

SMART PHONES IN ASSESSMENT

BY KEVIN LOHAN

In a recent column I commented on the different styles of question that make up a lot of assessment quizzes. In particular, the kind that are often featured in online assessments where correct or incorrect answers have to be pre-loaded into the program.

You just can't ask an open question in an online quiz and expect the computer to give a result. So, we're left with 'choice' type questions where the candidate has to select from a given range.

These can be notoriously difficult to write.

However, just a week ago, I discovered a new lever that candidates are using to help them get by in assessments.

A friend was completing a number of difficult technical eLearning modules and was finding the assessments difficult.

Importantly, he should have already known the material as this was a refresher and he has many years of experience in the field.

Yet, he still found the assessments difficult.

He uncovered a work-around. What he started doing was to use his phone to take a photograph of any screen that he felt might include tricky or complex info that could appear in the assessment. Then, when it did indeed appear in the assessment, he simply referred to his image library to find the answer.

How refreshingly simple and clever of him, I thought.

Then I thought: One of two things is likely to be happening here. One: the 'teaching' component of the module is not doing its job. Two: the assessment is not valid.

Since he claimed to have pre-existing knowledge and experience with the content I ruled out the 'teaching' part. Of course, it could still be poor but his prior knowledge made it redundant anyway.

So, I was left to ponder about the quality of the assessment.

I've seen more than a few online assessments that are structured poorly. It seems to me that this is because the author is constrained by the limitations of the 'choice' format governed by computer assessments.

Suffering under such a constraint the author often winds up creating questions that are poorly structured simply because they are trying to force a multiple-choice question out of content that is difficult to ask in a multiple-choice format. Not impossible - just difficult.

There aren't many places we can go to be taught how to structure well-written assessment questions. We are typically left to our intuition or our own experiences with multiple choice or true false assessment formats. (Drag and Drop and other similar formats are still 'choice' style questions.)

One infuriating style of questions that invariably catches learners out is when they are asked to put a sequence of events or facts in order (often in drag and

drop format). The more choices there are in the list the more variables there are and the more ways there are to get the thing wrong. To make it more infuriating, the program often chucks you out after say, three failures and you have to do the module over again.

This is where my friend hit upon his ingenious plan.

Armed with a photograph of the correct sequence he is now able to get the sequence right at his first attempt, every time.

What we are now assessing is his ability to solve problems rather than to properly sequence that list he was asked to put in order.

That may be a good thing but it's not the right thing. The assessment is no longer a valid test of what we are attempting to assess.

I think there must be a market out there for someone who can create a training course in how to properly write assessment questions - especially for online programs.

Am I right?

- a) Yes
- b) No

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