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JANUARY 22, 2024

Artificial Intelligence Elevating eLearning

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For anyone watching the education space evolve over the last two decades, the current online learning boom has been an inevitability. But, amid societal and cultural shifts and real-world deployments of nextgen technologies, this category is perhaps exceeding even the most optimistic of expectations as research forecasts exponential growth.

This, as e-learning market size reportedly surpassed \$315 billion in 2021 and is projected to reach \$1 trillion as soon as 2028. Emerging tech like artificial intelligence and machine learning are certainly driving much of this growth. In fact, reports increasingly evangelize the copious benefits advancements like AI bring to the e-Learning sector ... and industry pundits are taking heed.

e-Learning: Then and Now

The term “e-learning” was coined in 1999, and it took another decade for online learning to start picking up steam. After an initial spurt in 2012, which the media dubbed the “Year of the MOOC” (for Massive Open Online Courses), e-learning settled into strong, relatively steady growth. Some online course providers reported staggering enrollment base growth — one of which, Coursera, surging by a consistent 7 million annually in just a three-year period.

Then came the pandemic, which rapidly accelerated online learning and thrust the industry squarely into the spotlight — whether or not it was ready for primetime. In fact, the World Economic Forum estimates that e-learning course enrollment doubled in the first year of the pandemic. It increased another 32% in 2021. In 2020, nearly 31 million new students enrolled in Coursera courses — a significant jump that occurred again in 2021 when the platform’s user base reached 92 million. That same year, the number of MOOC learners eclipsed 220 million.

Overall, the e-learning industry has grown 900% since 2000, fueled equally by the pandemic and the escalating demand for a flexible, affordable alternative to the traditional four-year degree. The

fast-emerging corporate e-learning space is on a similar trajectory, expected to skyrocket 250% in the next three years as companies large and small launch digital courses and certificates.

The Completion Conundrum

As online learning races toward a \$1 trillion market size and competition heats up among academia, corporations and other creators, an uncomfortable question looms: Why aren't more students completing online courses?

For one startup, that question sparked a decade-long obsession — and laid the foundation for an AI and behavioral science-driven platform that cracks the “completion rate” code.

“Investment in online courses is growing at an almost exponential rate, yet the industry has failed to tackle its biggest problem: low completion rates,” said Scott Duffy, co-founder and chief executive officer of Courus. “We’ve spent a decade researching this single problem because, without bolstering today’s sub-par completions, e-learning can’t reach its full potential.”

In 2021, more than \$300 billion was spent on e-learning. Research shows that the average completion rate for e-learning courses is just 3.1%; in other words, 97 out of 100 students who enroll in any given course fail to finish what they started.

Course completion is directly tied to learning outcomes, yet it is a statistic most in the industry are hesitant to talk about. Not Duffy. He revealed that his team has been obsessively researching a solution to the completion rate problem ever since the “Year of the MOOC.”

“All that extensive research has taught the team what doesn’t work,” said Duffy. “Despite the tendency to blame the learner’s attention span, low completion rates aren’t the student’s fault — and data shows that ‘bells and whistles’ aren’t the solution.”

“When course creators see a poor completion rate, the tendency is to think, ‘What can we do to boost the student’s attention span?,’” Duffy continued. “But, through rigorous testing, we’ve seen virtually no difference in completion rates for courses with poor-quality versus high-quality video content. Replacing an out-of-the-box Learning Management System with a custom one doesn’t move the needle, and neither does gamifying the content.”

Duffy added more fuel to the fire, noting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, online university enrollment skyrocketed, yet there was no measurable difference in completion rates.

Meager Motivation Undermining Online Learning

According to Duffy, low completion rates are a motivation issue, not an attention span issue. “What motivates someone to complete courses in person doesn’t apply online,” he asserts. “In most cases, creators fail to consider how learning changes once you remove the classroom environment.”

The dynamics of accountability, interaction and attention, for example, all shift when education leaves the physical classroom environment and goes online. If attention spans aren’t the issue and what applies in person doesn’t apply online, then how can course creators boost their failing grades in completion? Joe DeMaria, Courus co-founder and chief learning officer, said the team’s behavioral modeling has also uncovered what does work: ascension and alignment.

“First, does the program’s structure take learners where they want to go? Can we actually build the skills to reach an end result? And then, is the result aligned with the student’s goals and desires?” asked DeMaria. “Through our modeling, we’ve found that if a program has these two facets, the result is more engagement and higher completion.”

“Structuring a program for completion and aligning that experience with the student’s motivations is a tough dynamic to get right,” Duffy said. “That’s especially the case when so many creators have backgrounds other than education. In a landscape where 40% of Fortune 500s are investing in e-learning, that’s an increasingly common scenario.”

According to Duffy, Corus helps creators crack the code. Fueled by proprietary behavioral science and leading-edge AI, he underscores that the platform is proven to enhance engagement and increase completion rates to 65% or higher. “With Corus, brands are building the world’s most powerful online courses and, in many cases, seeing real ROI for the first time,” he noted.

Boosting Consequential KPIs

Corus uses AI, machine learning and proprietary behavioral science to help creators learn what to build, how to structure that content for e-learning completion and when to optimize it for reduced friction and drop-offs.

“Our proprietary behavioral science models have been amplified even further through the power of AI,” said DeMaria. “Think of all the incredible minds and heaps of intellect that can now be realized because, for the first time, courses are fully optimized to boost engagement, completion and overarching ROI.”

To achieve that, the platform leverages a range of automated tools. An audience insight engine helps creators understand learners before investing in a course, while a course builder identifies the precise structure to boost completion and engagement.

The data on course completion rates may be discouraging, but AI and behavioral science are empowering creators to build more powerful courses. And, the benefits are sure to extend far beyond the ROI of any single course.

“By optimizing courses for completion, ROI isn’t just boosted but outcomes for learners also improve and e-learning is closer to achieving its full potential,” Duffy concluded, “Because, if there’s one industry long overdue for disruption, it’s education.” **C&IT**

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