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QUEEN OF ONLINE TRAINING

TALKING WITH LYNDA WEINMAN

In 1995, educator Lynda Weinman wrote *designing web graphics* (selected chapters of which were reprinted in GRAPHIC EXCHANGE), a book that would help to lift her into international prominence as an authority on web design, and the first of many that she would produce on this subject. Her website, lynda.com, also grew quickly in popularity as a vital source of information for designers.

CLICK HERE TO LISTEN TO THE COMPLETE UNEDITED INTERVIEW

Lynda now heads an organization that not only provides tens of thousands of users with online video training on every software application imaginable, but attracts attendees from all over to her Flashforward conferences and other events. Lynda and her team are also responsible for producing many of the training materials which are included with Adobe software (including former Macromedia products), as well as providing educational services to numerous corporations and institutions.

gX editor Dan Brill recently sat down with this web pioneer to discuss her approach to online training and to ask about her vision of web-based video, present and future.

Given your involvement in shows, conferences, podcasts, books, the lynda.com website, and all your other activities, do you still view yourself primarily as a teacher?

Oh, definitely. I see all my roots in education, and my goals and ambitions and objectives are all related to that. And I think that hopefully I've branched out in a way that is helping more people and spreading good education.

So it's true to say that education is still what turns you on?

Definitely. I love sharing, and helping people. Learning how to teach something well—something that most people will understand—can

be a really fun challenge. That's my angle on the world, and I love it.

Why don't we begin with what's new and exciting at lynda.com?

I suppose the thing we're most excited about right now is our online training library subscription service. We've had it now for four years, and it has grown by leaps and bounds every year—we have tens of thousands of people who subscribe to it.

We've been creating courses at the rate of about two per week—sometimes they're ten to twenty hours long, so it's a huge video editing project, because all of the training that we deliver is in video

"We've been creating courses at the rate of about two per week...it's a huge video editing project, because all of the training that we deliver is in video format."

format. We are subscriber-sponsored, so it's really exciting to us that we're able to grow and sustain ourselves, to evolve and meet the demands of our customers, and run a customer-driven publishing company. It is a wonderful medium for those who are visual learners, or who might want to learn just the answer to one problem, rather than take an entire course all the way through, because you can watch everything in a non-linear way or in a linear way. It's up to you how you get the content. You could subscribe thinking that you want to learn Flash, but say you have a little InDesign problem, or suddenly you need to learn how to program an Access database—it's a really neat "all you can learn" buffet for growing your skillset.

We're extremely proud of it, and it is the fastest growing part of our company, and by a landslide the most profitable thing that we do—and the thing that's fueling us to be able to do other things like events and podcasts. We work with a lot of experts and trainers, and they get royalties, so this has become a really neat eco-system where our customers are paying us to produce the content, and we are paying our contributors. It's a wonderful self-sustaining mechanism that we have built and continues to grow. I would say that out of everything we're doing, that is the thing I'm the most passionate and excited about.

Judging by the list on the website, it looks like you offer training for just about every application imaginable. How do you decide what to offer?

We get feedback from our customers in terms of what other types of training they'd like to see, and we get a lot of interesting oddball requests—like, I don't think we would ever have thought to do eBay training, for example. But over and over, people wanted to see a training title on that, so we launched that this month.

Right now we have a big user demand for Autocad, and I never would have thought to offer Autocad training. But because we're able to poll the customers, we're able to respond to what they're asking for.

And at the same time, because we're clued in to the industry, and because we have a really good network of trainers and industry experts, we're also able to come up with ideas on our own and push them at our audience with, of course, varying degrees of success. But we manage to get pretty good response to everything.

Can you explain the "linear or non-linear" approach to training that you mentioned earlier?

I think a lot of times, when you think of online training, it's a very structured kind of experience, where you start with Lesson One, and when you've finished a test, you go to Lesson Two. But if you're already an expert in Photoshop, but you can't remember how to do a certain masking technique, you don't necessarily want to go through an entire course to get the answer to that one problem.

So our system is just like an open buffet. You can either watch something from movie one to movie one hundred, or you can watch movie fifty-three, and then go to a different course and watch movie twenty-two. We don't actually number them like that, but what I mean is that you may have a very specific need to learn something in InDesign, and something in Acrobat, and something in Flash, and all in the same session you can log on, and get the answers to those three problems.

By searching with a specific question?

Yes, there is a navigation bar at the top of every page and it says "Learn by", and you can learn by subject matter or the vendor or product—for example, Acrobat—and when you go to "Acrobat" you will see there are five different courses on Acrobat. When you click on that, you get a Table of Contents for that particular course, and that might have a hundred different movies, and you can just look through the names of the movies. Say I want to learn how to do security in Acrobat, you can hone in that way, or you can use the Search box and type in "security + Acrobat" and find it that way.

