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Practical Applications of Technology for Learning

e-Magazine

THIS WEEK: Development Techniques

Using Lectora to Repurpose e-Learning Content – Can It Really Deliver?

By Len Perkins

What do you do if you have a piece of e-Learning content that refuses to run on anything other than an outdated version of Windows and the company that developed the program has gone bust? Have it rewritten, obviously! However, what if you can't afford to put the work out, can't wait for a vendor to redevelop the material, or you simply can't get anyone to take on the challenge? Do it yourself, right?

Wrong – unless you want to spend several months learning how to program. At least, that used to be the fear. Then along came the many authoring systems that claim to allow anyone to develop effective e-Learning without needing to be a programmer.

"Oh," you groan, "that is just marketing hype." Yes, it would be great if using an authoring system was as easy as using a word processor, but isn't it the truth that most authoring systems can't really achieve the kind of complex programs we want? Therefore, you feel that your only choice is to use tools like Flash, which can take a lot of learning before you manage to build anything useful, although they have come a long way from the days when drawing a line on the screen was like writing a mathematical formula.

Recently a customer of mine approached me for advice about how to "con-

There are so many content authoring systems for e-Learning that it is difficult to list them all, let alone review them.

However, Learning Solutions eMagazine is determined to provide in-depth looks at the less-frequently reviewed tools as well as the ones that are household words. This week, we present an impartial (but enthusiastic) account of Trivantis Inc.'s Lectora product, written by a user and based on his experience with the product in a recent project.

A publication of



vert" a piece of courseware that was causing problems because it was not compatible with anything other than Windows98™. The company needed a course covering much of the original training, but updated so that it would run on the latest Windows™ platforms. A second requirement was to develop courseware that non-programming staff, i.e. instructors, could easily keep up-to-date, since the company often revised their procedures. The existing courseware had suffered from getting out of date quickly after purchase, because no one had the skills to modify it.

I volunteered to take on the challenge of reviewing whether there were any authoring systems that could do the job, developing a prototype with any such system that I found, and then submitting a proposal with a simple recommendation as to the tool they should use, since they had no appetite or time for a Brandon Hall-style survey.

To begin the task, a quick Web-search on authoring tools came up with a handful of options, and I began by downloading trial versions. Mindful that I could not do in-depth evaluations of everything on the market (Google returns 69 million hits for "authoring systems"), I spent an hour or so with three or four "candidates" before selecting the system I would try. Now I

admit the selection process was not scientific, or by any means exhaustive. However, I reasoned that, if I could not see how to put together a menu and a few pages in under an hour or so, then a) the system did not suit my learning style, b) I was unlikely to make much progress with it quickly and, most importantly, c) neither would my customer. The system I was looking for had to have a number of key features. It had to:

- Be easy to install
- Have an intuitive interface – in other words the menus had to make finding things easy
- Be WYSIWYG – as I developed courseware I wanted to see what would be seen by the end-user
- Be capable of creating stand-alone PC, CD, or Web-based versions – and be able to create all three from the same source files

The system I eventually selected was Lectora from Trivantis Inc., and this article is a brief review of my experiences using the program. For reasons of confidentiality, the screen shots of the prototype I developed have been modified to remove the identity of my customer – but they do demonstrate, I think, what can be achieved with the Lectora authoring system in a very short space of time.

Lectora overcomes the problem of not being able to program by including a number of tools to help the non-programmer get started. It also comes with a very comprehensive user manual, including a very good chapter on planning and workflow for those who have never developed an e-Learning title before.



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Wizard development

The customer sent me the existing program, so I examined it with Windows Explorer to see what type of files were involved. Essentially, it was composed of a series of bitmap graphics, a few animation files, and a bunch of audio narration files. Now I knew that if I was going to be able to reuse a lot of the original material, then I needed to build a container to hold it all. The container would act as the user interface, glue all the components together, and let the end user go from one teaching point to the next.

I also knew that Flash, Dreamweaver, or any Windows-based development environment had the muscle to replicate the old user interface – but I am not a Flash programmer nor did I have a couple of months to learn the program. Therefore, the question was, “Could I use Lectora to create a container, into which I could drop the old content?”

Lectora overcomes the problem of not being able to program by including a number of tools to help the non-programmer get started. It also comes with a very comprehensive user manual, including a very good chapter on planning and workflow for those who have never developed an e-Learning title before.

