



THE PROS & CONS OF 'VIRTUAL' LEARNING MARCH, 2011

I've had a busy year so far. We launched the marketing campaign for our brand new, energy efficient, super performance grocery cart. My team was all over it!

Janet did a fantastic job on the graphics, although I had to bribe her with a larger computer monitor to get her properly motivated.

Ray looked after the ad copy and press releases. He can be a bit wordy sometimes which threatened to spoil Janet's layouts but I was able to broker a compromise between them and it all went well after that.

Brian, as always, took a little reining in. It's difficult working with a friend and trying to behave as his supervisor without compromising our relationship. He's such a party animal, always wanting to quit work early and go for a drink. Because he's my friend, he seems to think it's OK to roll into work late so, as diplomatically as possible, I have had to put a stop to that. I 'tasked' (*new age verb*) him with organizing a celebratory barbecue for the team after the ad campaign hit the media; it was right up his alley and he did a marvelous job!

The truth is ... Janet, Ray and Brian aren't real. They are my new two-dimensional virtual pals featured in an on-line leadership and management course I've just completed. At the end of the programme, I received a certificate indicating that I had completed the requirements of the course and am now a project champion and team manager; all achieved without having spoken or worked with a single real live human. How alarming is that!

I'm qualified to supervise and negotiate with two-dimensional make-believe people who don't yell and scream, who don't gossip behind my back, who are consistently well-groomed and presentable, whose barbecued burgers are completely calorie-free and who don't ever need a day off to look after a sick child with a virtual virus!

As more people opt to work from their home offices—whether they live in downtown Vancouver, or are tucked away in the Slocan Valley—there are more and more opportunities to study from home as well. The Internet has opened up the world to all of us with broadband. We can visit any city on the globe, tour an art gallery in Florence, fall in love with a complete stranger, or 'work' in an office full of virtual colleagues!

The first time I took an on-line course it was to become a licensed Realtor and I found it an excellent way to learn. I didn't have to be bothered with other people's schedules, I could work at my own pace and, since I live in a small BC interior town, I didn't have to spend time and money on travel. It was also a course that included a textbook ... something I felt very comfortable with.

My recent on-line learning experience consisted of ten pre-packaged modules and tests and no written references or assignments. I have to confess I found it not particularly fulfilling and rather superficial. This is due largely to the subject matter itself: 'Management & Leadership', which, by definition, necessitates contact with other humans and, much to my chagrin, it seems that my buddy Brian isn't one!

Additional frustrations affecting my feelings about this method of learning and delivery included numerous technical glitches—the course material failed to load, tests couldn't always be completed and there are problems tracking progress—and, of course, there is no one real to talk to. Answers and options were limited to only a few specific responses with no room for flexibility. So, for example, when Janet, my simulated graphic designer, demanded a brand new, state-of-the-art computer, I, the ever-benevolent manager, was expected to snap my fingers and provide her with one. The course format did not allow me to consult my budget, worry about setting a precedent that might elicit similar demands from her co-workers, or suggest alternatives.

Roy Tamashiro, Professor of Education at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, did a study on the pros and cons of on-line learning involving a sample population of 180 students. They, like me, ranked technical difficulties and absence of human exchange as their top two concerns regarding on-line learning.

On the other side of the argument, convenience, cost effectiveness, scheduling flexibility and the opportunity to proceed at one's own speed, sat at the top of the pros column.

I think it is fair to conclude that the pros and cons of on-line learning depend upon the nature and purpose of the course being taught and, loathe as I am to admit it, perhaps the age of the student?