An Interview with Joanne Mowat

A graduate of the EdTech Program in 1997, Joanne Mowat has been President of The Herridge Group Inc. since April 1995. The company (http://www.herridgegroup.com) based in Toronto, counts BMO Financial Group, IBM, Manulife and Air Canada among its clients. The company specializes in instructional design, learning object design, instructional games and simulation, e-Learning and integrated performance support. Before The Herridge Group, Joanne worked at CN Rail in Montreal as a System Manager Education. She's now completing a Ph.D. in online learning through Capella University in Minnesota.

Q: You are doing your Ph.D. through an online university. How are you finding the experience?
A: I'm finding it better than I thought I would. There's more targeted conversation, more interaction with my professors, and generally great discussions with lots of reflection that sometimes leads to off-line conversation. What's nice is that you hear from everyone, including those you might not hear from in a traditional class. There aren't many folks doing learning objects right now. I was able to create my own reading course structure. Capella found me a professor in Australia who wasn't even a faculty member, who came in especially for me and mentored me through it. This is the type of flexibility that an online university allows for.

Q: What advice do you have for those who are considering pursuing additional studies at a distance?
A: I researched and looked for schools that have solid programs and that are well respected. One thing I did was during an ISPI and an On-Line Learning conference I went to folks I respected, like Allison Rossett, and Ellen Wagner. I asked them for their recommendations. Everyone except for one recommended Capella and said they would hire someone from there. I would also recommend to anyone considering taking a degree online to take one course from the institution before signing up full-time.

Q: One of your and Herridge Group's areas of expertise is gaming and simulation. In fact, you previously taught a course on this topic for the EdTech program in 1999. Could you briefly talk about the role gaming plays as a training solution?
A: If designed and applied correctly, a game fosters improved learning, problem resolution skills, retention and transfer of learning in a nonthreatening way. It's an alternative to traditional testing methods.

Q: What is a FlexGame?
A: It's a game where the game board (the context) stays the same, the rules of engagement stay the same, and how you win stays the same. The difference is in the content. As an example, you have teams of students come up with the questions and answers the week before, and the next week, they play the game using questions from another team. I have used it in corporate settings for either formative or summative evaluations.

Q: Not to oversimplify the concept, but would Trivial Pursuit with all of its various versions be considered a FlexGame?
A: Yes.

Q: One of your big interests is in learning objects. You've presented and written about the topic, your company helps corporations design/use them, and you are currently doing your Ph.D. focusing on this area. There's so much to talk about with regard to learning objects, more than space allows here. Can you give a brief definition of what a learning object is?

A: It's a self-contained, sharable content object that covers one terminal objective. It is designed to stand alone, but it can be sequenced. I have two articles that provide lots of background on my site (see http://www.herridgegroup.com/articles_reports.html).

Q: You are an active member of the International Society for Performance Improvement and the North American Gaming and Simulation Association. How important are these professional affiliations to you and the work you do?
A: I believe that as a profession, we need to be willing to give back to the field in terms of working with folks coming up, sharing information, and generally getting a sense of community of practice going. This is what these groups do. Being involved in local groups helps build credibility, allows one to understand what's going on in the market, and it's an important networking opportunity. That said, it is equally important to be part of international organizations for similar reasons.

Q: What advice do you have for new and up-and-coming graduates of the EdTech program?
A: The things that differentiate a good from a superb instructional designer are strong design, project management, problem-solving and communication skills. It doesn't matter how good you are as an ID if you can't set and manage client expectations and communicate with them. The second piece of advice I have is to go to work for a company for a few years before you go out on your own. You can't go out and charge a client for services, such as developing storyboards and job aids, if you haven't done them before yourself. Folks who do this end up in painful situations. It's a small market and once you lose your reputation, you don't get it back. Keep a close eye on opportunities to apply blended solutions. It's no longer good to be an expert in only one area like e-learning.

Q: What is Integrated Performance Support.
A: Simply put it is providing the exact information, tools, and resources at the moment and place of need. On my website (http://www.herridgegroup.com/articles_reports.html) there is an article on an EPSS design and development methodology and a document providing the basic EPSS definitions if anyone wants more information.