Most users of Microsoft products are familiar with wizards, and Lectora makes good use of them. The first of the tools for creating e-Learning modules is the “title wizard.” Trivantis has adopted a book metaphor so that for Lectora, e-Learning modules are “titles,” made up of “chapters,” “sections” (which are sub-chapters and can have sections within sections), and “pages.” The “pages” are what the end-user actually sees and where the developer actually creates the content or objects (text, graphics, video, audio, etc.).


The Lectora title wizard provides ten styles of user interface, with associated navigation buttons and color schemes. The most basic style is a plain white scheme, with very simple forward and back navigation buttons. The schemes are not at all bad and using any of them results in a professional-looking program. Most of the styles do default to 640 x 480 – and I would have liked to see styles using 800 x 600 and 1024 x 768 resolution, which most of us use now. Nevertheless, since the screen resolution is a feature that the developer can change very simply, it is not a limitation. Most people will want to develop their own or custom look and feel – as I did (more about this later) – but to get started the wizard is an excellent tool to develop the basic structure or container for your content. I chose the blue aqua scheme shown in Figure 1, at right.

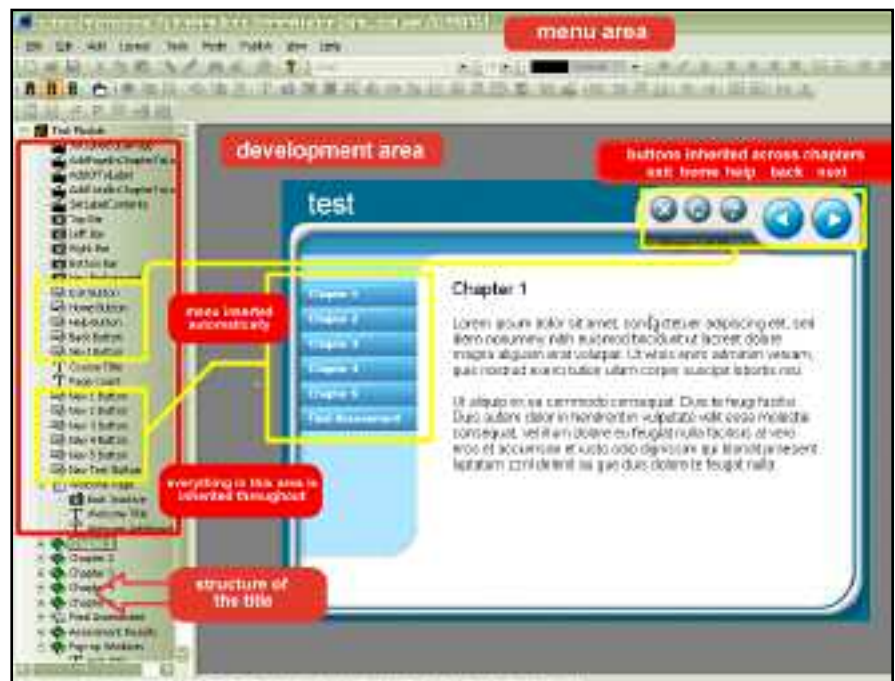
The wizard runs through a dialogue and then sets up the basic structure of the title, including the number of chapters and pages you need, the background

color for your title, and the navigation style you chose for the pages. I needed five chapters for my title and between 10 and 15 pages for each section – 60 pages in total. Lectora is very flexible, and using this process, you can create up to nine chapters with 99 pages in each chapter. One thing lacking in the title wizard is the ability to create sections within the chapters (Trivantis take note) but once you have created the basic structure, it is possible to add as many chapters, sections, and pages as you wish. The whole process took me around thirty seconds to complete the dialogue boxes and at the end when I hit the OK button, Lectora created a basic structure for my title, and was ready to populate it with content. Lectora also automatically added the menu and all the buttons and navigation so that the lesson was ready to run. Clicking the green traffic light icon on the Lectora tool bar launched the program in preview mode and I was able to see that I could page backwards and forward through a fully functioning lesson shell – albeit without my content.

Lectora also provides four templates – two Website templates and two CD or stand alone program templates – one academic and one corporate. The academic template is suitable for a school environment and includes quizzes. The corporate template meets the needs of the company wanting to produce a company induction program or a safety program. The difference between using the wizard and the templates is that the templates set the number of chapters, sections, and pages for you, along with suggested titles for the sections and hints for the content.

I admit, the selection process was not scientific or by any means exhaustive. However, I reasoned that, if I could not see how to put together a menu and a few pages in under an hour or so, then a) the system did not suit my learning style, b) I was unlikely to make much progress with it quickly and, most importantly, c) neither would my customer.

