

Integrating The Bigger Picture Of Learning

Workplaces are becoming increasingly ambiguous and unique

 By Clark Quinn



The role Learning & Development (L&D) can play in the organization is changing. There are great opportunities to assist in success than just offering courses. The time is now for L&D to step up and become an ever-more valuable contributor.

The nature of work is changing. As things move faster, the ability to execute against known factors is dropping in importance. The situations being seen in the workplace are increasingly ambiguous, unique, and changing. What's needed is an ability to adapt quickly, to innovate continually. This doesn't come from courses alone.

There are new developments on several fronts in how we think, work, and learn. Our understanding of our own cognition has advanced, but unfortunately we are not seeing this reflected in workplace practices with sufficiency. We need to account for these new realizations in our approaches.

It used to be the model that all our thinking was done in the head. We provided lots of knowledge and tested with 'closed books'. What's now recognized by science, however, is that our cognition is distributed across our artifacts and representations as well as in our head. Our thinking isn't as formally logical as we'd like to believe, and external supports – checklists, lookup tables, wizards, etc. – are valuable complements in ensuring our outcomes excel.

We've also recognized that creativity is not an independent activity. Innovation comes from creative friction, people working together with complementary skills. When properly facilitated, the room (as the saying goes) is smarter than the smartest person in the room. Creating ways for people to work together is a new imperative.

Finally, our learning isn't best facilitated by content dump and knowledge test. It's hard to get rote and arbitrary information into

our heads, and we're better suited for decisions than remembering. We should use the supports identified above to support remembering, and save our learning for better decisions. However, doing so implies a different form of pedagogy: meaningful and sufficient practice. There is nothing inherently wrong with courses, but they need to be focused on [business](#) outcomes and provided with sufficient opportunity to develop the ability. Practice until they get it right won't get it done; you need to practice until they can't get it wrong.

Further, we need to look at the bigger picture of learning. Models such as the 70:20:10 Framework as touted by Charles Jennings or Jane Hart's Modern Workplace Learning help us understand that learning doesn't stop at the end of the course. Learners can and will continue to develop with mentoring and coaching, and by taking on challenging assignments. This is particularly true for the more complex decisions that we are increasingly seeing, and we should not only acknowledge this, but also design with it in mind and support the process.

What do these realizations imply for the future of work? It suggests that courses need to change the focus, and we need to supplement courses with a variety of other resources. Our perspective has to shift to one of facilitating organizational outcomes, and that learning also includes research, problem-solving, design, and more. Our tools will include performance support and social media.

Our processes need to change as well. We have to start looking at performance consulting before we start designing courses. We need to ask what the core gap in performance is, and then whether it's a knowledge, skill, or motivation problem. If it's not a skill problem, we need other [solutions](#) than courses. If we do this, however, we're now focusing on delivering a bigger solution to the organizational performance problem than just one component.

To complement the focus on performance, we also should consider how we develop the ability of the organization to learn beyond and *outside* of courses.

To support coaching and mentoring we need to ensure we have good practices and good tools. We also need meaningful work.

In addition, when we innovate, trouble-shoot, create, we don't know the answer when we start, so that too is a form of learning. Here we need to facilitate people working well *together*, as well as learning on their own. These should not be assumed, but developed, and here too is a role for assessment and courses.

With this perspective, we see courses as a rich component of a full suite of support for organizational learning. Formal learning provides not only the optimal execution for what is done by the individual, but serves as a channel for developing learning and social working skills. Moreover, as courses begin to expand to a wider definition, incorporating "micro-learning" or small content chunks that can include 'how-to' videos and troubleshooting guides, these too need to be hosted and tracked. The goal is to have resources that go beyond 'just in case' to include the 'just in time' needs that are increasingly seen.

This can seem like an expanding role, and a consequent bandwidth challenge for already strapped resources. Increasingly, organizations are finding two strategies help mitigate this problem. One includes being more opportunistic, and the other includes being more focused.

Too often, it's easy (particularly under the sway of the Subject Matter Expert or SME) to want to offer everything potentially relevant. However, when you've got motivated workers focused on achieving outcomes, they really don't want *everything*, and they'd prefer just the minimum necessary. A useful approach is the Least Assistance Principle,

where the realization is that "what's the least I can do for you" isn't a rude response. Giving folks just enough to get back to performing is desirable for your resources and the audience. This is a good principle in the design of solutions whether mobile or coursework, and also supports using other approaches such as performance support instead of creating a full course. A mantra is 'resources before courses'.

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An associated mantra is 'curation over creation'. Increasingly, materials can be found that meet an organizational need, and when so, they should be used. In fact, a reasonable policy is not to create anything that isn't proprietary; for general business needs a 'buy not build' approach should be chosen. An alternative to 'a course for everything' is to have a course on how to learn from resources, and then pointers to books or outside courses rather than investing development resources internally.

With policies like these, the organization can become more efficient and effective, while also becoming a more strategic contributor to the organization. The opportunity exists for L&D to 'go big'. L&D can begin to grow to include a much more flexible definition of course, and perform against a richer in facilitating organizational success.

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Clark Quinn, Ph.D., helps Fortune 500, government, not-for-profit, and educational organizations align technology with how we think, work, and learn. He integrates creativity, cognitive science, and technology to develop award-winning online content, educational computer games, and websites, as well as adaptive, mobile, and performance support systems. After an academic career, Quinn has served as an executive in online and elearning initiatives and has an international reputation as a speaker and scholar, with four books and numerous articles and chapters.

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