Taking Blended Learning to the Next Level

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The L&D profession is steadily expanding from creating targeted training to conceptualizing blended learning programs to designing more comprehensive learning environments. For your more robust projects, consider the ways that learning and application can be supported in an ongoing way rather than defaulting to an instructionally designed event or traditional blended learning approach. Employ readily available tools to collate additional resources and enable ongoing interaction.”

In industry blogs, conference presentations, and journal articles, you can’t help but notice the news that the learning and development field is changing fairly dramatically. We are seeing—and will continue to see—real changes in what our organizations expect from us in terms of how we do our work and the contributions we make.

The message is that our old models of supporting learning in organizations need to be set aside, and we need to find modern ways to champion and scaffold learning. The techniques that are gaining attention include informal learning, social learning, narrating our work, and learning in the flow of work—techniques that, by the way, don't necessarily need L&D support to flourish.

What’s next in L&D

Whether we talk about breaking up with training, revolutionizing L&D, building a learning ecosystem, or defining new roles, it's clear that, if we want to remain relevant, we need to craft ways to support learning well beyond designing training. It’s equally clear that learning remains the life blood of
organizations in our fast-paced, ever-changing workplaces, so the right kind of support would certainly be welcome. Learning resources may be widely available, but finding the most useful can be a daunting task. While learners appreciate diverse options and individual control over when and how to engage, they also like to have some guidance and support in identifying the best sources, checking their understanding, and getting feedback on application.

In *A New Culture of Learning*, Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown conclude that one of the challenges we face as learning leaders is "To find a way to marry structure and freedom to create something altogether new."

But what is the “something altogether new” that L&D professionals should be creating? To answer that question, we can draw on what is emerging from the efforts of learners themselves.

The notion of a personal learning environment has been around for over a decade. A personal learning environment consists of resources and practices that a person pulls together to support his or her own learning. To develop a specific knowledge base or skill, an individual might find and aggregate static resources like articles, books, and web sites as well as “follow” thought leaders, develop a network of like-minded peers, and perhaps seek formal learning. A personal self-directed learning process is also likely to involve documenting and sharing learning, envisioning how to apply new knowledge and skill, monitoring one’s own results, and discussing implications with trusted others.

You’ve probably created personal learning environments for your own development goals. Having identified what you wanted to learn, you sought out a variety of resources to explore the topic and began talking with people who share the same interests. The resources in this environment are likely quite diverse: a bookshelf of resources behind your desk (or on your tablet), a few document files on the computer, new names on your contact list, new people whose blog or Twitter feed you follow, and your own notes or blog posts on what you’re learning.

Communities of practice have also been identified as important learner-generated learning spaces. According to studies of this phenomenon, communities are formed by committed people who have a shared body of knowledge and a desire to collaborate on emerging practices. In the workplace, these groups find many ways to work together and to share their emerging understanding of their practice field. They engage in ongoing discussions, share documents, and wrestle with problems. The community often interacts through digital common spaces that hold multimedia repositories, discussion forums, blogs, and instant messaging.

You may be personally familiar with communities of practice. It is fairly common in our field for work teams to share stories and ideas with one another, often using some kind of electronic platform to house shared documents and allow asynchronous conversations. Developers share code and troubleshoot issues; consultants share presentation templates and discuss learning strategy with one another. These kinds of communities work best when the community itself founds and maintains them—too much company “support” can negatively impact the camaraderie and commitment that holds them together.

Personal learning environments and communities of practice are solid models for what we might do to marry structure and freedom for the learners we support. Taking cues from these kinds of learner-driven initiatives, L&D professionals can move from designing learning *events* to designing robust learning *environments* intended to support specific learning needs. A well-designed learning
environment is a deliberately curated collection of resources and activities for learning related to a specific need—it’s blended learning taken to the next level.