 **Figure 1**
Lectora provides an easy-to-use interface



Both the title wizard and the templates are highly effective for the novice, allowing rapid assembly of an e-Learning program without the need to do any of the programming.

As the saying goes, nothing breeds success like success. With Lectora, using the wizard or templates guarantees success in the early stages – making the usual hard climb up the steep curve of learning a new program more like an elevator ride. I can't believe that anyone who really wants to develop an e-Learning program, as opposed to just playing with software, would not respond with enthusiasm to their first experiences of using Lectora.

Learning about and modifying the structure

The Lectora system impressed me from the start. Not only is the installation process slick and efficient, but the design of the interface is elegant. The desktop consists of three areas, which I have identified in Figure 1 with callouts. The main area presents the screen design and provides a workspace for developing content. To the left side, a Windows Explorer™-type tree structure lists the various chapters, sections and pages along with all the objects in the title. Finally, at the top, the menu area organizes Lectora's functions and tools.

The main area presents exactly what the learner will see in the finished program. There are three working modes – edit, run, and preview. Edit mode consumes most of the developer's working time, as you would expect. The two additional modes are for testing the title. The run mode retains the development environment (although not the ability to edit), while activating all the objects, so the developer can check items such as buttons or media clips for appearance or performance. The preview mode launches the program as the end-user will see it, i.e. without the development interface.

One additional mode, if you are developing a Web-based title, allows the user to preview the title in a browser – although linked pages and screens are not available since Lectora only creates the current page. If you want to preview the whole title then you must first publish it to the location that will host it – either a desktop Web server or a remote server.

To me this arrangement is infinitely preferable to a system where you can't see what the end-user is going to see until you hit the preview button. When designing a page, I want to see what it looks like immediately – particularly when speed is important. Lectora presents all this in its desktop environment.

There is another benefit of Lectora's interface design. Because I used the wizard to develop the basic structure of the title, it was obvious with a little poking

around how Lectora put all the elements together. At the top of the tree were all the features that appear on every section and page – so the navigation buttons are right up there. Lectora uses a simple concept – inheritance – that populates later pages with objects from earlier pages. So putting a button at the top of the structure adds it to all the pages that follow. Fortunately, the inheritance property is also editable so that if you want different layouts or features in different sections, then by switching off inheritance for the selected objects, you can remove them from the subsequent pages.

Looking at the structure of the title Lectora had created for me, I could see all the graphic objects, buttons, and text objects in the list. Previewing the title, I could see how the objects at the top of the tree were inherited across the title, and how the various buttons are set, through their properties, to navigate to different pages.

Getting the interface design to have the look and feel I wanted was relatively simple. I used a graphics program (Photoshop) to mock up the interface I wanted and then sliced and exported the various elements as separate bitmaps. Lectora supports all of the common graphic formats i.e. jpegs, gifs, tiffs, bmps, pngs, wmf's and emf's, as well as gif animations and Flash animations. I then used Lectora's powerful drag-and-drop feature to drag the various elements from their folder into position onto the first page of my title. Bingo – my blank document now represented the design look I wanted. (See Figure 2, below.)

Dragging and dropping graphics works from most

Many of the pages in the customer's original program included a feature common to many other e-Learning programs – namely, the text and graphics built up on the page in synch with the audio narrative. While Lectora does not actually do this for you, it has a useful tool that makes it possible to accomplish this – the Action object.



Figure 2

The interface which I built by dragging and dropping elements onto the basic structure.



source locations – so if you have a corporate Web site with the look and feel you want, you can copy elements (such as your logo) from this and drop them into position. Each resulting graphic (and for that matter any resource such as audio, video, or animation) when dropped onto the desktop is copied and stored in a separate folder which Lectora automatically creates for you, solving the problem of media asset tracking at a stroke.

Lectora also comes with a button wizard that allows you to create your own buttons, or select buttons from an extensive range of options. Once I had created my background, I replaced the default button style with an alternative from the button library.

Within an hour or so, I had my user interface, complete with corporate look and feel, a menu, and all the basic navigational features I wanted.

Drag and drop

If only all programs could utilize Windows' drag-and-drop feature so that collaboration between applications is as possible as it is in Lectora. Lectora exploits it to the full.

Do you want a graphic on the page? Go to the folder containing the graphic and drag it from the folder to the stage. Lectora copies it, places it on the desktop and files it in an Images folder it creates for you.