And everything is in video, so that there's no reading, and it's all visual training?

Yes, it's all audio and visual, so you have all these great instructors walking you through, and you can stop it and replay it, or watch it another day if you forget.

Can you give us a general overview of how you charge for the training materials and what sort of choices there are?

It's very simple. The lowest commitment is $25 per month. You could just decide to join for one month and then unjoin, or you could sign up for a whole year—and there are two different annual programs. One is where you sign up for a year, and you save twenty percent, and that's $250. And the other is the premium program, where you sign up for a year, but you also get the same exercise files that the instructors are using. So it can be a better service for people at a beginner level, because often they don't know how to extrapolate that technique, and they want to go along step-by-step with the instructor.

It's not a course-by-course service. You purchase it, and you have access to everything. You can use our products anywhere there's an internet connection; dial-up will work, although broadband offers a better experience, and the reality is that most people have broadband connections now.

Just over three years ago, about two-thirds of U.S. homes were still on dial-up, and one-third were on broadband, but today those figures are reversed. Has this helped your business?

Yes, we have been on that wave with the customer adoption of our service, in that it is much higher today than it was three years ago. When we first launched the service four years ago,

"The promise of Apollo...will become more relevant to designers as they get more comfortable bridging the developer-designer gap."

we didn't have enough training to make it nearly as compelling as it is today—I don't think we even had a thousand movies—and now we have over fifteen thousand.

One of the really neat things is that as a subscriber, you not only have access to what's there today, but what's going to come tomorrow. So if you make a commitment to go for the whole year—well, let's just look at the last fourteen releases, and this might have happened over the last month or month and a half… Filemaker Pro 8.5, Advanced Inspector for Filemaker Pro, a font management title, new features to Filemaker Pro, After Effects and Flash Integration, Flex 2 Beyond the Basics—which is an intermediate level course, After Effects for Title Design techniques, Flash Professional 8 for building data-driven applications, eBay essential training, Photoshop Filters, CSS Site Design, Getting Started with CorelPaint, Paint Shop Pro, iMovie and iDVD, and Photoshop Actions and Automations.

What's neat is that we will push a title at our customers, and they may end up learning something that they didn't even know they'd be interested in. Or they can at least get a good idea of what they *can* learn. I think this library approach is exposing people to a lot more than they might be exposed to, especially if they were buying training on a course-by-course basis. If you were just going to buy a Photoshop Actions course, it may never occur to you that you'd want to learn Flex. But there it is, it's part of your service, you don't have to pay extra for it, so nothing says you can't at least review the Table of Contents.

Do you offer a special deal for educators and students?

Yes, we do have special educational programs for schools and teachers—for example, teachers can assign their students our movies instead of a book. They get a free account if they bring on a certain number of students. So we definitely like to help the teachers out.

Do you have a sense of how many subscribers are outside the U.S.?

I think it's about 15%. It's pretty large.

What are your observations on the Adobe-Macromedia merger? Do you think it's been going well? Have there been any surprises?

I think it has gone really well, but I don't really think we have seen the fruits of their labour yet. The merger is a year old, and since it has occurred, very little new software has been published, but I think when we get into future generations of Adobe products, you will start to see that they have been working on things.

Creative Suite 3 has been announced, and I think we're going to start to see much better integration, especially with Flash. On the Wharton School of Business website, there was an interview with Bruce Chizen, and he had a one-word answer for why the acquisition occurred, and that one word was "Flash". I'm sure there's going to be a lot of very interesting integration and new kinds of communication vehicles that are going to emerge out of that. I think once that starts to happen, the public will get a much bigger sense of what the merger is going to mean to them.

Any comments on what you've seen of Adobe's Apollo project?

I saw the first true demo of Apollo at the last FlashForward, which showed what the workflow is like a little bit, and it's a lot of scripting, and I would say that it is going to be something more for a developer than a designer—at least, right now it doesn't look like Apollo comes with an authoring tool. It looks like Apollo is a set of technologies that can be combined and published under one "wrapper"—they're calling it a runtime. But I do think that the promise of what Apollo is will be a very significant step for Adobe, and will become more relevant to designers as they get more comfortable bridging the developer-designer gap.

With digital publishing—especially interactive media publishing—it's a whole new kind of mindset for a designer, and it has just started. People were introduced through web publishing, and now we're talking about application publishing, and that's what Apollo is about. Apollo can create an application that can run on your desktop outside of a browser, yet can be internet-enabled and can work with and leverage Adobe technology, like PDF and Flash and Flash video—and CSS and HTML and Ajax, and things like that.

I think it's actually a really exciting time, as this line between designer and developer is getting blurred. What's interesting for Adobe is that they already kind of own the design market. And I think they're going to be the bridge to help a lot of designers go into this new era of becoming developers.

