TMR REPORTS
LEADING AUTHORING TOOLS

EDITED BY DEANNE DALRYMPLE AND KATICA ROY

TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW

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IN THIS REPORT

CONTENTS

TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW provides objective reviews of training content and supporting technologies, advice on media-related training issues, research reports, and consulting.

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INTRODUCTION

by Patti Shank

If you're planning to build online or blended instruction (courses, modules, lessons, tutorials, activities, support files, and so on) and want to build it yourself, you have no doubt wondered which authoring tool to purchase. But answering this question is like answering these questions: What's the ideal house size? Where's the best place to retire? What's the best color scheme for a website?

The answer to all of these questions is…it depends. When it comes to authoring tools, the choice depends on many factors, including your current skill level and tolerance and time for the inevitable learning curve, budget, what needs to be built, standards that must be adhered to, technology constraints, and whether an authoring tool plays nicely with the other tools your organization uses (or wants to use) and any e-learning infrastructure your organization has or intends to purchase.

I had a potential client call me a while back, and she had numerous people in her organization on a conference call to hear my answer to the million-dollar which-authoring-tool-is-best question. When I said, "It depends. Tell me what you want to build," she was clearly displeased and told me she'd find another person who could quickly answer the question. I wasn't trying to be difficult, and it's not that vendors and consultants won't answer this question—many will. The problem is that their answer, when they don't know much about your organization and needs, is likely to be self-serving and unlikely to be valuable.

Some authoring tools may be initially appealing because they seem super easy to use. In fact, some tool vendors proclaim that their tool can do everything you need. Possibly true… if your needs are limited. And you may feel frustrated once you've mastered the tool's limited capabilities and need it to do more. Others may be far too complex, with functionalities you'll never use that make the tool needlessly hard to use. Some tools are terrific for some uses but not for others. And over time, your needs are likely to change.

Here's some good news. I review lots of authoring tools, and many are getting better and, in some cases, easier to use. The good and bad news is that there are lots of choices, but they can be confusing. This report can help you select the best tools for your current circumstances and provide enough information to consider future needs, too. Technology

doesn't stand still, and you will very likely need and want other tools in the future. To help you select good tools for you own purposes, I developed a list of criteria to consider when you research and select these tools. The reviews in the report provide insights about each of the tools according to these criteria.

The 33 reviewers, including the editors, didn't attempt to review every possible tool but selected a list of 23 that instructional developers regularly use and tell us are valuable. Subscribers to Training Media Review will find reviews of additional tools on the website (www.tmreview.com or www.trainingmediareview.com). Subscribers can also check the site for updates to reviews of products included in the report.

Each tool is reviewed by people who have regularly used it to build instruction, with an eye towards considering the needs of folks new to this field. Practitioner reviews are a cornerstone of Training Media Review's approach to evaluation. For brief biographies of each reviewer, see the last section of the report.

Although graphics tools are commonly used to build buttons, logos, image maps, and such to be used in online instructional content, they are not reviewed here. Some folks work with their corporate communications department or a graphic artist to develop good graphics, and others build their own. Some of us (me included) do the little stuff (such as simple editing of photographs) ourselves but get a graphic artist involved for the major look-and-feel components. A good graphic artist is worth his or her weight in gold, and few instructional developers without a graphic design background will ever get good enough to do professional-looking graphics. A professional look and feel is not a place to skimp, and the good news is that it doesn't usually cost a fortune.

THE *BEST* TOOL

As I said above, there's no easy answer to the which-authoring-tool-is-best question. Different issues should ideally impact the choice of tools. The following table describes the issues that should be considered and how they may affect your decision.

TOOL SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS

ISSUE	IMPACT ON TOOL SELECTION
Skill level and tolerance for learning curve	A novice developer might prefer a tool with a flatter learning curve. More experienced developers tend to worry less about learning curve (because they're confident that they can learn any tool) and more about matching features and functionalities to needed results. Both might select a very flexible tool (often harder to master) in order to use it for multiple purposes.
Budget	People or organizations on a tight budget will often look for a less expensive tool. Those with more resources might put cost lower on the list of criteria. Organizations that need to buy multiple copies of a tool or a site license might look for one with a better deal on multiple copies. Every buyer should take into account the cost of updates and tech support. And the cheapest tool may not be cheap if it's the wrong tool.
What needs to be built	Although cost may be an issue, penny-wise can truly be pound-foolish. (Ever bought based on cost only to have to buy again because it didn't meet your needs?) A more expensive tool might be a better choice if it better meets your needs.
Standards you must adhere to	If you need to produce SCORM- or 508-compliant instructional content, you'll want a tool that makes this easier for you. Ditto with other standards. Many tools are specifically designed to work with standards. Some aren't.
Technology constraints	Consider your learners' technology constraints. If your learners have bandwidth limitations, for example, tools that produce high bandwidth files (like full motion video) are likely to be less useful. If they have limited access to the network or Internet, you may need a tool that publishes to an executable format or CD-ROM. If the organization you're producing materials for doesn't allow certain plug-ins, producing content that requires them doesn't make sense.

{02

TOOL SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS (CONTINUED)

ISSUE	IMPACT ON TOOL SELECTION
Compatibility with other tools your organization uses and e-learning infrastructure	If people in your organization are using other authoring, multimedia, presentation, and graphics tools, it's usually wise to buy tools that play well together. It makes it easier to share files, resources, and expertise with others. If you have or are buying an LMS or LCMS, you'll want to be sure your tool integrates well with this infrastructure.

As you can see, there are many issues to be considered in determining the best tool for you and your organization. In most cases, the choice is a balancing act, like most purchasing decisions. You want something that works well and provides value for the money spent. It may not be perfect in all ways, but it is the best choice now and in the near term. Why didn't I say *long term*? Technology changes rapidly, as do tools and organizational requirements. What you need now and in 10 years is likely to be different. Expect it.

It's also wise to consider vendor longevity, reputation, and business focus. By "business focus" I mean how important the product is to the overall business of the organization. If it's a minor or oddball product, you might not get timely updates or good service because the vendor won't make the investment. It would be great to have a tool that the manufacturer will continue to upgrade.

In most cases, it makes sense to buy tools that publish in web native code (such as HTML, JavaScript, and Adobe Flash .FLA and .SWF files, etc.) so you can extend and augment the code when needed and import the files into other authoring tools if and when the tool manufacturer goes out of business (or stops supporting the tool). Call me a pessimist, but I've seen plenty of e-learning vendors close shop. I don't want to end up with a bunch of content in proprietary formats I can't do anything with if the vendor bails. More and more tools allow you to import and use a variety of digital media such as Flash, video, and audio.

Notice my use of "tools" throughout the discussion above. I use the plural because much online instructional content is built using a combination of authoring, multimedia, and graphics tools. You may think you will only use one tool now and forever, but I can almost guarantee that you (or your team or organization) will use more. Keep that in mind as you read the reviews. There often isn't just one "right" authoring tool. You are likely to need several that work well together and with your e-learning infrastructure to produce the types of instructional content needed.

TOOLS VS. DESIGN

Let's say I leave my desk to go get some lunch and leave an authoring program open on my computer. If Cleo, my cranky but wonderful cat, walks across my keyboard while I'm away, she will not produce good instructional content, even though the tool is a good one. That may seem painfully obvious, but it makes my point that good tools aren't enough. A tool that doesn't allow you to do what you need certainly can limit instructional quality, but a good tool won't by itself generate better instructional content. A tool's features and functionalities affect instruction, but better features and functionalities don't necessarily turn out better instruction. Good design and development skills are needed to make good tools produce good instruction. So don't just invest in tools. Also invest in instructional design skills.

Good design also influences the choice of tool in a given circumstance. For example, let's say you want to build instructional content on how to migrate from your company's old email system to the new one. Some authoring tools have screen-capture capabilities built in, but you can also use a very inexpensive and wonderful tool like SnagIt (TechSmith) to grab screen captures and then import them as graphic files into another authoring tool. You might want to allow learners to practice and could use a software simulation-authoring tool like Captivate or Camtasia to produce the simulations. Analyzing the instructional content and desirable instructional strategies provides lots of insight about the tools that are most needed.

And remember, one person is unlikely to know how to do everything. Because this can be reasonably complex stuff, people with different skills often work together to build courses and other instructional content. That's exactly why I warned you earlier to see what others in your organization are using and make sure what you use plays nice with what they use. If you are working with outside vendors, you'll want to be sure that your tools and theirs are compatible.

CONSIDER INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS... THEY'RE *MOST* IMPORTANT

Too much online instructional content consists of text and graphics and not much else. Text and graphics are often necessary but insufficient. The essence of good instruction isn't content as much as activities and practice. To produce appropriate activities that allow for adequate practice, several tools or a blended approach is often needed. I'm hoping we've moved away from the idea that online has to mean *only* online.

In the table below, instructional activities are divided into two types: those that promote recall or remembering (e.g., distinguishing between procedure and diagnosis codes for medical billing) and those that promote the ability to use the content in real-life situations (e.g., coding a series of typical but complex medical procedures for a set of patients) and examples of some types of activities you'd find in each category.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

RECALL ACTIVITIES	*USE* ACTIVITIES
Drag-and-drop exercise	Hands-on practice
Simple animation	Field work outside of the course
Multiple choice quiz	Guided analysis
Presentation sequence (text/graphics or slides/text)	Case study
One-way webcast	Problem solving
Demo	Virtual lab
	Simulation

Many tools allow us to easily build recall activities, but good instruction begs for activities that allow the learner to practice doing what they need to be able to do with the content in the real world. It's beyond the scope of this report to describe when to use and how to build these types of activities, but I encourage you to keep in mind the "use" activities listed above as you consider tools—in other words, what kinds of activities will they let you build?

EVALUATING THE TOOLS

In the spirit of "it depends," I developed criteria to evaluate authoring tools. Here are the criteria and an explanation of what each criterion means.

CRITERIA	EXPLANATION
Installation and initial use	How easy is it for a typical user who is new to the product to install the program and get it up and running? Any installation or first-time running hassles?
Documentation	If learning tutorial(s) are provided, are they useful? Does the tool provide adequate help for the new user to rapidly get started and feel confident?
Help/Support	Are answers to common questions easy to find (how to start new file, format, add elements such as graphics, etc.)? If there are extra charges for support, are they reasonable?
Interface	How intuitive is the program to use? Does the program interface, including panels, windows, and screens, make sense? Are menus well organized and clear? Are there multiple ways to do the same thing (e.g., insert a graphic)? Is context-sensitive assistance with primary tasks provided (e.g., simple-to-change font size and colors when working with text)? Can an average user figure out how to use the primary program features without loads of help?

