

CBT PROVIDERS

by Jonathan Jermey

Computer-Based Training – About Computers

The idea of using a computer to teach people about computers is an appealing one. No need to hire expensive trainers or buy course manuals when the student can learn what they need from the computer itself! Any competent programmer can quickly set up a 'simulated' environment which 'looks like' Word or Excel, but with enough control to prevent the student from doing anything except what they are supposed to do. I've done it myself now and again. Add a few extra buttons and direct the user with a few instructions, either spoken or presented on the screen: "To open a document in Word, click here...". Through using the simulation the student then learns what to do in the real program. Simple, eh?

However, it generally doesn't work. Despite twenty years of development and marketing, most CBT computer training packages have failed to make a significant impact on consumers. In my view, this is because:

- CBT assumes a world in which nothing ever goes wrong. The real world is not like that, if nothing ever went wrong, people wouldn't need training. At least half my time as a face-to-face teacher is spent dealing with what can go wrong, has gone wrong and will go wrong. CBT simply assumes it doesn't happen.
- People who aren't scared of computer programs learn about them best by using them. For example, rather than playing in a simulated or crippled version of Word or Excel, they prefer to jump into the real thing. Meanwhile, people who are scared of applications programs are just as scared of CBT. The tutorial just becomes one more thing to be frightened of.

At its very best, CBT only trains the user to do what it wants you to do. After forty-five minutes you can write and address a letter perfectly – but what if you want a fax cover sheet or a memo instead? The essence of practical skills is the ability to abstract and generalise from one situation to another, and this is the area where CBT falls short.

This doesn't mean that all CBT is bad. When I take a plane somewhere, I am pleased to know that the pilot has spent many hours on a computer simulator learning to fly before being allowed behind the wheel of an aircraft. I encourage my own children to use CBT to brush up on skills and areas of knowledge in which they are weak, like maths and Italian. However, using a formal, purpose-built computer application to teach

people about using a computer is a bit like using a toy phone to teach people about using a real one.

Having said this, let me describe some of the available CBT computer training packages. Some are available online, some as CD-ROMs. A few can be run, or previewed, via a Web connection, but many CBT providers are still offering their wares the old-fashioned way, sight unseen.

Free Online Tutorials

As ever, the first place to look is the Web. A Google search for, say, 'Excel tutorials' will bring up many thousands of hits. Some of these will be commercial packages like the ones below, but a good many will

The screenshot shows the Apex Web Media website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Training CDs, Corporate Training, Educational Bodies, Online Learning, and Select Region. The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there's a large promotional banner for 'Master any software application in days' with a 'TRY A FREE DEMO' button. Below this, there's a section titled 'Two great ways to learn' with sub-sections for 'Content rich Training CDs' and 'High quality Training at an affordable price'. On the right side, there's a 'How Shipping' section with an image of a shipping box and a 'Best Sellers' list featuring products like 'Dreamweaver MC004', 'Adobe Photoshop CS', and 'Illustrator CS'. The page also includes a 'Categories' section at the bottom with links for Web Design, Graphics & Page Systems, Multimedia & Video, Database, Animation & 3D, and Operations.

Figure 1: Apex Web Media Home Page

be freely available. Some will be mostly text, some will incorporate graphics, a few may have animated GIFs, Flash and even sound. Online tutorials tend to be relatively short and to the point; for instance, a Photoshop tutorial may tell you how to apply a particular kind of 3D effect to a shape to make it look like a chrome button. If you have very specific requirements like this, a Web tutorial may be exactly what you need.

Where to start? Try <http://www.tutorialized.com>. This is an impressive community effort; tutorials of all kinds have been contributed by a wide range of people, covering a massive range of topics. Submissions are rated by date and popularity. Unlike other sites, the emphasis tends to be on non-Office programs. There

are 36 tutorials on Word, 41 on Excel and 169 on Macromedia Dreamweaver. It is definitely worth a look. Only the spelling leaves something to be desired. Try also the CBT Café at <http://www.cbtcfe.com> and the (rather disorganised) <http://www.ehow.com>.

Plenty of tutorial material can also be found at the Web sites of the companies who produce the software – Microsoft, Adobe and Macromedia, among others, all provide tutorial support for their products. Many universities also have tutorials written for their students and staff, which they make available online.

