

The changing face of work-based learning

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Learning is all about change: changing attitudes, beliefs, skills and actions. So you would think that in the face of the growing whirlwind of economic, social and technological forces blowing across the world stage, the learning and development community would be the first to change its own thinking and practices.

Yet in many ways, the learning and development community is still lagging behind in adapting to a highly competitive environment that demands just-in-time access to information, on-the-spot decision making, and the highest standards of customer service, 24/7. Too much training is still delivered at the wrong time, is presented in uninspiring and indigestible formats, and fails to bring about the desired improved performance.

Why is this? Too often business sponsors treat training as an afterthought and don't give their learning and development colleagues either the time or the budget to design effective solutions. Equally, corporate training departments frequently fail to persuade their business stakeholders of the value of designing learning into the very fabric of a change programme, and instead fall back on what they feel comfortable delivering, which may not fit the business need. This lack of alignment may always be around to some extent - depending on the management culture of any one organisation. But is there something deeper at work here? Should we be questioning our approaches to learning design more fundamentally?

Using technology: home vs. work

There is a real feeling of a growing grassroots demand for change, which could imminently result in what Malcolm Gladwell calls a Tipping Point, (also the title of his book) which puts forward how seemingly from nowhere, ideas, products, messages and behaviours spread like viruses and become ubiquitous. This is

born out of the widening disconnect between the way we are embracing technology as consumers and the way we operate at work.

The internet and the mobile phone have fundamentally changed the way we interact, communicate and share information. More and more of us turn to the internet to complete routine tasks such as our weekly grocery shopping, managing our finances, and booking travel itineraries. And with more than two thirds of the UK population on broadband, we have extended our internet use to include managing our music and photo collections, watching movies, playing games and making free telephone and video conferencing calls - from our own PC or laptop. Increasingly, families have more than one computer, with many installing wireless routers to create home networks.

Digital natives

On top of all this we are obsessed with owning the latest MP3 players, digital cameras, PDAs, DVDs, games, and mobile phones. Indeed, families are now breeding "digital natives", teenagers who are more at home with SMS lingo and instant messaging than full written prose, more comfortable making friends online in chat rooms and virtual game worlds than outside on the street corner. The PC in the bedroom (and quite likely their next smartphone) is now the busy central nervous system of their social universe.

But why is this relevant to learning practices in the work place? Well, these digital natives will be entering the workforce in just a few years' time. And given that western world demographics mean there are a lot fewer of them than their elders, they will be in high demand. They take technology completely for granted, cannot survive without it and will want to learn and communicate in the workplace using the media channels they are most comfortable with. So we have to think now about how to support and include learning activities that make use of instant messaging, blogs, wikis and other social and collaborative tools.

Good or bad?

A commonly held view is that video games, television shows and other forms of popular entertainment have a negative effect on our cognitive and moral development. However there is a compelling argument put forward by the science writer Steven Johnson in his fascinating book *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* that the opposite is true.

Johnson describes what he calls the 'Sleeper Curve', an expanding universe of popular entertainment that grows ever more complex and referential, in which today's media user has to do more cognitive work than previous generations. For example, mastering quick decision-making and devising long term strategies in

role-playing video games is a far more sophisticated mental workout than earlier games gave us - just ten years ago.

Again, how does that affect learning in the workplace? Perhaps we simply can't continue with the relatively simplistic design currently used on many training courses. Out will go the endless clipart PowerPoint presentations and page-turning e-learning. In will come highly interactive models and simulations that target core concepts and capture virtual scenarios that allow learners to explore and discover a truer rendition of the complexities they have to deal with in the real world.

Concerns over cost miss the point. Good learning design doesn't automatically mean using more expensive media. By targeting budget on the 20% of learning that makes 80% of the difference, you can start to produce more realistic learning experiences that more easily demonstrate a significant return on investment. And modelling real work situations more closely will result in business stakeholders understanding better how training can be aligned with business needs.

Working together

Another area that should be concerning us is how virtual communities can work together to produce better decision-making and performance.

In his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki observed that "under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them." A crowd's 'collective intelligence' will produce better outcomes than a small group of experts even if members of the crowd don't know all the facts, or choose individually to act irrationally. For this to occur, the crowd needs to have a diversity of opinion (to widen the range of information available), independence between members (to stop any one opinion leader swaying the others), be decentralised, and have a good mechanism to aggregate opinions.

Already we are delighted to participate in sharing our opinions and votes for the latest *X Factor/Big Brother/Who Wants to be a Millionaire* show, commenting on news and special interest blogs. Are there ways we can harness this desire to participate across learning communities within our organisations?

Design matters

These themes: changing workforce demographics, our newfound comfort with all things digital, a growing desire to collaborate, and our thirst for more sophisticated media consumption suggest we need to re-evaluate our learning design assumptions and up our game.

Rather than seek to produce large quantities of learning content more cheaply, we should focus further on the quality of the experience, targeting areas that stimulate further self-learning, collaboration and contribution. That means challenging both training buyers and learning design specialists to dedicate more creativity and resources on getting the design right.

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