{04

EVALUATING THE TOOLS (CONTINUED)

CRITERIA	EXPLANATION
Ease of use	How easy is it for the average instructional developer to learn the program at a basic level? Mastery level? What additional resources would likely be needed to attain expertise with this product? What is the learning curve like? Is there any previous knowledge or skill that would be beneficial to have before attempting to use this tool?
Compatibility	Since most experienced instructional developers use three to seven products in total, how easy is this product to use with other products and methods used to create instructional content (e.g., PowerPoint, graphics programs, programming, other authoring tools)? What functionalities are built in to allow using with industry standard LMSs?
Value for the money	What is the value of this program relative to comparable programs or other methods for achieving the same goal?
Overall rating	Should you buy this tool or not? Under what circumstances should you buy or not buy?

Although they aren't a rating category, best uses and functionalities of the tools were an important part of the reviews. Reviewers were asked to consider these questions:

> What kinds of instructional content is the product best suited for? What are the top two to five things an experienced and knowledgeable instructional developer would use this product for? What is the product less well suited for? Does the product allow you to see and manipulate actual code and bring in code and other common file types (PDF documents, Flash, and so on) from the outside?

If you are new to instructional authoring, it often makes sense to start with simpler and less expensive tools and less complex instruction. This way you can learn and gain confidence without a huge potential downside. When the instruction is more complex, you either want to add more complex tools or partner with a team of people inside or outside of your company who bring additional skills.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is the president of Learning Peaks, LLC (www.learningpeaks.com), an internationally recognized instructional design and instructional technology consulting group. She is listed in Who's Who in Instructional Technology *and is often requested as a speaker at training and instructional technology conferences. Patti is quoted frequently in training publications, contributes chapters to training and instructional technology books, co-authored an online learning fundamentals book,* Making Sense of Online Learning, *published by Wiley/Pfeiffer in 2004, and has two additional books coming out in 2007. She was an award-winning contributing editor for* Online Learning Magazine *and writes for the eLearning Guild, Adobe, Training Media Review, Magna Publication's* Online Classroom, *and other organizations and publications. She can be reached through the Learning Peaks website.*

OVERALL RATINGS

The table below ranks the 23 authoring tools included in this report by their average overall rating and indicates the number of panelists out of 33 who furnished evaluations of each. This comparison should only be one piece of information you use in your own evaluation of authoring tools. The reviews are essential for understanding the products' specific uses and pros and cons. So are hands-on trials of any tool you are seriously considering.

OVERALL RATINGS

TOOL	AVE. OVERALL RATING	NO. REVIEWERS
Lectora	3.63	4
SWiSH Presenter	3.50	1
STT-Trainer	3.50	1
MindIQ	3.50	1
Flash Companion E-learning Studio	3.50	1
Captivate	3.46	14
Camtasia	3.44	9
Articulate	3.43	10
OutStart Trainer	3.38	2
PowerPoint	3.37	21
Dreamweaver	3.37	23
Flash	3.22	16
Breeze	3.13	8
ReadyGo	3.00	3
Quest	3.00	1
Firefly	3.00	1
Director	3.00	4
Designer's Edge	3.00	2
ViewletBuilder	2.83	3
FrontPage	2.75	2
RapidBuilder	2.50	3
Authorware	2.25	8
ToolBook	2.17	3

ABOUT THE STAR RATINGS

Outstanding	4.0
Very good	3.5
Good	3.0
Above average	2.5
Average	2.0
Below average	1.5
Poor	1.0

REVIEWS

ARTICULATE STUDIO

Primary use: Rapid e-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

Articulate has two main tools for rapid e-learning development, Presenter and Quizmaker, which can be purchased individually or together. Reviewers noted that Presenter can be used for many types of content, including:

- Simple illustrations of processes or procedures
- Image-based content
- Conceptual content
- Software simulations

One panelist described Presenter's strengths in detail:

> Articulate Presenter is great for turning large PowerPoint files into smaller Flash files that can be distributed on the web or on CD. By itself, Presenter supports PowerPoint's hyperlink capability and many PowerPoint animations. One ideal use for Articulate [is] rapid development, where a subject matter expert creates the initial PowerPoint [slides]. The instructional developer [can] edit the PowerPoint, adding audio, video, animations, and interactions, and finally publishing to an LMS, using Presenter's support for SCORM and AICC. Presenter includes a sophisticated tool for creating and editing audio timelines, making it easier to create well-timed music and audio to match screen animations.

Quizmaker, as its name indicates, is Articulate's tool for creating online quizzes. It "can integrate into an e-learning program or be used as a stand-alone product for creating long or short assessments that include true-false, multiple choice, drag and drop, and hotspot questions." However, Quizmaker was not as beloved by all reviewers. According to one of them, "Quizmaker, while easy to use, does not dazzle."

Although Quizmaker didn't receive stellar marks, the consensus about Presenter is that it's an "excellent all-around product."

{07

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

The majority of the comments about what Articulate is less well suited for focused on Presenter. In the reviewers' opinion, Articulate has the same downside as PowerPoint: "Though there is a great deal of talk about 'interactivity,' the product is limited to what can be done with PowerPoint." One reviewer pointed out, "Most of us associate PowerPoint with slide after slide of bulleted lists. To really get the most from Presenter and Quizmaker, developers will need to think beyond typical presentation uses of PowerPoint." This is a point well taken. But this isn't a problem with the tool but rather a problem with limited imagination and design skills. No tool can overcome that.

Presenter might not be the best tool for "heavy text content, fine illustration, or some audiences" because its "translation of PowerPoint into Flash results in somewhat fuzzy screen resolution." One reviewer issued a warning for instructional developers: "Because it is easy to learn, developers may be tempted to create more complex programs with it. This can push beyond Articulate's technical limits and cause display problems for a completed program."

The price of $999 for Articulate Studio, which includes Presenter and Quizmaker, means a buying decision isn't trivial, especially when the buyer is considering multiple licenses.

Overall, however, the drawbacks of Articulate are few, and no one complained about the price. As one reviewer explained: "There is a good deal of competition in the PowerPoint-to-Flash market. This product is arguably the best of the lot."

RATINGS

Articulate received an average overall review of 3.43, just below *Very good*, and that's consistent with the awards it has won and is backed up by reviewers' comments. For the price, instructional designers and developers receive cost-effective and robust tools that enable them to quickly create, edit, and publish online learning.

Articulate Global
800-861-4880
www.articulate.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
11 responses

Installation and initial use	3.83
Documentation	3.15
Help/Support	3.10
Interface	3.56
Ease of use	3.78
Compatibility	3.61
Value for the money	3.28
Overall rating	3.43

AUTHORWARE

Primary use: CD-ROM delivered learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Average

BEST USES

Authorware is often regarded as the first authoring tool designed specifically for developing computer-based learning (delivered on CD-ROM). As such, it "is an extremely robust tool" that is suited for any learning objectives. Another reviewer concurred, stating that, "Authorware is highly flexible and can be used to create training for almost any type of content." Authorware is also useful for including video and animation in stand-alone interactive learning on CD-ROM.

One drawback of Authorware is its steep learning curve, as noted by two reviewers. Indeed, one noted, "VERY long learning curve. Not intuitive. I gave up, as did web developer on staff here." Steep learning curves seem to be a common complaint about former Macromedia's tools, including Director and Dreamweaver. The steep learning curve may not account for the entire problem, though. Some of it may be due to the shift content developers have to make from a word processing format to a design format—or perhaps it could be lack of help or support.

The general consensus among the reviewers seemed to be that Authorware is best suited for stand-alone interactive CD-ROM based learning

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Reviewers agreed that Authorware is not a good match with developing and deploying e-learning. One reviewer noted:

> Authorware courses can be "shocked" and run on the web. However, this will require the user to install and run a fairly large plug-in. If content is intended for the web, most developers prefer to use other authoring tools.

We are assuming the reviewer is referring to the need for users to install Adobe Shockwave in order to run Authorware courses on the web. Two reviewers also mentioned that Authorware projects take a long time to develop, and thus the tool is not suited for rapid e-learning. If you are planning on developing e-learning, it seems that there are better tools such as Flash or Dreamweaver to meet your needs.

RATINGS

Authorware received an overall rating just above *Average*, which is congruent with the reviewers' comments that it is best matched with experienced developers who are creating training to be delivered on CD-ROM.

Documentation received the highest rating, just short of *Above average*, which is not surprising given the amount of Authorware documentation on Adobe's web site. Also, this rating is not unexpected given Authorware's longevity.

Ease of use, predictably, received the lowest rating, between *Below average* and *Average*, consistent with the reviewers' comments that this tool is tough to learn and is not for use by nontechnical types and novice developers.

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 8 responses	
Installation and initial use	2.19
Documentation	2.43
Help/Support	2.06
Interface	2.14
Ease of use	1.86
Compatibility	2.58
Value for the money	2.14
Overall rating	2.25

BREEZE (ACROBAT CONNECT)

Primary use: Synchronous-asynchronous delivery platform with authoring tools
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

Adobe has rebranded the Breeze product as Acrobat Connect. Throughout this review, we will use the old name to avoid confusion.

Among the several uses of Breeze is rapid e-learning development of online courses delivered in Flash format. (The other components of Breeze are Presenter, Meeting, Server, and Events.) For instructional purposes, Breeze can be used for "presentation, activity-driven, or discussion-based content where objectives are [to] remember, recall, and explain domains for facts, concepts, procedures, or processes." One reviewer noted that instructional designers and developers might choose Breeze in "a situation that needs a video presentation [rather than] text and graphics to get the point across."

Breeze allows both synchronous and stand-alone or asynchronous e-learning. For synchronous instruction, Breeze comes with tools including, "whiteboard, chat… and has videoconferencing capability."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

One downside is that Breeze is "very expensive compared to similar products." However, this is in comparison to stand-alone instructional development tools. When compared to other top-tier web conferencing and training tools and to enterprise-level authoring tools, the cost of Breeze is not high. So the cost-benefit really depends on your need.