A learning environment can be designed by assembling a recommended collection of materials, and then making those resources accessible to learners who need them. The list of potential learning resources is quite wide-ranging, including information sources (books, articles, web resources, performance support, etc.), tools that allow knowledge sharing and timely connection, people (mentors, peers, experts), training and education options, company development programs, and tools to support learning by doing. The determinant of a learning environment’s worth is active curation of the resources and activities (a topic for another article). The point is to guide learners to the best learning resources.

All of these resources and activities are typically made available through an electronic gateway of some kind (e.g., web page or document with embedded links). Given the tools we now have at our disposal—especially online capabilities, social tools, and access to Internet-based resources—we can invest our energy in ferreting out the best available resources instead of creating material from scratch.

**Types of learning environments**

Learning environments can be designed in a number of ways. Initial forays into learning environment design have been in creating blended learning hubs. You build the collection of resources in this case around a formal event on a specific topic (e.g., a management-training class or sales skills). The hub extends the learning by providing additional links, articles, tools, application-support materials, feedback, coaching, a place for ongoing discussion, and more.

L&D leaders have also engaged in efforts to create space for knowledge exchange. Building from the approaches popular in knowledge-management circles, a knowledge exchange provides space for both experts and learners to share resources, engage in Q&A, and collaborate on relevant projects. The most important feature in this kind of learning environment is the extent of user-generated materials.

A third approach is to assemble a learning resource portal. When learners have widely varying needs, or the knowledge base and skill set has many elements, learners need to be able to pick and choose the learning resources that will be most useful. A learning resource portal organizes resources and activities to be easy to search and browse. It offers many different modes of learning (text, videos, courses, live discussion, etc.) so that people are able to find an approach that matches their preferences.

In a different vein, a collaboratory recognizes that a particular knowledge base and skill set is so new and evolving that documented resources are hard to come by. A collaboratory-type environment focuses on enabling timely robust exchange among participants—to share knowledge, yes, but more importantly to invent new ways of doing things and discover new concepts and ideas that are useful to the group as a whole. In a collaboratory, knowledge is generated by doing and learning from experience.

These approaches are just prototypical designs—every learning environment design project generates a different set of resources and calls for different kinds of interactions. Learning environment design is a way of conceptualizing how we can support learning without necessarily
controlling it, how we can incorporate powerful learning techniques like social learning and experiential learning without getting in the way.

**A recommendation**

The L&D profession, then, is steadily expanding from creating targeted training, to conceptualizing blended learning programs, to designing more comprehensive learning environments. For your more-robust projects, consider the ways that you can support learning and application in an ongoing way rather than defaulting to an instructionally designed event or traditional blended learning approach. Employ readily available tools to collate additional resources and enable ongoing interaction.

By advocating and facilitating the development of learning environments, we can provide highly valuable support to learners in their efforts to keep up with ever-changing knowledge and skill demands.

**For additional information**

For a small sample of opinions on what needs to change, check out David Kelly’s blog on [breaking up with training](http://www.davidkelly.com/breaking-up-with-training/), Clark Quinn’s thoughts about [revolutionizing L&D](http://www.clarkquinn.com/), Mal Poulin’s article on [building a learning ecosystem](http://www.malpoulin.com/articles/), or Jane Hart’s perspective on defining [new roles in L&D](http://www.janehart.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=122&Itemid=57).

Also, for more on personal learning environments, see [Harold Jarche’s PKM resource page](http://www.pkmpedia.com/); for more on communities of practice, browse the [Wenger-Trayner web site](http://www.wenger-trayner.com/). For more on learning environment design, see [here](http://www.wenger-trayner.com/).

Dr. Lombardozzi will teach a Guild Academy course, Advanced Blended Learning: Learning Environments by Design (Pilot), in six weekly two-hour live sessions from April 17 to May 22! To learn more or to register, visit [http://www.elearningguild.com/content.cfm?selection=doc.3239](http://www.elearningguild.com/content.cfm?selection=doc.3239).

**References**