

## Learning as you like it

### Lars Hyland reflects that a connected world will unleash our inherent motivation to learn.

*"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."*

I sometimes think that a large proportion of the education and training world unwittingly lives by the cynicism of this famous passage of Shakespeare (As You Like It, Act 2 Scene 7). As students or adult learners, how many times have you felt part of a helpless and trapped audience for a teacher or trainer who is more interested in their own performance than yours?

The famous bard goes on to describe the second of seven ages of man:

*"Then the whining school-boy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school."*

He's identified the core problem with most learning experiences we have - a failure to engage and harness our intrinsic motivation to learn. Now this is a problem not just limited to school boys and our school days - it affects all of us at all ages. And the world has clearly changed dramatically since Shakespeare's day, even just in the past twenty years. In a connected world, technology is fundamentally challenging traditional models of education and training, empowering us to learn in a more fluid and natural way than ever before, at our own pace and place. The learners are taking control, at long last.

So how fundamental is this change? Well, consider the research of Sugata Mitra, Professor of Educational Technology at Newcastle University, formerly Chief Scientist at NIIT in New Delhi, India. His "Hole in the Wall" experiments with communities in India, Cambodia and Africa demonstrate that children can intuitively learn how to use interactive multimedia applications in very little time. By literally building a networked PC into a wall accessible in an outside space (very much like a cash machine here), and providing no direction or instruction he sat and waited to watch what would happen. One child learned to browse in 6 minutes and was teaching 70 other children by the end of the day. They interacted with content that was not even in their own language - they had to self-learn English to get to the content itself. In one experiment children managed to grasp basic concepts of biotechnology and the principles of DNA! All this occurred without a teacher or classroom. Tellingly, he found that children learned best when the "hole in the wall" was kept right away from the traditional school environment. Now this is "informal learning" in its extreme, but it provides a compelling argument for us to radically review how learners of all ages, in

education and in the workplace, spend their time developing new skills and acquiring new knowledge. Are we holding people back rather than propelling them forward?

In the corporate world, the attempts to define and (ironically) control "informal learning" are forcing us to realise that much of the energy and resources that go into our formal approaches to educate and train goes to waste. Forcing us to learn away from the context of our actual job environment, in concentrated blocks of time goes against the core truth that we will forget and fail to apply most of the new knowledge and skills we are exposed to when we go back to our normal activities. In contrast, when we harness the available technology around us, we move away from artificially extracting "learning" from the "performance" we want to see demonstrated.

Connectivity is rapidly accelerating the learning process, and the younger generation who don't know a world without the internet and mobile phone, get this more than most. In fact they take this for granted. Increasingly, they won't stand for the one-size-fits-all pace of traditional classroom based sessions that deny the existence of these tools. Why leave the workplace when you find the answers you need at your desk, on your laptop, in your phone? Through simulation we can practice skills and gather virtual experience that we can more readily and directly apply in real contexts. Not only that, we can literally pull out of thin air the resources that support our performance, just-in-time, at the point of need.

So, while many corporate environments appear to be a long way from being able to harness this phenomenon, in many ways they are being bypassed by the way we are using technology socially. Social networks cut across hierarchy: knowledge is just a search and a few clicks away, and virtual environments allow us to practise (perhaps crudely at present) quite complex technical and soft skills. Now, not everyone is naturally drawn to these experiences. However this is often a matter of design and usability.

Take Nintendo for example. With their DS and Wii gaming platforms they have brought e-learning to the masses. Who would have thought that in 2007 we would see Nicole Kidman, a Hollywood actress, advertising a Brain Training game on national TV and in cinemas? Travel to the Continent and you'll see that the top selling "games" for the DS are English Training and other life skill based titles. Apple, with their iPhone, iPod and iMacs, have succeeded in making technology highly desirable. Both organisations share a core principle: they are design-led and obsessive about the overall user experience. Good design that is sensitive to the user, is intuitive, is exciting to interact with and simply does what it is meant to do. Imagine if your corporate systems, tools and processes were as easy to operate. We could remove whole swathes of training activity that only exists to make up for poor design and usability. In terms of e-learning design, too many products are hard to use, un-ambitious in scope, and written in

a dull style. No wonder many people's experience and perception of e-learning is poor.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We can shift our learning design principles to those that take into account current cognitive research. We can genuinely consider the environment in which people will use and interact. We can tailor our design with the personal goals of the individual. Then e-learning becomes truly performance enhancing. After all, learning can only ever be as you like it.

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