{09

Breeze isn't appropriate for" hands-on application training." Another panelist said that it is "more suited for smaller, say a dozen or fewer, participants at the same time." One panelist said that "people who've never attended a synchronous training session are just dazzled by the Breeze sales pitch." This ties into the reviewer's comment above about hands-on training—the more learners attending a synchronous learning event, the less opportunity they have to actually interact with the instructor, other learners, and the content in any meaningful way. Moreover, "a more suitable platform should be considered if robust assessment and LMS functionality are needed." Breeze can manage course content but not on the same level as a dedicated LMS.

Breeze is difficult to compare to pure single-purpose authoring tools, however, because its core use is as a delivery platform for synchronous web conferencing and training. As noted, it can also be used asynchronously for self-paced learning. Breeze's authoring capabilities are convenient for users but not crucial because it can play content from a wide variety of tools such as Captivate, Authorware, Dreamweaver, and Flash.

RATINGS

Breeze receives an overall rating just above *Good*. Reviewers felt that Breeze has some good functionality, such as whiteboard and chat, but more breadth than depth. Help/Support and Value for the Money received the lowest ratings. The Help/Support rating is not a surprise given that many of Adobe's (formerly Macromedia's) tools rate low in this area. Now that Adobe has purchased Macromedia, we hope to see them improve their help and support systems.

Value for the money is really open to interpretation. If you are comparing Breeze to other stand-alone rapid authoring tools (except for enterprise products), it's more expensive by far, but if you're comparing it to other web conferencing tools, it's reasonably priced. The benefit—or, some might argue, the principal drawback—of Breeze is that you get synchronous and asynchronous delivery along with authoring in one product.

Ease of use received the highest rating. A panelist concluded, "Ease of use and the cross-platform support for Flash—Breeze's file format—make it an excellent choice."

Adobe Systems
888-649-2990
www.adobe.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 8 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.36
Documentation	3.19
Help/Support	2.88
Interface	3.43
Ease of use	3.46
Compatibility	3.19
Value for the money	2.56
Overall rating	3.14

{10

CAMTASIA

Primary use: Rapid e-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

According to our reviewers, Camtasia is an excellent application for developing software demonstrations in video format for both web and CD-ROM delivery. Camtasia's fairly simple learning curve was noted by many reviewers, as was its capability to rapidly create content, add voiceover narration, and convert recordings to multiple formats, including Flash.

One reviewer summarized: "Camtasia is best used for producing brief demonstrations of software through its motion screen-capture and voiceover capabilities." Another said: "Excellent for quick production of software demonstrations or anything else you want to record from a PC and play back. Converts recordings to most popular formats, including Flash."

The top two uses of Camtasia listed by the reviewers were:

- Creating software demonstrations
- Recording PowerPoint presentations with an added audio overlay

One panelist uses Camtasia for "creating animated, narrated software tutorials; screenshots; documentation and illustration of step-by-step procedures."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Although Camtasia is a great tool for creating demonstrations (show me), reviewers agree that it is not the best tool to use if you are looking to create interactivity in a practice environment (let me try). As one reviewer put it, Camtasia isn't the right choice for "highly interactive content that would be better produced as a simulation. Although Camtasia has the ability to create 'simulation type' content, it is better suited for more 'passive' than 'active' learning."

Other comments indicated that Camtasia would not be a likely choice for the following uses:

- "Long lectures or demonstrations"
- "Full WBT design and development"
- "Testing and evaluation"
- "Programs with multi-branching requirements"

To create interactive simulations and assessments, reviewers agreed that there are better tools. Captivate, Firefly, and SST-Trainer were mentioned as possible choices, with one reviewer saying that "there are much better tools out there for practicing or assessing ability to perform key strokes after the demo or simulation. I'd stick to this for simple demos only."

Patti Shank added, "I haven't used Camtasia myself, but some of our clients have switched from Captivate to Camtasia because the current version of Camtasia better facilitates desired interactions. If I was going to buy a software simulation tool today, I'd definitely want to evaluate current functionalities."

RATINGS

With an overall rating of 3.44 or slightly below *Very good*, Camtasia ranked in the top one-third of all tools reviewed. Camtasia received its strongest ratings in the Value for the money and Installation and initial use categories, although no categories were rated lower than 3.11— that is, all were better than *Good*. As one of the panelists remarked, Camtasia is "easy to learn—a developer can get by without much knowledge of multimedia."

TechSmith Corporation
800-517-3001
www.techsmith.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
8 responses

Installation and initial use	3.56
Documentation	3.11
Help/Support	3.17
Interface	3.28
Ease of use	3.39
Compatibility	3.17
Value for the money	3.61
Overall rating	3.44

{11

CAPTIVATE

Primary use: Rapid e-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

Captivate is known as "the tool" for creating software simulations. Basically, it allows you to capture software screens and movements in a video format, edit and annotate them, and then publish them to Flash format. The large number of panelists who rated the tool (14) reflects the product's popularity.

One member of the review panel listed these uses for the program:

- Screen capture of software process animations

- Creation of simulations

- Creation of interactive assessments

- Creation of animated storyboards

- Recording audio to MP3 format

After Macromedia (which has since been bought by Adobe) acquired RoboDemo a few years ago, they vastly improved its ease of use and repackaged it as Captivate. The new tool's interface includes a timeline, similar to the one in Flash, that makes synching callout boxes and audio seamless and easy. One person pointed out that "it's so easy to learn that a moderately computer savvy user can be up and running in fifteen minutes."

Once you've captured your software screens, you can enhance them "by adding text captions, audio, video, images, animations, and quiz questions." In fact, said a reviewer, it "is so easy to record MP3 audio in Captivate that I prefer to use it over programs that are five times more expensive."

Other benefits of Captivate include its value and LMS and LCMS compatibility. For value, Captivate is hard to beat. "At $599 ($199 for the full-featured educational version), the product can fit the smallest classroom or business need." A few reviewers mentioned that Captivate can be added to an LMS and LCMS and easily distributed to learners. "The Flash output is better inserted in an LCMS or Dreamweaver shell, not used by itself as a stand-alone application."

{12

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

The areas where other tools are better suited are content and PowerPoint conversion. Reviewers cautioned that Captivate should not be used for soft skills or conceptual content. (Note: Patti Shank disagrees with this conclusion.) Assessments, including quizzes and testing, leave a lot to be desired: "Although Captivate has built-in capability for creating quizzes, it is probably not the best tool to use for this. Other tools or even plain HTML are better."

Also, a user warned that Captivate "should not be used with PowerPoint slides. Some of our faculty would like to talk over static slides. That isn't captivating." That is a great point: Captivate is designed as a software simulation tool, not a PowerPoint conversion tool.

RATINGS

Captivate received an overall rating just shy of *Very good*. Although Adobe recently increased its price by $100, Captivate is still fairly inexpensive and is instantly usable out of the box, providing even the novice developer with an intuitive interface. Help/Support receives the lowest rating, consistent with most former Macromedia products the panel has used. Adobe should enhance their help and support to meet their customers' needs.

A member of the TMR reviewer panel expressed the consensus view of Captivate: "There are many screen-capture applications available on the market, but none that I have used can truly compare to Captivate."

Adobe Systems
888-649-2990
www.adobe.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 14 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.54
Documentation	3.11
Help/Support	2.81
Interface	3.46
Ease of use	3.36
Compatibility	3.29
Value for the money	3.62
Overall rating	3.46

DESIGNER'S EDGE

Primary use: Instructional design for e-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

Designer's Edge is a pre-authoring instructional design tool. It can be used to create storyboards and lesson plans, and guides users through a 12-step instructional design process. Designer's Edge integrates well with other development tools, and, according to the Designer's Edge website, completed storyboards can be exported directly to HTML and Java using NetSynergy to allow playback on the web.

Experienced instructional designers can utilize the program to:

- "Develop storyboards—pre-authoring support "
- "Introduce simple concepts for web-based delivery"

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Designer's Edge supports the sound planning of instructional content to be created elsewhere, in programs better suited for content development. According to the vendor's website, the Dreamweaver Extension for Designer's Edge allows collaboration and integration of Designer's Edge projects from within Dreamweaver. Our reviewer notes:

> The primary focus is not to author courseware, but to assist in the design of instructionally sound training programs. The storyboard can facilitate the development of courseware using other authoring tools.

Designer's Edge is typically used with larger projects that require team development: "Simple topics that do not require comprehensive instructional design analysis will not benefit from Designer's Edge capabilities."

RATINGS

Designer's Edge had an overall rating of *Good*. The highest ratings were for Documentation and Ease of use, due in part to the fact that the program steps the user through the 12-step instructional design process. Designer's Edge is a front-end application for e-learning development and therefore has a limited but potentially valuable role to play in development.

Allen Communication Learning Services
866-310-7800
www.allencomm.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 1 response	
Installation and initial use	2.00
Documentation	3.75
Help/Support	3.00
Interface	3.00
Ease of use	3.50
Compatibility	3.00
Value for the money	2.25
Overall rating	3.00

DIRECTOR

Primary use: Multimedia, especially video, for CD-ROM or DVD delivery
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

Director is a multimedia authoring tool most often used in instructional design to create custom stand-alone instructional films, including "how-to demonstrations and hands-on practice." One reviewer said Director can be used to create and edit:

- Audio
- Video
- Illustrative content
- Simulations
- Processes
- Complex concepts displayed visually

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

A drawback to Director is that, similar to Authorware or Dreamweaver, it is hard to learn and may discourage many beginning instructional developers.

Two reviewers noted that Flash is a better tool than Director because it integrates with web-based content more easily. Actually, Director and Flash have different uses. Flash may be a better tool for most web-based content delivery, but Director is better for CD-ROM and DVD delivery because of its ability to incorporate a variety of file formats and its extensibility. However, as learning moves away from CD-ROM training toward web-based training,

> Director seems to lend itself to fewer and fewer and fewer uses, especially considering its complexity. Video producers might still use it for multimedia editing, but they may just as well use Flash for mixed media or a high-end video editor for these purposes.

RATINGS

Director received an overall rating of *Good*. However, panelists were split on the rating, leading one to believe that the tool is good if you are an experienced developer. Interface and Ease of use received the lowest ratings. In other words, for developers who produce multimedia training on CD or DVD and have paid the price to learn it, Director is a worthy tool.