Apex Web Media

Apex Web Media is one of the few companies which produces CBT for computer training, and markets it directly to the public. Its CD-ROMs can be purchased from the site for \$149.95, plus shipping; each CD contains 8-10 hours of tutorial material. There is also a subscription option, whereby a user can pay US \$30 per month and run all Apex tutorials directly from the Web. Multiple users can buy a site licence at a discount.

If the classy Web site is anything to go by, Apex is doing rather well. The home page (<http://www.computer-training-software.com>, viewed in mid-October 2005) offers a choice of locations, including Australia; the only difference seems to be in the currency units shown. There is the option to subscribe to a newsletter, and a complete list of the applications that are taught, with a comprehensive list of the tutorials available for each one. This dates well back into the past, covering older versions of most programs, as well as new ones. Best of all, every single tutorial has a demo section available, running directly off the Web. A potential customer can see exactly what they are getting.

I ran a few demo tutorials relating to programs I was familiar with. These take the form of 5-10 minute QuickTime movies, captured from the trainer's screen. In each movie, the trainer carries out activities in the program itself, while providing a voice-over, which describes what he or she is doing. All the trainers are named, and a list of all the tutorials they have prepared can be found on the site. The students cannot interact with the tutorial other than by pausing or replaying it, or adjusting the volume, but they can have the actual program running on their screen at the same time, allowing them, immediately, to test and confirm what the tutorial has taught them. This, in fact, is fairly close to what a face-to-face trainer would be doing – showing the student what to do while going over it vocally, then sending them off to do it for themselves. The trainers themselves seem competent and their delivery is generally relaxed and casual. Some of the earlier tutorials have a lower display and sound quality compared with the later ones, reflecting improvements in screen recording technology.

Is this an effective way of learning? Individual styles differ, but for me I quite enjoyed this approach; discuss a concept in depth and then let the user go away and try it out until they are comfortable with it. What's

more, users can see and hear the instructor hesitating, hovering between buttons, occasionally clicking on the wrong one – they realise that even experienced users can get things wrong, and this in itself is a great confidence booster.

As well as distributing its own products, Apex provides material to other training distributors, such as 32Learn (<http://www.32Learn.com>) and Marrutt Software Training (<http://www.softwaretrainingtutorials.com>).

SkillSoft

Like Apex, SkillSoft (<http://www.skillsoft.com>) supplies a number of other training distributors with its tutorials. The home page focuses on its business services, of which providing IT training is only a small part, and demos of its CBT can be found in an area of the site called the Demo Centre. The approach is classic CBT; the screen shows a simulated environment rather than the real application, and a voice-over describes the steps necessary to carry out a simple task while this is demonstrated on the screen. The user is then prompted to carry out the same actions. Finally, there is a very brief quiz. Within the limits of this extremely controlled environment, the CBT was quite well done. There is a course map showing a suggested sequence of lessons, and a transcript option that gives you the whole lesson as a single printable document. Other resources include an on-screen glossary. Download speeds, even over broadband, were very slow, perhaps because the tutorials are delivered through Java rather than Quicktime. I was unable to run the tutorials in Firefox, only in Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Some black marks for SkillSoft – first, to run the courses you must supply some details including your address, e-mail address and phone number; however, false ones work just as well, and eliminate any risk from their on-sale to junk mailers. Secondly, the tutorials run in a pop-up window. The window is smaller than it needs to be, resulting in poor use of screen space. Finally, I was unable to find out any details about pricing, a definite deterrent.

MindLeaders

MindLeaders (<http://www.mindleaders.com>) has a smaller range of sample tutorials available. They take a bit of finding from the austere home page but can be located at the top under 'Demos'. As with SkillSoft, they require popup windows and registration. (One wonders how much revenue is made from the courses, and how much is made from on-selling user details.) The 'lessons' are in Flash, and presented as a series of static screens with text and pictures, plus a voice over, which simply reads these out. The only interaction consists of mouse-clicks – no dragging, typing or entering text. It's a bit like trying to concentrate on a book while an irritating friend reads it out loud over your shoulder. At the end, there is a textual quiz, but the very first question threw me: *What is the term that keeps order to all of the fields of whatever it is you're using Access to track?* Huh? The answer, by the way, is supposed to be *record*. Ironic that one of the (alleged) user ... cont, p 16