Do you want to insert a video or audio file? Find it on your hard disk or on a CD, drag it onto the stage, and Lectora will add it to your title. Lectora also copies the file into a separate Media folder, which it creates behind the scenes. Lectora supports an extensive range of video file formats (including Microsoft .avi, Quicktime .mov, .mpg, Mpeg, Microsoft streaming video .asf, Real Media Streaming Video, and Windows Media Video), audio file formats (.wav, .midi, .mp3, .au, .aiff, .asf, and .rm), and external file formats (including Shockwave and Flash) which can simply be dropped into the title.

If you try to include non-supported formats, such as proprietary Acrobat or Microsoft files, Lectora adds the files to a separate Extras folder, and you then create a link using a hyperlink on the page. So, if you want to include references to external resources (for example a Word document or Acrobat file), you simply try to drag them in – and Lectora responds by creating a copy within the file structure in a separate folder, which can then be linked to and run as long as the end-user has the appropriate application.


Since I had the original program to work from, I had all its assets – text, audio, and graphics. In order to develop the content, all that was necessary was to drag the pictures, text, and audio onto the pages in the title, arrange them where I wanted them, and I was finished.

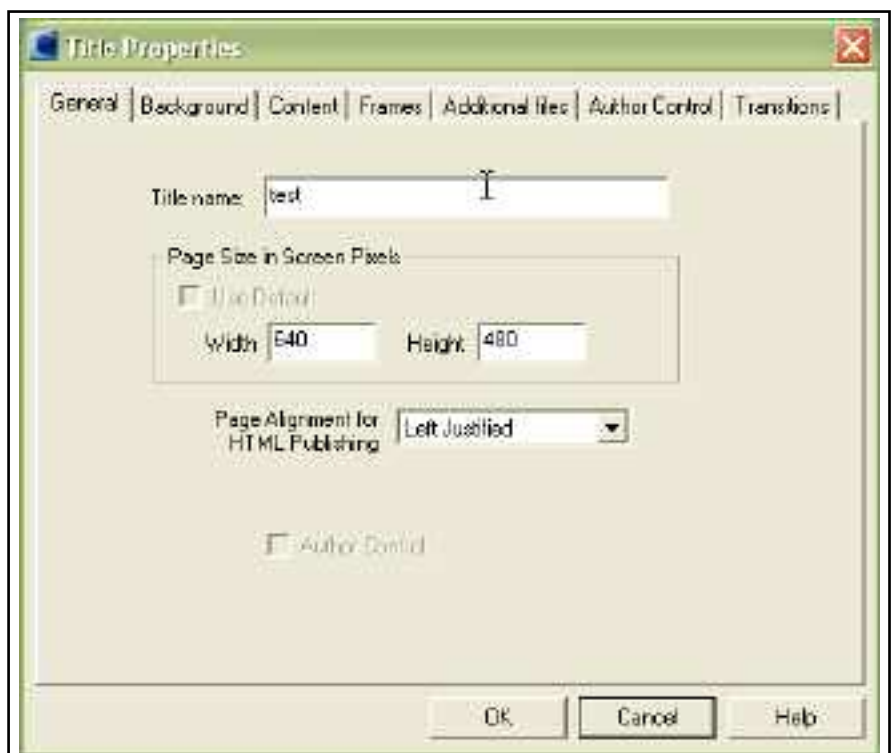
Properties, actions, and variables — PowerPoint on steroids

An important feature of Lectora is that all objects have properties. Double-clicking on any object brings up a dialogue that allows you to edit its properties. The properties available depend on which type of object you are trying to edit. For an example, see the properties for the title in Figure 3, below. Using the dialogue boxes, you can change features of the title such as: name of the title, screen resolution, page alignment for HTML publishing, background colours, default font and colors, and whether a background image or sound is used. You can also control how the content is published, i.e. whether it is a standard Lectora title (CD or HTML), a CourseMill 2.0 title, or an AICC/SCORM/CourseMill 3.0 title, and whether the title runs in full screen mode, uses frames, additional files, and transitions, or should be protected with a password.

Many of the pages in the customer's original program included a feature common to many other e-Learning programs – namely, the text and graphics built up on the page in synch with the audio narrative. While Lectora does not actually do this for you, it has a useful tool that makes it possible to accomplish this – the Action object.