{14

Adobe Systems
888-649-2990
www.adobe.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
4 responses

Installation and initial use	3.25
Documentation	2.75
Help/Support	3.25
Interface	2.38
Ease of use	2.63
Compatibility	2.75
Value for the money	3.00
Overall rating	3.00

DREAMWEAVER

Primary use: Web page development
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

Dreamweaver is widely considered to be the industry standard for web page development. The fact that it was reviewed by more panelists than any other software product included in the report is evidence of its widespread use. While many panelists remarked on its suitability to create a wide variety of instructional content, most agreed that Dreamweaver is most appropriate for "web authoring and site maintenance." A reviewer summarized it this way:

> Dreamweaver is best suited for producing text-based content. However, its biggest strength is its ability to integrate content that was produced in other applications (for example, graphics, animations, audio, video, etc.) into an instructional whole.

Another remarked:

> Dreamweaver is extremely flexible and can be used to create a large range of learning content. It provides an authoring environment that can be used to create most any type of content and can integrate with most any other content developed with other tools.

Some typical uses of Dreamweaver noted by panelists were:

- Creating HTML pages and architecture for a course
- Managing website files
- Integrating instructional content produced in other applications
- Developing test items (possible only with an extension)
- Programming dynamic (database-driven) content and interactions

Reviewers commented on Dreamweaver's easy integration with Flash and Fireworks, its clean generation of HTML code, its CSS and layers capabilities, and its extensibility through the use of add-ons such as CourseBuilder:

> The addition of free add-ons like CourseBuilder and LearningSite provides capability for hosting, quizzing, etc. Purchasing it as a bundle with Flash and Fireworks can provide an excellent all-around web design package.

> The CourseBuilder extension provides templates for interactions such as sliders, drag-and-drop, and multiple choice questions, making Dreamweaver perfect for technical content and product knowledge materials where recall and comprehension are targeted.

There were words of caution along with the praise, however, as more than one panelist commented on the learning curve, noting that Dreamweaver is an "intermediate-to-advanced tool." As a panelist explained:

> Because it is so open-ended, you can create anything from presentation-based e-learning to full simulations of software, machinery, or any other content. Its learning curve is very steep, though, and requires a technical aptitude. Used with its CourseBuilder extension, Dreamweaver as an authoring tool is much more manageable, but will still require a steep learning curve. CourseBuilder allows you to create highly customizable quizzes and interactive content without knowing JavaScript.

Another cautioned that although "integrated programming tools and a clean HTML generator make Dreamweaver the best choice for website creation," frequent "changes to the interface require a retooling of work habits. And a new pricing scheme makes the tool much more expensive for the casual user."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Several panelists voiced the opinion that Dreamweaver's lack of embedded instructional design support and learning curve made it "less matched to novice users who are unfamiliar with HTML and web page creation." Reviewers also mentioned that it is not the best choice for rapid e-learning development, PowerPoint-to-web conversion, simulations, and "highly interactive content or content that requires complex animation." One reviewer cautioned, "Although [Dreamweaver is] complex, it is not a fit for high-end materials with extensive custom programming and on-the-fly database connections."

Panelists pointed out that Dreamweaver is an HTML creation tool and "is not intended for creating or editing media (graphics, animations, audio, video, etc.)." They acknowledged that while it is possible to create testing in Dreamweaver using the CourseBuilder add-in, it is "not as easy or intuitive as other more recent tools," and "compatibility and error inconsistencies make using the features too time consuming for the results, especially when using them with a SCORM-compliant LMS."

A few panelists suggested that other tools such as OutStart Trainer (formerly TrainerSoft) and Lectora require less programming knowledge and experience and are more intuitive to use for creating simple tutorials and quizzes. Others remarked that tools such as Captivate are better suited for creating interactive simulations. Several reviewers mentioned that Dreamweaver can create complete online courses, but it is not the best tool for the job. One of them said:

> Dedicated tools provide course creation and management services that, while replicable in Dreamweaver, would be difficult to maintain. As a result, Dreamweaver is better suited for the creation of prototypes and site styles rather than the creation of large course or course site projects.

Another panelist concurred:

> Course management software such as WebCT or Blackboard is better suited to building full online courses. Dreamweaver provides more flexibility in creating individual pages and can be used effectively to create pages that can be uploaded as content in a broader course management system.

RATINGS

Dreamweaver received an overall rating just short of *Very good*, which ranks it in the top ten of all programs reviewed. Considering that over 50% of the panel submitted a review for this product, the rating is quite an achievement and indicates superior user satisfaction. The highest ratings were for Compatibility and Value for the money. The easy integration of Flash and Fireworks from within Dreamweaver no doubt had an influence on these ratings, as did the availability of add-ins such as CourseBuilder.

Ratings for Documentation and Help/Support were just less than *Good*. Most users would appreciate additional support and documentation from within the program and online. One reviewer said, "The best support is found in books rather than in the tool." However, this lack of documentation and support does not seem to affect the consensus that Dreamweaver "is an excellent all-around tool." It's possible that this satisfaction is a barrier to better support materials, though, because it lessens the vendor's incentive to improve them.

Ratings for Ease of use and Interface were both high. That's remarkable considering the comments specifically addressing the learning curve. These rating numbers imply that not all reviewers believe the learning curve is problematic. One reviewer said, "I have heard others comment on the learning curve, but I taught myself from the

{16

free tutorials included with the product." Another observed, "Design and development take a long time, but it is the standard tool in the web design industry for creating HTML-based content. If you have technical resources inside your organization and you want to create highly customized e-learning content, consider Dreamweaver." A third panelist said flatly, "For creating native HTML-based e-learning content from scratch, Dreamweaver does not have an equal."

Adobe Systems
800-833-6687
www.macromedia.com/software/dreamweaver/

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
23 responses

Installation and initial use	3.40
Documentation	2.90
Help/Support	2.90
Interface	3.20
Ease of use	3.10
Compatibility	3.50
Value for the money	3.50
Overall rating	3.40

FIREFLY

Primary use: Enterprise-wide rapid e-learning
Pricing: Very high
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

Only one panelist has used Firefly, an enterprise-level simulation tool. It is good for creating training that necessitates decision-making skills because it allows branching based on learner decisions. The reviewer noted that Firefly "is easy to use, requires no programming language, and the simulation product runs without plug-ins." The vendor, KnowledgePlanet, sells a variety of enterprise training solutions including a Learning Management System. According to the vendor, "Firefly is the only rapid development tool that captures everything on the screen, including live menus, fields, buttons, tool tips, and keystrokes."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

As an enterprise-wide software application, Firefly requires a serious commitment to teaching people how to use it. It is also expensive in terms of the total investment, but the value depends on the scale and importance of the need and the cost per developer or end user.

RATINGS

Firefly receives an overall rating of *Good*. The reviewer called it a "good all-around product." The panelist flagged compatibility as an issue without elaborating; it could be either how compatible Firefly courses are with LMSs other than KnowledgePlanet's, its interoperability with other development tools, or both.

KnowledgePlanet
800-869-5763 (toll free)
717-790-0400
www.knowledgeplanet.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
1 response

Installation and initial use	3.00
Documentation	3.00
Help/Support	3.00
Interface	3.00
Ease of use	3.00
Compatibility	2.00
Value for the money	3.00
Overall rating	3.00

{17

FLASH

Primary use: E-learning with animation and interactivity
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

The review panel's consensus is that Flash is a primary choice for building instructional content that requires animation and interactivity. Flash's vector-based graphics and adjustable compression settings typically result in small file sizes well suited for web delivery. Its compatibility with other development programs, its flexibility to create a wide variety of instructional content, and the availability of the Flash player on most user systems were repeatedly noted as advantages.

One reviewer expressed the consensus succinctly:

> The universal compatibility of the SWF (Small Web Format) files produced is the main reason Flash is the cornerstone development application of e-learning product development departments around the world. Its flexibility allows for the creation of simple conceptual content for elementary school students up to advanced interactive simulations of complex processes to train commercial airline pilots.

Another panelist said Flash is "very flexible and is especially appropriate for content best presented via animation. The Flash player is now nearly ubiquitous on user machines."

Examples of other instructional development cited by our panel ranged from simple to complex:

- "Converting art or photos to other formats"

- "Pieces relying heavily on audio"

- "Simulations and labs, but more developer skill is required than with Director"

- "Pieces that rely heavily on database interaction, including surveys and tests"

- "One-way communication to an audience that needs to interact, even via touch screen responses. Combine audio and video for professional authoring at a low price point"

Panelists agreed that in the hands of an experienced instructional developer, Flash can be used to create a wide range of content but is especially useful for producing content with animation and interactivity. One reviewer raved, Flash "can do just about everything."

{18

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Although Flash is powerful and flexible, most reviewers tended to agree that developing content in Flash isn't necessarily the easiest or fastest solution. Learning Flash is difficult, and in order to be used to full potential, the application requires that the developer know the programming language ActionScript. Reviewers were united in their view that getting the most out of Flash requires time and experience. This means that good Flash developers are primarily Flash developers, not people who occasionally develop Flash.

Not all comments were encouraging in this regard. A panelist said, "Flash has versatility. If one has resources and time, it can be used to produce amazing things." Another warned, "Unless you have lots—and I mean *lots*—of experience with Flash, it is difficult to create *anything* that isn't one of its built-in Learning Interactions. It is a very complex tool that is hard to learn." Another panelist added that Flash requires good graphic design:

It's not the product's fault so much as it's the user's skills: the software requires a good deal of artistic talent. I outsource Flash work to someone with better graphic design skills than mine. Long learning curve; requires knowledge of coding and scripting.

However, not all content created in Flash requires an experienced developer with programming experience. Flash has a library of pre-built reusable objects and interactions. One reviewer said, "Fortunately, Flash comes with a series of built-in Learning Interactions that help new developers create effective and attractive interactive assessment content, including drag-and-drop, matching, and fill-in-the-blanks type quizzes and tests."

