

The Learning Mixer

Jay Cross



The front page of a recent issue of The New York Times displayed a heart-wrenching photograph of two polar bears stranded on tiny chunks of glacial ice floating in the Bering Sea. The accompanying headline reported, "Science Panel Calls Global Warming 'Unequivocal.'"

Yet, many of our leaders and scientists continue to demure. They need more proof and say, "Why not put things off until next year?"

Informal learning can be as controversial as global warming. Recently, I shared my thoughts on informal, networked learning with 100 learning professionals.

One attendee wrote, "Too bad this bad experience is how I ended this great conference. Your session was too scattered for me." Another, however, said, "Bravo. Every speaker here has talked about how we need to change the way we teach, but no one had a plan. Now I have the blueprint. Thank you."

The naysayers tell us, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." They complain their bosses would never buy informal learning. They think change is incremental, and we can wait for the day when there's overwhelming proof informal learning works. "Business as usual" rules the day.

The boosters say network effects spark exponential results. Traditional design and training models are vestiges of the Industrial Era that have grown ineffective and obsolete. "All of us are smarter than any of us," they say, as they implore everyone to begin changing this very afternoon.

How can learning professionals' opinions on informal learning be divided and cocksure? I attribute it to taking an all-or-nothing attitude about an area rife with shades of gray.

Informal learning and formal learning are aspects of an overall spectrum of learning as a whole. Imagine an audio mixer in a recording studio, one of those units with dozens of sliders that enable you to boost the vocals, downplay the guitar, etc.

Our "learning mixer" has sliders for characteristics such as content, delivery, duration, authorship and development time. You don't

achieve the best mix by moving all of the sliders to the top or to the bottom.

The "delivery slider" moves from courses and push (formal) to conversations and pull (informal). Duration goes from hours (formal) to minutes (informal). Subject matter ranges from curriculum (what the organization says — formal) to discovery (what the individual needs — informal) Timing goes from outside of work to during work. Development time ranges from months (events — formal) to minutes (connections — informal).

Learning professionals who favor using formal learning exclusively (or informal learning exclusively) are denying themselves the opportunity to mix the ideal combination for the situation.

After the conference presentation mentioned earlier, I decided to eat my own dog food (although I prefer to think of it as "drinking my own champagne").

I realized I hadn't set the sliders quite right for the "unworkshops" we've been conducting on learning Web 2.0. The objective was for participants to adopt a new self-image as Web learning professionals. Workshops are not the road to redefining how people see themselves. That requires community.

As I write this, I am moving my sliders to create a learning community. One slider is moving from fee to free. Another is moving from proprietary information to putting our content in the public domain. And another will be serving members rather than participants. The resulting melody is a community of practice for learning professions.

In the words of Tom Stewart, communities of practice are the shop floor of intellectual capital, the place where stuff gets made. The major raw materials are conversations, so I'm setting up a clubhouse, not a classroom.

I recommend every CLO push the sliders on the "learning mixer."

Of course, I also recommend you stop driving a gas guzzler and don't even think of going outside without wearing sunscreen — you don't want to end up like the polar bears. ■

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