The Action object allows sophisticated control of the program. By using Actions attached to objects, the developer can control the flow of the lesson to occur on certain events, for example, when an object

 **Figure 3**
Properties dialogue for Title, showing options that can be changed.



displays, when the mouse rolls over it or out of it, or, in the case of media, when a clip finishes playing. Each Action object has an "On" property, an "Action" and a "Target." For example by using Actions attached to my sound objects, I was able to control when the next graphic displayed and when the next audio clip started playing. I simply set the On property to when the clip was finished playing (Done playing), the action to play (Play) and the target to the name of the next clip. Thus, I was able to control the build-up of the lesson sequences to mimic the original. Actions can be applied to standard events such as keyboard input, mouse click, double mouse click, mouse enter, mouse exit, show (i.e. when an object is displayed), done, and so on.

I didn't actually need to control branching based on performance – but Lectora also provides control over events in the title using variables. Lectora comes complete with a set of common system variables, such as time and date. It also allows the creation of user defined variables. For AICC/SCORM-compliant modules, Lectora adds all the variables needed – with default values – allowing you to set them as required.

Actions allow you to modify variables. So, for example, I could set a variable for the score achieved in a chapter and only allow the end-user to progress to the next chapter when he or she has achieved a certain score. Using variables dramatically extends the control the developer has over the flow or functions of the program, and takes Lectora from being a system solely for creating simple page-turning lessons rather like PowerPoint presentations, to a system with which it is possible to create sophisticated adaptive e-Learning modules – PowerPoint on steroids.

Quizzes

Lectora also includes a couple of structural elements for developing interactivity and assessments – the quiz and the test. Quizzes allow the creation of interactions in the form of questions throughout the module, whereas the test object combines a sequence of questions at the end of a section or chapter, automatically adds feedback and judging, and allows submission of the results back to a destination of your choice – for example, back to a CGI script or email.

Lectora includes all the standard question types including true/false, multiple choice, short answer, essay (without judging, of course), fill in the blank, matching, and a couple of graphical question types – drag-and-drop and hot-spot. I included a drag-and-drop question to test the system and it appeared to work OK – with the limitation that only getting the right answer would allow me to continue.

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Publishing options

One of the most useful and flexible features of Lectora is its support for publishing to a variety of formats. Lectora supports publishing to a single file executable, CD-ROM, HTML, as well as SCORM 1.1, 1.2 and 2004, AICC, and LRN compliant formats. Note that some features that are available when published to executable or CD are not supported in HTML, such as the done-playing feature. In addition, Lectora supports the generation of packages that Trivantis' proprietary LMS, CourseMill, can host. This is useful if you want to deploy Web-based training but do not have a Webserver/LMS environment.

For the rapid e-Learning developer this flexibility in publishing brings many benefits. If your organization is not ready to migrate to Web deployment of training – and I imagine there are many organizations in this category, because you are not geographically dispersed enough or do not have the infrastructure to go this route, this feature is for you. It provides you with the ability to be able to create both CD-ROM and Web-based training (standards-compliant or not) from the same source file.

My potential customer was not interested in a Web-based version or in SCORM or AICC compliance – but wanted to be able to distribute the program via CD to remote sites and to be able to run it on their local networked PCs. Lectora is ideal for this. As part of the publishing process, Lectora checks the title for errors. In the case of HTML titles, it also checks for large file sizes. Once the check is completed, Lectora displays a list of errors and prompts you to correct the errors before publishing. Additionally, Lectora reports on any unused resources, such as graphics or media files, and offers the opportunity to delete them (or rather, to delete the copies of them which Lectora has created). The checking mechanism is a very simple idea but has the result of making sure that the published title will run optimally.

If you are going to deploy your title in a SCORM environment, Lectora will check that it is SCORM-compliant and will prompt if you have omitted setting the variables needed for each environment. Since I wasn't interested in either SCORM or AICC compliance (my customer does not use an LMS), I did not use these features. I would note, however, that although there is some discussion of SCORM and AICC features in the user guide, I would have liked to see a general discussion of the standard for the novice, to ensure understanding of the possibilities and benefits.

One other nice touch, which I did make use of, is that Lectora allows you to incorporate your own custom icon for the program before publishing, so you


can stamp your own identity on your program. When I supplied the program to my customer, he was able to launch it with his company's own icon on the desktop.