Panelists pointed out several types of content for which Flash may not be the wisest development choice:

- "Printed material such as handouts and quizzes are a waste of Flash resources."
- "While Flash is an awesome tool with limitless capabilities, I would not recommend using it to convert motion video files to SWF format."
- "I sometimes think it's over-used for drawing, navigation, and image enhancement."
- "DVD-based explorations"
- "Anything involving manipulation of objects in 3D"
- "Rapid e-learning—Flash takes too long to produce and fewer people are competent in its use"
- "Flash can be cumbersome when it comes to creating some content, like recorded processes or simulations. I like to use Captivate to create a basic recording with audio and then use Flash to enhance the content. Also, Flash attracts some users who want to create animated presentations that could be more easily produced with a presentation application like PowerPoint."
- "Flash is commonly used for software simulation training. However, other tools are much easier to use and can output the content as Flash."

A reviewer also noted that "Photoshop and Fireworks or Freehand are better products for artwork, complex imaging work, and navigation."

Given the downside of the product, it is easy to understand why other easy-to-use products have come along to take advantage of Flash's strengths—for instance, Articulate and Captivate.

RATINGS

Most reviewers agreed that Flash is a powerful program in the right hands and used for the right purposes. Flash's overall rating is slightly better than *Good*. The rating reflects the panel consensus that Flash is highly capable but not the easiest to learn. High ratings for Compatibility and Value for the money indicate high user satisfaction with the product and the content produced using it. Flash's steep learning curve contributed to the mediocre rating of Ease of use. And once again, a former Macromedia product received low marks for documentation.

Adobe Systems
888-649-2990
www.adobe.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 16 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.20
Documentation	2.60
Help/Support	2.80
Interface	2.90
Ease of use	2.40
Compatibility	3.60
Value for the money	3.70
Overall rating	3.20

{19

FLASHFORM RAPID ELEARNING STUDIO

Primary use: Rapid e-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Very good

BEST USES

Flashform Rapid eLearning Studio by Rapid Intake allows a developer to create Flash-based courses without knowing the complex Flash interface or writing code. According to the reviewer:

> Out of the box, this rapid e-learning tool is best suited for converting existing content to an interactive, localized, online learning experience. Because it is built on Flash, Flashform Rapid eLearning Studio can be extended to accommodate any instructional approach. In spite of its name, e-learning developers do not need to know or own Flash to use this tool to create e-learning. Flash is only needed to fully customize it. All source files are included for the potential of unlimited customization.
>
> One of its strengths is its ability to combine content from any other source, including PowerPoint, Flash, Camtasia, Captivate, Swish, and many other creation tools…. Content is stored externally in XML files, making it easy to update and maintain.

The tool has these primary uses:

- Convert existing classroom materials to e-learning content
- Create online quizzes and tests that are compatible with any SCORM- or AICC-compliant LMS
- Combine content created with other tools into a course
- Customize existing templates to fit an organization's look and feel and instructional approach
- Build dynamic "smart templates" that contain content based on Flash and XML

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Although this program develops complete Flash-based courses, it "is not suited for creating software simulations." However, it can "integrate content from tools such as Captivate that are designed for building software simulations." In addition, other tools are better suited for PowerPoint conversion.

RATINGS

Although only one panelist rated it, Flashform Rapid eLearning Studio seems to be a promising new product. It was rated 3.50, or *Very good*. The tool is cheaper and easier to use than Flash and is developed specifically for creating e-learning.

Rapid Intake
866-231-5254
www.rapidintake.com

{20

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 1 response	
Installation and initial use	2.50
Documentation	2.50
Help/Support	4.00
Interface	3.50
Ease of use	3.00
Compatibility	4.00
Value for the money	4.00
Overall rating	3.50

FRONTPAGE

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: Moderate
Overall rating: Above average–Good

BEST USES

FrontPage is a powerful website development tool for creating HTML-based instructional content for web delivery. It includes optional themes, templates, wizards, and site navigational tools that assist the rapid development of website content. According to our reviewers:

> FrontPage 2003 can be used to develop a wide range of instructional content, from individual HTML pages to complete interactive web sites.

> In the right hands, FrontPage can create a wide array of instructional content for the Web.

An experienced instructional developer with knowledge of FrontPage could use it to create:

- Online tutorials and interactive online job aids
- Complete instructional websites
- Interactive forms
- Discussion forums
- Database-driven websites

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

There was some disagreement between reviewers as to the compatibility of the HTML code produced by FrontPage. One reviewer stated:

> Like with most Microsoft products, if your learners will be using a variety of web browsers to view and interact with your instruction, it may not be wise to build your HTML content in FrontPage, as the code it writes may not be compatible with all of the browsers, leading to unpredictable results and potential learner frustration.

This user also suggested that "if you have the opportunity to use Dreamweaver over FrontPage, take it."

The other panelist had a different opinion:

> Although some will say the code created by FrontPage is problematic, I have been using it since its first release to develop sites that are completely cross-platform and multi-browser compatible. As with all design programs, the experience of the developer with the program has a direct impact on the final result.

FrontPage does have built-in image editing capabilities, but better results can be achieved by using an image editor such as Photoshop or Fireworks.

According to the Microsoft website, FrontPage 2003 is the final release of the current program. The company has announced plans to release a series of programs "partially based on FrontPage technologies" in 2006. According to Microsoft, the new website design tool will be called Microsoft Expression Web Designer. A first look at the new program through the previews on the Microsoft website shows a program with similarities to FrontPage but is more capable of creating CSS, XML, XHTML, and DHTML code. The program will have one version for professionals and another for consumers.

RATINGS

FrontPage received an overall rating of 2.75, putting it in the bottom third of all the applications the panel reviewed but still making it *Above average*. Ease of use received the highest rating, 3.75 or *Very good*. As one rater said: "The FrontPage 2003 interface is familiar to Microsoft Office users, which makes the learning curve fairly quick for beginners who have experience in other Office applications." Installation and initial use, and Documentation received the lowest ratings at 2.5 but were still Above average. Considering the amount of documentation in the program's help files and the online tutorials available on the Microsoft website, this rating could be partially due to the lack of a hardcopy manual shipping with the program.

Microsoft
866-463-3866
www.microsoft.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 2 responses	
Installation and initial use	2.50
Documentation	2.50
Help/Support	2.75
Interface	3.25
Ease of use	3.75
Compatibility	3.50
Value for the money	2.75
Overall rating	2.75

LECTORA

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Very good–Outstanding

BEST USES

Lectora is an e-learning authoring tool that enables instructional designers, instructional developers and other training professionals to develop e-learning content without knowing a programming language, e.g., HTML. Lectora-developed e-learning can be exported as HTML, CD-ROM, .EXE, and DVD.

One panelist noted that Lectora is "very easy to learn—all drag and drop, no knowledge of programming [is necessary]." Indeed, another panelist agreed, stating that," if the instructional design calls for creating simple interactive online tutorials or web pages, Lectora is hard to beat." A third reviewer concurred: "The ease of authoring highly interactive pages and the flexibility of testing options makes Lectora a top choice for instructional designers and or authors who want to go beyond the 'page turning' experience for the user."

Lectora's interface is quite intuitive and capable of performing fairly complex functions: "Lectora's use of conditional variables and branching/routing options, it is also possible to create realistic system simulation and 'choice-based' exercises."

Three other areas where Lectora excels are creating tests, pre-publishing testing, and publishing:

The testing options are straightforward for the beginner and are only limited by the creativity of the instructional designer to push the envelope to produce interactive questions that become a learning experience in themselves.

The efficiency and accuracy of Lectora's ability to check for authoring errors prior to publishing is superior. When checking for errors Lectora will automatically take you to the page where the error is located and describe the nature of the error.

Lectora's publishing options give instructional designers several delivery options, all within one authoring package, for maximum utilization of content for their clients.

However, one of the panelists disagreed that Lectora was a good tool for developing tests and assessments:

> While there are wizards to produce tests/assessments, the functionality is quite limited. It is difficult to incorporate "alternative feedback" (i.e., custom text boxes or audio/video) in the question wizards, difficult to provide the student with multiple attempts before evaluating a question, and there are no "wild card" character variables for use in parsing a student's text-based answers (e.g., short answer, essay, and fill-in-the-blank questions).

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Three reviewers noted that Lectora falls short for learning that demands more complex interactions, such as animation or software simulations. One reviewer noted, "There are times when more complexity is required, and those times call for a more flexible tool than Lectora."

Also, a panelist has found that "the drawing, image, video, and audio editors included with the Pro Suite package are somewhat clunky and limited in functionality—you have to rely on other tools like SnagIt and Camtasia to create higher-quality media."

One experienced user, whose company buys multiple licenses for Lectora, says they have experienced consistently poor support. Other reviewers were satisfied with the support they received.

RATINGS

Lectora's overall rating fell between *Very good* and *Outstanding*, which indicates a very high level of satisfaction with the tool. Ease of use received the highest average rating. The reviewers' only negative comments concerned Lectora's lack of ability to produce complex e-learning interactions and its pricing strategy: "[the] value would be higher except their yearly 'upgrade' cost model essentially requires you to purchase the product at full or near-full price each year." In addition, one user has experienced inadequate support.

Trivantis
877-929-0188
www.trivantis.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 4 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.38
Documentation	2.88
Help/Support	3.25
Interface	3.38
Ease of use	3.75
Compatibility	3.75
Value for the money	3.38
Overall rating	3.63

{23

MINDIQ

Primary use: Simple e-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Very good

BEST USES

MindIQ's Design-a-Course software is intended for novice developers and simple e-learning content. The one panelist who rated the product said "hosted WBTs and tracking" were the strengths of the tool. It seems capable of quickly creating stand-alone training materials and self-paced training courses that do not involve interaction between students and the instructor. The panelist summed up the niche this application fills:

> [The tool is] for people with a low budget and no LMS. It needs little expertise, is very easy and quick to use, and has great value and very good support.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

The reviewer said that the "limited interface and interactions" were the chief drawbacks. The software isn't appropriate for e-learning that involves anything other than simple interactions or a need for student-to-student or student-instructor communication.

RATINGS

The reviewer gave Design-a-Course software by MindIQ an overall rating of 3.5, due mainly to the Help/Support, Ease of use, and Value for the money. The reviewer's comments regarding the limitations of the interface explain the average rating it received. The option to purchase an annual subscription, which includes the Design-a-Course software, free upgrades, and unlimited course hosting, makes the product a low-cost alternative for those whose can work within its limitations.

