


# Remember the Learner!

## *Fundamental rules of learning when introducing new learning technologies*

 By Sally-Ann Moore



### **The Hammer and the Nail**

As the founder and director of a leading eLearning event, I have the chance to discover and appreciate all the marvelous new tools and technologies in our industry.

Mobile Learning, serious games, social learning and collaboration applications all show great promise for learning. But sometimes I worry that the technology distracts us from the prime purpose and that we may be putting the cart before the horse.

Looking at eLearning projects around the world in 2013, sometimes it seems that there is a misplaced focus on how we can use the latest technology for learning, rather than how we solve learning-related business problems. That is to say “When the only thing you have in your hand is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail”!

#### **Back to basics**

Although new technologies offer exciting approaches to help introduce, reinforce, or continue learning experiences, they haven’t changed the way we fundamentally learn. As we design courses with the latest tools and technologies, we should keep proven learning

models in mind.

Sam Herring, author of “Moving Toward 2020: The Learning Decade” recently wrote (in an article published by the ASTD) some key points to keep in mind when creating learning solutions today.

They are: Design, Application and Reinforcement and I have transcribed some key thoughts on these three fundamentals below.

#### **Design**

During 2012 and 2013 we have seen an increasing number of research reports, books and conferences about cognitive science and the neuroscience of learning. We know so much more about how learning takes place and we should be using this new knowledge when designing learning solutions with new technologies.

John Medina, in his book “Brain Rules”, says that from a cognitive point of view, (our much-vaunted) “multi-tasking” is ineffective for learners.

Medina shows that it takes “down time” for our brains to stop focusing on one task in order to switch attention to another-so much so, that the time it takes to change focus from one task, subject, or

## » Remember the Learner!

software application markedly compromises our ability to get anything done at all.

Ouch! How much multi-tasking is designed into mobile and social learning programs? Our job as learning professionals is to make sure course design is improved so that learners are fully engaged and only doing one thing.

If the application is for performance support, which by design functions at the learner's workplace during real work activities, this implies that we have to make the content totally relevant and sharp, and that we have to organize into "micro-learning" objects.

It also implies that learners are able to direct their own learning path according to their specific and instantaneous needs, not a prescribed path set by someone who might not be familiar with their real work activity and the needs generated by it on the spot.

### Application

In his book, "A Whole New Mind" Daniel Pink points out the synthesis between learning and performance, calling today's leaders "creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers." These leaders can synthesize ideas from differing fields, tossing away rote book learning in favor of the kind of creative thinking that disrupts and innovates.

Learning solutions that complement this leadership style allow star performers to become tomorrow's CEOs. As learning professionals, we should be anticipating that today's learners are the leaders of the future, and engaging them with experiences that will help them grow and respect their talents.

Regarding application, our learning solutions should respect learners by assuming that they bring their full experience, intelligence, and history to the learning experience. So, we ought to set high expectations for learners, and challenge them to combine new learning's with their prior experience.

What does this look like in practice? For example, in many large organizations, new managers being promoted take a "management fundamentals" class during their first few months on the job to learn relevant management skills (for example, giving feedback to their team members), and practice those skills in a workshop environment through role-plays.

Now, when they leave the workshop, they can apply newly learned skills through an online environment with manager resources; a peer network; and a friendly competition between peers to encourage collaboration among colleagues, practices newly acquired skills, and maintain engagement.

Their instructor can also set up a challenge so that they must execute to sharpen & practice their skills-and along the way, compete with their peers and earn points. A new manager challenge might consist of preparing to give feedback to a team member, having that conversation, reflecting on it and debriefing with a coach or manager to uncover critical lessons learned and areas for growth. The online environment can track the new managers' progress and awards them points for each of these specific activities and for completing the entire activity, thereby fulfilling the challenge. This approach represents an excellent way of blending not only virtual and real world environments, but also learning and real work settings.

### Reinforcement

Reinforcing newly acquired skills is a third key pillar of compelling learning design, and one where new learning technologies show particular promise. There are many examples where technologies can drive reinforcement and help learners incorporate what they have learned into their daily work: assessments, peer and mentor feedback,

self-reflection exercises, simulations, and more. One really powerful reinforcement method, as old as the hills, but benefiting from new technology is the checklist.

In his book "The Checklist Manifesto" surgeon Atul Gawande makes a strong case for using checklists to break down difficult tasks into component parts to ensure uniform processes across large, complex systems. His book has inspired a checklist-based performance improvement measures within North American hospitals by demonstrating the incredible impact of codifying and following best practices. Of course, there are many applications for critical checklists outside of healthcare: All airlines that operate in the United States are required by the Federal Aviation Administration to certify specific hands-on skills of employees on an annual basis. For example, employees who administer jet-loading bridges must demonstrate, through a hands-on assessment, their ability to effectively complete a series of tasks related to the operation of the bridge for a variety of airplane types. Using a mobile checklist tool, an instructor can ask the employee to perform precise tasks, and score their abilities accordingly.

Although the assessment is valuable from a compliance perspective by automating a manual task and thereby creating an audit record, it also can deliver a valuable learning experience by reinforcing skills gaps uncovered through the assessment. By automatically prescribing the employee remediating learning content, he is able to sharpen his skills, improve, and prepare for the next assessment.

So what is the key takeaway from this exploration of how to successfully integrate technology-based learning with real-world work experiences?

It's simple: Technology has changed markedly in recent years and will continue to evolve rapidly, but the way we learn hasn't fundamentally changed. Thus, it's important for us to remember to keep solid instructional design principles up front when it comes to designing new age learning solutions with the latest and greatest technologies.

### Summary:

Design technology-enabled learning environments that engage the learner with content and experiences that are deeply relevant to their needs, can be easily accessed within their everyday work routines, and hold their interest.

Provide opportunities to integrate learning and real-life practice and application of new skills through creative approaches that help motivate and engage learners such as quests.

Reinforce new skills through one of many approaches to support continuous learning such as a checklist that can be used for both assessment and performance support.

By keeping these concepts in mind when designing new learning solutions, you can create inspiring solutions that get the most out of what new technologies have to offer—all with an eye toward improving performance. **TEL**



**Sally-Ann Moore** is the Managing Director and founder of a worldwide series of conferences and exhibitions dedicated to e-learning, iLearn Forum Ltd. She has a long career in consulting and today specializes in eLearning, Competence Management and Performance Management. Visit - [www.ilearningforum.org/en](http://www.ilearningforum.org/en) Twitter [@Samoorethomson](https://twitter.com/Samoorethomson)