Would you agree that one of the biggest challenges for designers as we go forward is going to be mastering the cross-media environment—to be able to understand how to move from print-based design to screen-based design and back again, and utilize the same assets for multiple purposes?

Yes, that's very fair. I think that is exactly where everything is headed—and I think it's even more than designers. I think it's the public in general—if you look at how digital photography has taken off and digital video—who would ever have thought that average people would be doing things like green screen compositing.

That leads us to Web 2.0 and Ajax. In your mind, what are these new buzzwords all about?

Well, I think it is a term that is almost becoming outdated, but what it means to me is getting beyond the static web page, getting beyond the hand-coded web page, moving more into a data-driven model, a model that allows users to interact with data and to shift data and affect data, and

"Leveraging dynamic data—and inviting your audience not only to interact with your information but to shape it—is definitely a whole new mindset."

leveraging that collective community. The focus now is on community-driven interactions, everything from YouTube to MySpace to Friendster to blogs to podcasts—this idea that you don't get your news from just one source, this is an open forum that everyone can participate in.

Should Web 2.0 be a major focus for the creative community?
I think leveraging dynamic data—and inviting your audience not only to interact with your information but to shape it—is definitely a whole new mindset. I definitely think, given the popularity and adoption of it, that it's something designers should be aware of.

Some of those things are very technical, and there's this blurring line between a developer and a designer. I think the developer used to be someone who had no design sensibility, and a designer used to be somebody who had no developer sensibility, but now there's this hybrid—young people today who are just getting into the computer, and it's not anything newfangled, it's just something they grew up with. I think they have a much lower resistance to adopting and learning this sort of workflow than people like ourselves who have been mired in some kind of a process and workflow before this was all invented.

Do you have any comments on the recent Google-YouTube deal?
I was pretty blown away. What I found really interesting was—you can look at Google and say, are they are a search company? Or are they an ad company? Obviously they make their revenue through advertising dollars, and something like YouTube brings a lot of [visitors] to the page.

I look at it and say—from my own selfish perspective—we are a business that's subscriber-driven, and we're not advertising-driven, but is that going to be the wave of the future? Is there really enough revenue in advertising to sustain these sorts of dollar amounts?

I'm probably looking at it more from a businessperson's perspective than from a cultural perspective, but I think clearly they touched on something kind of like iTunes, so universally accepted and embraced, it's like, "Okay, this is how I'm going to want to get my music from now on." Is there any question of going back to putting a CD into the turner, and only being able to play this song at this time? No, there's no going back.

And I think with YouTube, to be able to share video that way, now that someone thought about it and did it right—how do you go back?

It really was a milestone piece of software.

And what does online digital video signify to Apple, Adobe and Microsoft?
I don't know how that's all going to shake out. Unfortunately, all of these different companies—Apple, Microsoft, Adobe—have their own agendas and their own proprietary objectives and biases. So it's not always what's best for the end user, and sometimes competition allows them to leapfrog. I think Flash video actually has a lot of interesting advantages over QuickTime, and vice versa—I think QuickTime has a lot of interesting advantages over Flash video, and I'm glad there's competition out there, so that the companies keep raising the bar on each other.

What are the advantages and disadvantages?
Well, most people have Flash, so there is no player required. When I go to CNN, and I'm on a Mac, and I can't see the video because it's on Windows—there are so many different formats that require their own plug-ins.

It's true that Flash is a plug-in, but it's also true that just about everybody has it, so you don't have to think, "What player do I have to have?"—it just plays instantly, and it is cross-platform and available to everybody.

The fact that it can have interactive branching—like in YouTube, how it has the little "Next Movie" button that comes up right in the video screen, because it's all tied into Flash. There is a lot of interactive programming that you can do to create some really interesting kinds of branching and interactive experiences around video that's much harder to do in QuickTime. QuickTime allows you to put a Flash track into QuickTime, but it's not the most current version of Flash, and it's not as robust.

But QuickTime is so scalable—it's used for films with super high resolution all the way down to web video, and I don't think that Flash video has nearly that kind of latitude. If you're looking to be published on television and be more high end, Flash would not be a good choice. As well, QuickTime has more codecs for compression, so that you can get a higher quality at a smaller file size than you can with Flash.

But as YouTube proved—who cares? Quality is not the be-all, end-all. Sometimes "good enough" is good enough.

What business opportunities do you see in the online video market, particularly opportunities that would be of interest to designers or creatives?
It just keeps expanding all the time. I think it is a great time to be a designer, because there have never been this many choices and directions that you can go into. Frankly, I think that the more designers can offer in the way of producing something and then leveraging it out to different mediums, the more things they can sell.

So I think it is advantageous for designers to form relationships with developers, or learn some developer chops on their own, to start to become literate in this, because I think those agencies and design shops that know how to do all of these different cutting-edge methods of communication will probably have more clients and more ways to generate revenue. •