MindIQ Corporation
800-511-5299
770-248-0442
www.mindiq.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
1 response

Installation and initial use	3.50
Documentation	3.50
Help/Support	4.00
Interface	2.00
Ease of use	4.00
Compatibility	3.50
Value for the money	4.00
Overall rating	3.50

OUTSTART TRAINER

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

OutStart Trainer, formerly called Trainersoft, can be used to develop a variety of instructional content for distribution as HTML, CD-ROM, and .EXE. Output can also be run on third-party LMSs. Two reviewers rated the application. One said OutStart is best suited for creating web-based training materials, while another said,

> [OutStart Trainer is] easy to use, comes with ready-made templates with built-in navigation. It is good for rapid design and deployment and has lots of support and tutorials. The product is accessible to those without programming skills.

Neither reviewer mentioned OutStart's test creation and tracking capabilities, which are key features according to information on the company website.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

The reviewers thought that OutStart Trainer is not the best choice for creating "highly interactive programs" or simulations. Cost versus intended use was targeted by one reviewer: "The application is good, but at nearly $3,000, the buyer may need to decide if it's that much better than using a PowerPoint-to-Flash converter tool." The second panelist pointed out possible weaknesses as well as strengths: "The tool lacks branching and no page/slide numbering or spellcheck. But it is very easy to use, has a short learning curve, and produces professional results."

RATINGS

OutStart Trainer has an overall rating just short of *Very good*, with Installation and initial use, Interface, and Ease of use receiving the highest marks. Keep in mind, though, that only two panelists rated the product. The product is

easy to use, in part because of its extensive built-in support of training content creation. At the same time, the price compared to that of other tools was an issue for reviewers, although not a large one.

OutStart
888-872-4637
www.outstart.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 2 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.75
Documentation	3.50
Help/Support	3.50
Interface	3.75
Ease of use	3.75
Compatibility	3.50
Value for the money	3.00
Overall rating	3.38

POWERPOINT

Primary use: Presentations
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good–Very good

BEST USES

PowerPoint is regarded as the standard for creating face-to-face presentations, and classroom training. Many reviewers commented on the ability to easily add audio, video, graphics, and animation to PowerPoint presentations. One noted that PowerPoint works best for:

- Lecturing. The trainer provides most of the information, even when asking questions. PowerPoint is not made for receiving feedback.

- Condensing information. It is a good visual tool to complement a lecture by summarizing what is being said.

- Expanding information. PowerPoint allows the user to write information about each slide, thus adding more information when needed.

Many reviewers indicated that PowerPoint encourages one-way delivery, with little or no user interaction. They also cautioned that without sound instructional design, PowerPoint can easily become "a bunch of hierarchical, de-contextualized bullets." Other panelists were even more critical. In one reviewer's estimation, PowerPoint is "badly deployed." The reviewer stated that it is important for instructional designers to "break out of linear thinking mode. Creative use of hyperlinks can produce simulations with branching decision-making." Some reviewers pointed out that instructional designers can use Visual Basic or Flash to integrate interactivity or enable playback online.

Overall, reviewers generally agreed that the top five tasks PowerPoint can be used for are as follows:

- Presentations or classroom training

- Creation of course notes

- Capture of knowledge from subject matter experts

- Storyboard course content

- Prototype course content

The consensus still seems to be that PowerPoint is a useful tool for instructional designers, whether it's used for developing classroom presentations or as a basis for developing online learning, through storyboarding, prototyping, or Flash delivery.

{25

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Most reviewers said that PowerPoint is less well suited for interactions, branching, and exporting to HTML. One reviewer thought that PowerPoint is "not ever effective as stand-alone source of content" because "without a voiceover or detailed notes, the content is not as clear as the author intends."

The majority of reviewers agreed that Microsoft Word is better suited to create course handouts and manuals. Furthermore, online learning and web page development should be left to Dreamweaver because PowerPoint's "save to HTML" feature does not create clean HTML code and therefore is not compatible with all web browsers, which can lead to learner frustration.

Lastly, reviewers suggested that Captivate and Camtasia are better suited for software simulations.

RATINGS

PowerPoint's overall rating was 3.40, just short of *Very good*, indicating a substantial degree of satisfaction with the tool. Over half of the panel rated PowerPoint, which could mean that users are not likely to rate a tool low that they use quite often.

Documentation and Help/Support received the lowest ratings mostly because the large amount of documentation isn't very useful and support is scarce.

Ease of use and Value for the money received the highest ratings. Ease of use can be attributed to the fact that, as one reviewer noted, PowerPoint is part of Microsoft Office, the most widely used office productivity software. Because Microsoft Office users do not have to buy PowerPoint as a stand-alone instructional tool, it is not surprising they would rate Value for the money highly.

Microsoft
866-463-3866
www.microsoft.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
21 responses

Installation and initial use	3.50
Documentation	3.10
Help/Support	2.90
Interface	3.40
Ease of use	3.50
Compatibility	3.30
Value for the money	3.50
Overall rating	3.40

QUEST

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

Quest is a development tool geared toward creating CD-ROM and web-based learning that is "well suited for the development of a large range of learning." According to the reviewer who evaluated Quest, "It offers templates for rapid development of simple courseware as well as access to programming languages for the development of complex animations and simulations." Quest can create courses that include problem-solving animation and tests.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Quest is not a good fit for web-based courseware because of the need for plug-ins. The reviewer also noted that "although the embedded templates (Fast Track Libraries) are suited for subject matter experts with minimal instructional design expertise, other authoring tools may be better suited for developers who have no need for high-end courseware."

RATINGS

Quest received an overall rating of *Good*, reflecting its flexibility and ease of use. Compatibility and Documentation were both rated only as *Average*. Because of the need for plug-ins to run Quest content on the web, however, its use for creating e-learning is limited.

Allen Communication Learning Services
866-310-7800
www.allencomm.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 1 response	
Installation and initial use	3.50
Documentation	2.00
Help/Support	2.50
Interface	2.50
Ease of use	3.00
Compatibility	2.00
Value for the money	3.00
Overall rating	3.00

RAPIDBUILDER

Primary use: Enterprise-wide rapid e-learning
Pricing: Very high
Overall rating: Above average

BEST USES

RapidBuilder is a web-based enterprise application designed for authoring "systems or processes training [and] applications demos." (Note: Another authoring tool is also called RapidBuilder; it is a low-cost web development application aimed at small businesses.) It is a multimedia tool built on a video model (as opposed to a screen capture model) that simulates systems such as Microsoft Windows. As one reviewer noted:

> RapidBuilder is good for creating "show me" and "guide me" style demonstrations and interactions; it is especially well suited for teaching computer system processes. It also can be used to make true, unguided, "let me practice" systems simulations, provided the developer is given enough time to create them.

One reviewer suggested RapidBuilder is a good tool for "experienced developers" rather than novices.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Reviewers noted that RapidBuilder areas for improvement include ease of use and compatibility. A reviewer pointed out:

> Unfortunately, there is nothing even remotely intuitive about RapidBuilder, which is surprising given its name. It takes two to three days to learn how to get started using the application, and unless you use it very regularly, it's easy to forget how to use it.

And while RapidBuilder supports many file formats, "compatibility has proven problematic in the past." One reviewer maintained that Articulate Presenter is a better option.

RATINGS

RapidBuilder received an overall rating of *Above average*, which reflects the tradeoffs the reviewers perceived in the product. Ease of use received a below average rating, consistent with reviewers' comments that it's hard to get around the interface and then easy to forget how to use it. Help/Support received the highest rating, between *Good* and *Very good*. As a panelist said: "Their help and support is outstanding."

XStream Software, Inc.
613-731-9443
www.xstreamsoftware.com/demos_rb.htm

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 3 responses	
Installation and initial use	2.33
Documentation	2.67
Help/Support	3.17
Interface	2.17
Ease of use	1.67
Compatibility	2.33
Value for the money	2.50
Overall rating	2.50

READYGO

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Good

BEST USES

ReadyGo Web Course Builder utilizes a dialog box-based interface to assist content experts and other inexperienced developers in creating template-driven courses for web delivery. Available in multiple languages, ReadyGo courses can be integrated with a variety of LMSs. Since course pages are written in standard HTML and JavaScript, they download quickly and can be viewed with virtually any browser.

One reviewer said of ReadyGo: "It creates whole courses rather than pages, screens, or slides. It's good for content-heavy, 'presentation' format approaches."

The product targets content experts with little or no experience in programming and web design and assists them in transferring their knowledge and experience to pedagogically sound web-based training:

> ReadyGo Web Course Builder requires no programming; navigation, architecture, etc., is built into the product. It easily imports objects or externally created materials. Good tool for subject matter experts or those without web design skills.

A panelist summed up ReadyGo as "a strong competitor in a crowded field."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

ReadyGo is specifically designed to create courses, not edit or create graphics. Reviewers stated that ReadyGo is not well suited for "programs requiring elaborate custom graphics or scripting work." The software does not try to be all things to all people. It is tailored to a specific user and output: inexperienced developers (including SMEs) and complete courses that do not include a lot of graphic content.

Documentation and Help/Support were rated *Good*, low relative to the product's other ratings. That may have something to do with the fact that support for the tool after the first three months is available only by subscription, which costs more than half the price of the tool itself.

RATINGS

ReadyGo WCB received an overall rating of *Good*. The rating is quite respectable, but it still belies the fact that the product received higher marks in other areas. The targeted audience and limited use of creating only complete courses may have resulted in the lower overall rating. Compatibility was rated as *Outstanding* because courses created with this tool are compatible with a variety of LMS and browsers.

ReadyGo, Inc.
888-ReadyGo
www.readygo.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
3 responses

Installation and initial use	3.33
Documentation	3.00
Help/Support	3.00
Interface	3.33
Ease of use	3.83
Compatibility	4.00
Value for the money	3.50
Overall rating	3.00

{28

STT-TRAINER

Primary use: Enterprise-wide rapid e-learning
Pricing: Very high
Overall rating: Very good

BEST USES

STT-Trainer is an enterprise training solution that includes a built-in LMS and requires a back-end server application to be used as a central repository for content created in the application. It is a three-part system consisting of:

- The back-end server application where all content is stored, edited, and deployed

- The authoring software, deployed on each author's individual system, that interacts with the back-end server

- The presentation environment: Internet Explorer and the web

One reviewer on the panel has extensive experience with the application and described its principal uses as "software application training—the works—demo, you try, pre- and post-tests, great documentation and manuals, shared access, check-in, check-out management, content management."