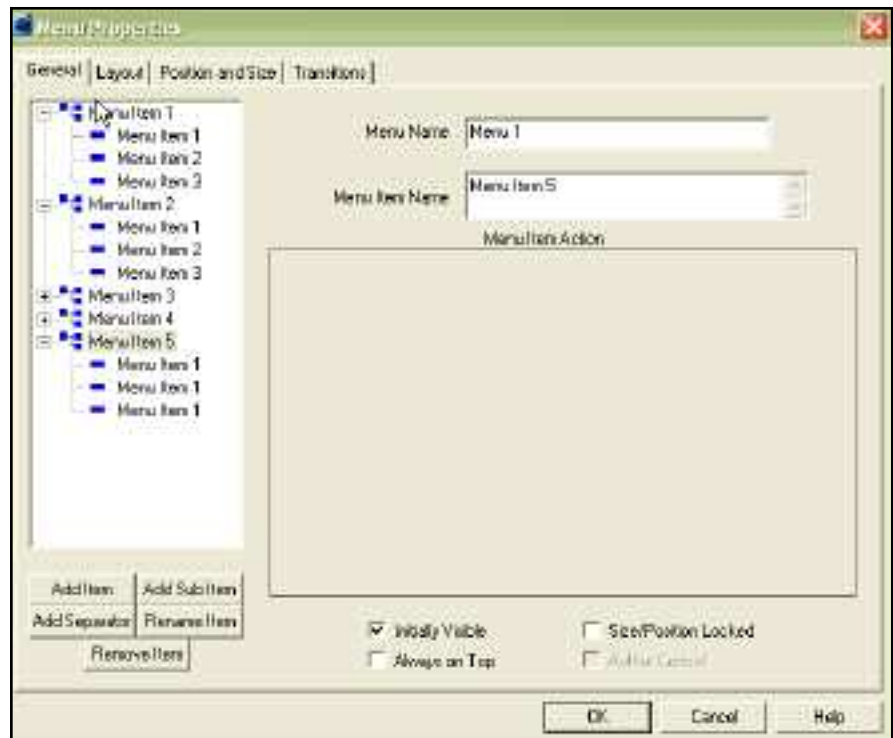
Other features

There are literally dozens of features in Lectora to fulfil most e-Learning developers aspirations, and certainly too many to address in this short review. I haven't mentioned for example the Menu wizard (see Figure 4, below), which, with a few key strokes, can create a sophisticated menu – based on your input of menu items and sub items – and display it as a drop-down feature anywhere on the page. Nor have I mentioned the table of contents feature that allows the creation of a complete index for your title based on its structure – with all the navigation programmed in. Equally powerful and useful is the ability to drop Flash movies onto the desktop – a feature that will be of interest to those whose skills continue to develop from what is possible with only a basic knowledge of e-Learning development.

Conclusion — pros and cons

So what are my conclusions? If it was not already obvious, for a non-programmer or for an organization that wishes to develop either standards-based Web e-Learning sites or CD titles, I cannot recommend Lectora enough. It is the first authoring system I have used which I believe really lives up to the claim to being a flexible and powerful tool, whose only limits are

 **Figure 4**
The Menu wizard, or menu builder




the imagination of the developers using it.

Lectora is highly suitable for the e-Learning development novice because there is a range of tools and features to allow the very rapid creation of simple but effective e-Learning titles. However, the power of Lectora does not stop there because using variables and the Action object provides the additional power and flexibility to satisfy the experienced e-Learning developer, without the need to learn complex coding rules.

For my money, Lectora's major plus points include:

- its WYSIWIG features,
- the Title wizard
- the powerful drag-and-drop facility
- the publishing options, and the support of various standards and formats

In my use of the program, I found very few complaints. If there was anything, I would suggest it was not being able to bring in objects using variables, and Trivantis may wish to add this feature to future releases. For example, there is no real way that you can add the text of a narrative from external files without creating each piece of text as a separate file and referencing the file by name. The same is true for audio or video clips. Another useful feature to have might be to control flow within a media clip.

For the time being though, I believe that most users of the program are likely to find more than enough features for the type of programs that they wish to produce. If rapid e-Learning is all about subject matter experts creating a learning program in a couple of weeks, then this is a tool which I believe should, at the very least, be in the short list for selection. 

Author Contact



Len Perkins has worked in education and training most of his working life. A veteran of the aviation CBT world, Len managed some large courseware development projects for the likes of Lufthansa, American, and other international airlines, before taking roles in sales and general management at UK based VEGA Group PLC, and then heading up their Aviation Division. For the past five years, Len has run his own consultancy business offering instructional design, project management, and general e-Learning consultancy to a range of clients in the aerospace, military, and petrochemical industries. Contact Len by email to: len.perkins@lpit.co.uk

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