in an online forum. Learning objects, small interchangeable units that address a single topic, can be strung together or pulled apart with a few lines of code. Yesterday's long tedious course becomes a series of Lego-style concepts online. These intellectual Legos can snap together or come apart, adjusting to the custom knowledge needs of EveryLearner.

Cognitive Arts says they make e-courses; I'd call their product something else. I'd term them educational immersions. Office workers can learn business English as a second language using Cognitive Arts courseware. But the "course" doesn't teach abstract principles. The course assigns learners the fictive role of business executive, then invites them to learn English by responding to fictional inter-office memos and reports left in the learner's e-mail in-box. This is not your father's ESL class.

The course is dead. Long live learning.