While STT-Trainer can easily create "online software application training and participant manuals," the developer can also create multiple learning objects from one authoring session, including a tutorial, test, and documentation in Word or HTML.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Since STT-Trainer is used in a client-server environment, the resources required for its use are much greater than a stand-alone application. Our panelist points out that it isn't well suited for "small apps—this is a high-end product, therefore quite expensive." Our panelist also acknowledges that viewers are "not able to try real application—STT-Trainer produces simulations only. However, they have a help window that will hover over the real app."

For any enterprise-level software, the need has to be great and large scale to justify the high cost and extensive application training.

RATINGS

Our panelist gave this product an overall rating of *Very good*. The highest individual rating was Compatibility, due in part to the fact that completed lessons can be viewed on the web with no plug-ins required. In addition, all STT-Trainer lessons are SCORM-compliant and can be accessed from either the built-in or third-party LMSs. The reviewer didn't rate Value for the money because it is difficult to assess for a high-priced product that requires a large-scale deployment and presumably is used for many years. With so many variables in play, the value versus price could range from very high to very low.

Kaplan IT Learning
866-STT-USA1
www.stt-global.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 1 response	
Installation and initial use	3.50
Documentation	3.50
Help/Support	3.50
Interface	3.50
Ease of use	3.50
Compatibility	4.00
Value for the money	NR
Overall rating	3.50

{29

SWISHPRESENTER

Primary use: PowerPoint-to-Flash conversion
Pricing: Very low
Overall rating: Very good

BEST USES

SWiSH Presenter isn't marketed as an e-learning tool. Instead, it is billed as a tool to convert PowerPoint files to Flash format for the web. A panelist had her first experience with the tool when she saw it on the list for this report:

> I was surprised to see this on the list so I downloaded it and tried it…[it] is not even advertised as an e-learning tool. The product is explicitly designed for converting narrated PowerPoint slides to Flash. Samples on the product site are primarily presentations about art galleries. Not appropriate for most instructional content.

Based on a survey by an online e-learning community, however, at least some trainers are using it as a low-cost application to convert PowerPoint content for use on the web.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Because SWiSH Presenter is designed to compress PowerPoint files, it might be wiser to buy Articulate. "Articulate does a much better job." But for "$99 someone just wanting to compress PowerPoint files would not find anything cheaper."

RATINGS

SWiSH Presenter was rated overall as *Very good*—but only as a tool that can complement instructional development, not perform it. Value for money, understandably, received the highest rating since SWiSH Presenter costs very little.

SWiSHzone.com Pty Ltd (Balmain, Australia)
Vendor does not publish phone number
www.swishzone.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
2 responses

Installation and initial use	3.00
Documentation	3.00
Help/Support	3.00
Interface	3.50
Ease of use	3.50
Compatibility	3.50
Value for the money	4.00
Overall rating	3.50

TOOLBOOK

Primary use: E-learning
Pricing: High
Overall rating: Average

BEST USES

ToolBook Instructor is an object-oriented development program that can create a variety of computer-based and web-based training, including software application simulations and assessments. Two reviewers said that ToolBook was best suited for web-based training. Another had a different opinion, saying that the program is good for "self-paced e-learning content delivered via CD-ROM or a network. ToolBook has powerful scripting capabilities that allow it to accommodate many instructional approaches, but it is severely limited in its online delivery capabilities." An experienced instructional developer can use ToolBook to "create self-paced e-learning courses from templates or from scratch that include quizzes and simulations."

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

Reviewers agreed that ToolBook requires a substantial investment of time and training and is not a suitable choice for "rapid e-learning development—ToolBook requires a lot of training to get up to speed." It also requires a lot of money; the current list price for Instructor is $2,795. Although it can be very powerful in the hands of an experienced user, ToolBook may not fit the rapid development needs of many instructional designers:

> For creating rapid online courses, there are numerous products better suited. Look at Articulate Presenter or Camtasia for PowerPoint conversion, or Flashform Rapid eLearning Studio for a template-based Flash approach to accommodating different instructional designs.

> Needs a lot of programming, not intuitive, tends to crash. No spellcheck. However, very powerful. Flash is better and far more object-oriented.

RATINGS

ToolBook's overall rating of *Average* was the lowest of all the tools reviewed. In none of the categories was the product rated better than *Average*, and two were rated lower, Ease of use and Value for the money. The ratings are no surprise based on the comments of the reviewers such as, "Needs too much training in this tool, not user friendly."

Although not included in the ratings, ToolBook is available in a scaled-back version called ToolBook Assistant geared to nontechnical users. "Books" created in Assistant can be opened and edited in Instructor, where scripting and sophisticated interactivity can be added by experienced programmers. Although it is true ToolBook Instructor is tough to learn, the robust simulations that are a trademark of ToolBook training applications and the program's longevity are two reasons why ToolBook continues to have a sizeable community of users.

SumTotal Systems
800-448-6543
www.toolbook.com/

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS
3 responses

Installation and initial use	2.00
Documentation	2.00
Help/Support	2.00
Interface	2.17
Ease of use	1.83
Compatibility	2.17
Value for the money	1.83
Overall rating	2.17

VIEWLETBUILDER

Primary use: Rapid e-learning
Pricing: Low
Overall rating: Above average

BEST USES

ViewletBuilder is part of a series of integrated products for producing online presentations that include ViewletCentral, ViewletACE, and ViewletCam. ViewletBuilder is a cross-platform compatible screen capture program marketed for designing presentations, demos, simulations, and tutorials. Like similar programs such as Captivate and Camtasia, ViewletBuilder publishes its completed files to Flash format.

Reviewers indicated that the application is best used for developing software instruction:

> ViewletBuilder is especially good for learning software applications or other processes where screen captures and a moving cursor to demonstrate the material are important. ViewletBuilder provides multiple ways to adjust and control cursor movement once captured. The program has some interaction

capability for clickable hotspots and text entry boxes, making it worthwhile for practicing new software. The product creates Flash files, making it feasible to develop a series of small, just-in-time performance support tools to assist new users of an application.

Panelists highlighted specific program features, including the ability to "easily add customized balloons and notes to the screen views," design interactivity through branching with hyperlinks, sound recording and importing, and simple testing.

LIMITS AND DRAWBACKS

ViewletBuilder is not suited for "practice and assessment." It is also not well suited for designing a presentation when materials need to be printed. One reviewer mentioned that ViewletBuilder is not the best choice to work with PowerPoint:

> ViewletBuilder would not support animations and transitions in PowerPoint, although these can be captured as Flash files with a separate product, ViewletCam. Another separate product, ViewletACE, creates more involved quizzes and surveys.

Panelists also commented on the benefits and disadvantages of using a screen capture versus screen recording utility:

> The benefit is that you have a good deal of control over what gets captured; on the other hand, the disadvantage is that you need to remember to designate the slide, which in the beginning is not always easy.

> There are also other products available that will automatically capture screen action from beginning to end; however, the disadvantage is that they may capture "oops" actions and are not necessarily easy to edit.

Although ViewletBuilder is a good screen capture program, reviewers agreed that it has limited use:

> ViewletBuilder is well suited for its intended use for software demonstrations and tutorials. Its design functionality makes it harder to apply to alternate uses.

RATINGS

Overall, panelists rated ViewletBuilder slightly less than *Good*, putting it in the bottom one-third of all tools rated. Although Value for the money was rated at *Very good*, Help/Support was rated at less than *Average*. Documentation also received a fairly low rating. A panelist summed up ViewletBuilder this way:

> The product seems to market itself as an inexpensive, easy way to produce simulations and demos. It delivers on what it offers, as limited as the product is in its overall applicability.

Qarbon
408-907-4810
www.qarbon.com

AVERAGE STAR RATINGS 3 responses	
Installation and initial use	3.17
Documentation	2.17
Help/Support	1.75
Interface	3.00
Ease of use	2.67
Compatibility	2.67
Value for the money	3.50
Overall rating	2.83

{32

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Deanne Dalrymple (deanne@deannesweb.com) is an adjunct instructor in the computer graphics department at Modesto Jr. College. She has been developing and teaching online courses since 1997.

Katica Roy (katica.roy@kp.org) is an instructional designer at Kaiser Permanente Colorado, where she designs, develops, and manages product training for approximately 5,000 employees. She has worked in training since 1998 as an instructional designer, project manager, and trainer. Her specialty is linking training to business strategy through effective needs analysis and creating instructionally sound learning interventions that can be properly evaluated. She has presented at conferences on a number of topics, including, "Maintaining the Human Touch in Online Learning" and "Multimedia Tool Demos." She co-authored "Simulation: An Interactive eLearning Trend" published in the ISPI Front Range Chapter's January 2004 Newsletter. She is also an Associate Member of the eLearning Guild and a member of ISPI's Front Range Chapter (a past board member), PMI, and ASTD. She holds a Master's in Instructional Design and Adult Learning from the University of Colorado at Denver, is a Certified Performance Technologist, and is working on an MBA degree.

ABOUT THE REVIEW PANELISTS

Jay Bahlis (bahlis@bnhexpertsoft.com) is president of BNH Expert Software. He has assisted numerous organizations develop learning strategies and align learning with goals, has evaluated e-learning technologies, directed research on adult learning theory, and managed the design and development of ADVISOR Enterprise. ADVISOR is a web-based decision support tool for planning and managing training budgets and resources as well as identifying ways to run training programs more effectively and economically. (For a review of the product, see Training Media Review, www.tmreview.com.) Jay is the author of *Technologies in Distance Learning* and *Workplace Training Reference Guide* and *From Classroom to Boardroom*. He holds a doctorate in Engineering and Applied Mechanics from McGill University.

Scott Berrett (Scott.berrett@fnf.com) is an instructional designer and training developer for Fidelity National Information Services. He has a Master's degree in Instructional Technology and has been designing and developing instruction for over 15 years.

Yvonne Bogard (ybogard@uccs.edu) is currently an online instructor and instructional technologist for higher education in Colorado Springs. She is also an online student working on her Master's degree in Instructional Design.

Jane Bozarth (jane@bozarthzone.com), M.Ed., is E-Learning Coordinator for the state of North Carolina and author of *E-Learning Solutions on a Shoestring*. A training practitioner for nearly 20 years, Jane's expertise is in the areas of inexpensive e-learning, competency-based instruction, and trainer development. Jane's programs have won NASPE's award for innovation in state government practice and a LOLA Award for creativity in synchronous learning.

Alicia Castillo (aliciacastillo@wealthing.com) is the president of Ventures Latinas LLC, a premier consulting, training, and coaching firm that fosters entrepreneurship in emerging markets. She has trained over 4,000 people in the Americas, Europe, and Australia, where she currently lives. She has created almost a dozen companies and nonprofits in various industries.

Alex Crutchfield is a technology consultant and instructor with extensive experience designing, programming, and delivering e-learning content. Alex has used his skills as a Macromedia Certified Professional to develop world-class content as well as custom application solutions for Fortune 100 corporations. A Microsoft Office Specialist Master Instructor, he has delivered thousands of hours of expert training to students worldwide, both online and in the classroom.

Rhea Fix (rhea@redpepperconsulting.com) is president of Red Pepper Consulting, providing performance consulting, instructional design, e-learning consulting, and training development to businesses. She combines technology, organizational development, and instructional design to create performance-based training solution sets that solve specific business challenges and performance needs. She partners with EdgeTraining, Learncentrix, and other training companies and technology providers to offer sales, service, support, training, and consulting to e-learning clients. She specializes in distance learning and has presented for ISPI, ASTD, and the eLearning Guild and has published in ISPI's Performance Express journal and the Journal of Computer-mediated Communication.

Daryl E. Fleary (Daryl.Fleary@WellPoint.com) is E-Learning Project Consultant in training and development for WellPoint/Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Richmond, Virginia.

Helen Gallagher (Helen@cclarity.com) is the author of *Computer Ease*, owns the consulting practice, Computer Clarity, and writes for business and technology magazines, including Training Media Review.

Jeffry Gordon (Jeff.s.gordon@vanderbilt.ed) is Professor of Informatics, Vanderbilt University School of Nursing. He teaches and practices the development of interactive multimedia, database-driven websites. Prior to Vanderbilt, Jeff was a professor of Educational Technology at the University of Cincinnati College of Education. He has been working with multimedia tools starting in the early 1980s and has won awards for some of his videodisc and CD-ROM applications. He has been using Lectora since it came out in the late 1990s.

Kim Hansen (khanexp@aol.com, www.transformativedesigns.com) is an Instructional Designer living in Boulder, Colorado, where she creates and designs instruction and curriculum for e-learning, web-based training, and instructor-led training. She assists clients in improving their presentation and instructional materials, redesigning for print-based, instructor-led, or online applications. Kim has designed instruction for such diverse subjects as lean manufacturing, gas and electric utilities education, telecommunications, zero waste management, corporate management training, and leadership development as well as for K-12 and higher education. Her Master's degree is in Information Learning Technologies.

Garin Hess (garinhess@rapidintake.com) is a principal of Rapid Intake, a custom e-learning courseware vendor and organizer of the annual E-learning Developers Conference. He is coauthor of Using Flash MX to Create e-Learning and creator of Flashform, a SCORM-conformant XML-based rapid course development toolkit.

Gary Hughes (lakesidemedia@msn.com), principal and founder of Lakeside Media Design, is an experienced instructional designer and multimedia developer. With over 35 years experience in instructional design, writing, photography, audio and video production, graphic development, and multimedia authoring, Gary has managed and produced a wide variety of communications and instructional programs for large corporations and small enterprises. In addition to his design and development work, he serves as technology consultant to companies in the healthcare and manufacturing sectors.

Angie Koponen (angiekoponen@hotmail.com) has been a cartographer, office manager, college instructor, and desktop publisher. She holds an Interdisciplinary BA with areas of concentration in management and marketing, communication, and writing; an MA in Communication; and is completing a doctorate in Instructional Design and Technology. She is a certified IC3 instructor. Her academic research focus includes intertextuality and interplay between textual elements in print and multimedia. She works for the Graduate School at the University of Northern Colorado as a graduate assistant for the program evaluation software TracDat (Nuventive).

Heidi Larson (hjlcab@yahoo.com) is a Research Associate with EDC (Education Development Center). One of her responsibilities is building the technology capacity of the staff of four companies spread across New England and New York. She has written several technology reviews for Training Media Review. She has a Master's from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a background in professional development.

Rosemary Lynn (rosemary@hillamtech.com) is a training program manager and senior instructional designer who has worked for three Fortune 500 companies in the Atlanta area. She is now head of the training function for Russell Corporation. She received a Master's in Instructional Technology from Georgia State University. Rosemary has a depth of experience with producing e-learning, virtual and instructor-led training, and curriculum development. She particularly enjoys using the former Macromedia and OutStart applications.

Helen A. Macfarlane (Helen@helenmacfarlane.com) is an instructor in the School of Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. She has been collaborating on student learning products for the past three years with the basic science teaching faculty. She has designed and produced materials for Cell Biology, Embryology, Immunology, Anatomy, Neuroscience, Pharmacology, and Neurology course work. Helen is accomplished in illustration, vector and raster animation, and digital video production. She also has experience with patient and professional education from her time with the US Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense and the Columbia Medical Plan.

Michael Maffie (mmaffie@edc.org) works at EDC (Education Development Center) and is involved in various aspects of online course design, including instructional design, editing, illustration, audio editing, and Flash and Director applets.

Ken Marranzino (KMarranzino@yahoo.com) is an experienced instructional designer who works for a New York-based Fortune 100 financial services company. Six years ago he started his training career as a classroom facilitator and, out of necessity and then enjoyment, evolved into an instructional designer. Ken holds two NASD securities licenses and at one time held the MCSE designation. He recently completed his Instructional Learning Technologies Master of Arts in Education degree.

Pat McNurlin (pmcnurlin@gmail.com) is an instructional design consultant with McNurlin & Associates, P.C., specializing in curriculum redesign and performance improvement. Her clients include telecommunications, healthcare, banking, and technology firms. She has also consulted with call centers in many industries and managed training departments for healthcare and technology companies. She has served as a judge of online training programs for Society for Technical Communication competitions. Pat earned her MBA and a Master's in Instructional and Learning Technologies from the University of Colorado at Denver.

Michele B. Medved (info@mbmtraining.com) is an instructional design and learning consultant based in Los Angeles. Her business, MBM Training Services, creates customized learning materials for organizations; she specializes in new hire training programs, blended learning solutions, and ongoing learning in the workplace. Michele has a Master's in Educational Technology and has published articles in a number of ASTD publications and spoken at ASTD events. She also has written several reviews for Training Media Review.

{35

Dawn Adams Miller (DMiller2@tiaa-cref.org) is an Instructional Design Manager for TIAA-CREF. Prior to that, she was a program manager at Microsoft where she managed training solution development and deployment for internal personnel. Prior to joining Microsoft in 2001, Dawn was Manager of Learning Technologies for NASCO, Inc. where she worked on computer-based and web-based training initiatives, knowledge management projects, and technical documentation. Dawn has also had design and development positions with Intellinex, SumTotalSystems, and was president of TechKnowledgy, Inc., a firm specializing in the custom design and development of technology delivered courseware. Dawn's clients have included Cisco Systems, IBM, Compaq, Dell Computers, AT&T, Health Alliance, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and Bank of America.

Deborah Paulson (Deborah.paulson@comcast.net), MA Ed., RPT, is an instructional designer and software trainer for a small hospital corporation. She is responsible for the development and delivery of training for hospital staff in the use of Epic, a comprehensive electronic health record software program.

L. Wayne Precht (wayne@wayneprecht.org) is the Assistant Director for Development, Learning Applications Development and Support, University of Maryland University College, where he lead the development team on the WebTycho online learning platform. In his 15 years in higher education, Wayne has worked on successive generations of e-learning platforms at UMUC, starting with 50 students using the mainframe-based PLATO system through the current WebTycho project with its 60,000 worldwide students taking more than 100,000 accredited classes in a typical semester. He is currently the architect for the follow-on system expected to be available in 2007.

Eric Replinger (eric@learningpeaks.com) is a project manager for Learning Peaks, an internationally recognized instructional technology and instructional design consulting group based in Denver, Colorado. Eric started in the video and film production business, and then migrated into computer-based training. He spent several years at Lucent Technologies/Avaya managing the development of CD-ROM based training before joining Learning Peaks in 2002. He has a Master's degree in Information and Learning Technologies with certificates in Designing and Implementing Web-based Learning Environments and Project Management.

Adele Sommers (Adele@LearnShareProsper.com, http://LearnShareProsper.com), PhD, is a freelance business consultant and the creator of the award-winning "Straight Talk on Boosting Business Performance" success program. She helps people "discover and recover" the profits their businesses may be losing daily through overlooked performance potential. She helps businesses plan where they want to head; develop systems and processes to make it possible; and create or bolster the instructional, communication, and performance support systems they need to achieve their goals. Adele is currently the president of an award-winning chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Ron Smith (im8x10@gmail.com) is a doctoral student in Education Technology at Pepperdine University. He also teaches at Hollywood High School in Los Angeles.

David Thomas (david@mindfab.com) is the Faculty Fellow in the Center for Faculty Development at the University of Colorado and Health Sciences Center. He also supports faculty course development at CU Online.

Carolyn B. Thompson (TSI@trainingsys.com) is president of Training Systems, Inc., a performance improvement and HR consulting company. She is an experienced facilitator, designer and Human Resources consultant who is known throughout the country for her high energy and enthusiasm, facilitating refreshing and dynamic training. As a consultant, Carolyn helps organizations improve their ability to recruit, inspire, and retain quality employees through recruitment planning, developing the Human Resource function, designing performance appraisal systems, and evaluating and developing an organization's entire training process.

Tammy Vercauteren (tammy.vercauteren@frontrange.edu) is Dean of Online Learning for Front Range Community College in Colorado.

Ann Yakimovicz (annyak2@yahoo.com) has been involved in the training field since 1992, developing expertise in instructional design and training management. In her corporate training career, she has discovered a passion for execution; she likes to partner with line managers to push performance to mastery levels. Ann holds a PhD in Educational Human Resource Development with a concentration in e-learning and continuing professional education.

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