



L&D's FUTURE MAY BE LESS WHIZZ-BANG THAN YOU'D LIKE

Last month Mark Tew took a quizzical look at the past 15 years of L&D achievement. This month sees Mark gazing into his crystal ball towards the next 15 years.

Artificial intelligence... Agents...
Speech and handwriting
recognition... Virtual reality and
3D visualisation... Smart cards...
Real-time collaboration... Enhanced user
authentication... Data Mining... Knowledge
Management...

Apologies for the list of brain-expanding topics, but the above is simply what respected IT analysts, Gartner Group, defines as 'advanced technology'

<http://www.gartner.com/it-glossary/advanced-technology> that is half-way out of the lab but which isn't yet prime-time ready. Or to use its formulation, technologies that are 'still immature' but which 'promise to deliver significant value'. Or ones that have some technical maturity but as yet relatively few actual users.

You can see what Gartner means: AI is definitely here (indeed, it's come back; remember the Expert Systems craze of the

1980s) but hasn't really transformed data processing the way it was supposed to. We have smart cards, but we haven't really moved all the way to using them as wallets yet. Data Mining? We've simply re-labelled it 'Big Data,' though the idea of using powerful computers to spot patterns in otherwise meaningless-looking mounds of data remains as tantalising as it was when you first heard about it (in my case, the 1990s, at a conference where an

astrophysicist talked about using it to spot new stars).

The fact that a lot of these genuinely interesting, promising ideas have been around for a while without really taking off shouldn't be an excuse for cynicism.

Progress is hard. A lot of computing problems are really tough – serious people thought we'd have 2001-level HAL 9000 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HAL_9000 super robots by the end of the last century, and great as Big Blue's Watson <http://www.ibm.com/smarterplanet/us/en/ibmwatson/> is, it isn't quite that yet, is it?

Some, if not all, of these trends as listed by the smart guys and gals at Gartner will eventually happen one way or another. Back to AI for a second; you may not have a super-duper Expert System on your mainframe to help your company manufacture better, but your kid plays video games with plenty of AI in them, to use just one example.

I could have chosen wackier ideas to illustrate the idea of 'the next 15 years'. Using Gartner again, you may be familiar with that organisation's famous Hype Cycle <http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2819918>, which features as very much 'out there' technologies such as bio-acoustic sensing, quantum computing, human augmentation and brain-computing direct interfaces, all of which are so far off ('ten years or more') that they are still basically in the realm of science fiction. "Open the L&D portal bays, HAL."

So, when we look to the future in IT, as much as in business, we often try and do so by taking familiar ideas (smarter, HAL-type computers) and push them a bit further than they might actually end up. By the same token, ideas that were wacky for years can suddenly become today's biggest hit.

Personally, I haven't the foggiest what a bio-acoustic sensor is, but then maybe it's the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) of the future. People had droned on about PDAs for years until one day Steve Jobs gave us one we all loved – the iPhone.

Or to sum it all up with one of my favourite quotes of all time, from famous quantum physicist Niels Bohr http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Niels_Bohr: "Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future."

OK then, I hear you ask, what do you think the next 15 years of learning and development tech might bring us? By the logic of my argument so far, you may not be massively surprised to hear that I think it's going to be a mixture of two

phenomena. Firstly, tech that doesn't ever really happen but which we'll keep on obsessing about. And secondly, things that will just come out of left field and shake the whole landscape.

I wish I could be more helpful – I am still a bit miffed because I don't get to jetpack to work, or live on a Lunar Base like the TV told me I would when I was a kid. But that's the reality of our market, amazing and fantastic as it is. Like I said, computing problems are often very tough, and progress to really, really deliver a step-change is often hard.

To crystallise all this into a discussion about collaborative learning, this is one of those seductive Gartner-style 'advanced technologies' that's just on the horizon, but which I am still pretty skeptical about, if truth be told.

Perhaps I am wrong to be skeptical. Many smarter people are convinced collaboration is the Next Big Thing. In this interesting set of predictions for the future of learning from a couple of years back Trends that will re-shape the training industry <https://www.trainingindustry.com/article/s/10-predictions-for-2011.aspx> we are confidently told that 'Learning technologies are becoming social, collaborative, and virtual... The future of learning technologies

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[will be] learning portals [that will] elegantly integrate social and collaborative tools for access to knowledge... [expect] virtual worlds of intelligence, where learners get information that is not organised or delivered as an event.'

To which, I'm afraid, I say: "Hmm".

DO TWO TRENDS A MARKET MAKE?

Yes, V1 is aware of this trend and we are developing the means to have a group or cohort talking to each other within our VL LTM learning environment <http://www.wearev1.com/learning-training-management/>. And yes, we do see that, as it stands, the sort of professional or work-based learning most people do is very



personalised. People attend a bit of learning, whether it is classroom or otherwise, but it is oriented really only at them.

They engage with it, they learn from it, they apply it, but that tends to be in isolation, either in their organisation or in their industry or profession. On paper, yes I see that could be extended and that they may have benefit in sharing that experience. Hence the call for more collaborative, forum-based learning styles.

But you know what? I'm not sure about this. There is a level of "We need to be doing this because everybody else is doing this" thinking going on in the market, but where is the *value*? How, specifically and on the ground, could collaborative/forum based training help most of us?

I am happy to acknowledge that in certain learning environments, blue sky thinking learning and sharing of experiences makes eminent sense (e.g., a bunch of neurosurgeons bouncing great ideas about the latest scientific paper or amazing new surgical technique). Indeed, I'd love what Lord Saatchi is pushing for in terms of breaking down some of the artificial barriers that might inhibit real innovation

in cancer research

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/saatchi-bill/10929131/Leading-doctors-join-with-cancer-patients-to-back-Lord-Saatchis-Medical-Innovation-Bill.html>, where the key to success may well lie in some form of inter-disciplinary cross-fertilisation. Shared professional knowledge wrapped up in a learning process. That is to say "I am sharing this because I think you should know about it" or "I am contributing to a topic because I have got first-hand experience of that particular area and it forms or should form part of that learning process." *That* has value.

Now tell me how learning about Health and Safety or the new EU compliance rules benefits from collaborating.

JETPACK ON ORDER!

Which is not to say we don't need to look at collaboration and I am coming into this discussion off conversations where our developers are doing just that. So, rather than having a course to attend, maybe you could join an online forum-type environment which might force participants to think about how they are going to improve themselves, share real

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best practice about improving their processes, and share that with the rest of the team across the world. It might be a brilliant, intuitive way of developing that thinking and provide some real practical learning.

The jury is still out on that. We need to be honest about the seductive power of ideas like collaboration, or another interesting related ones like MOOCs http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course. They sound wonderful, there's a lot of buzz and hype around them but to quote Gartner, one last time, are they not technologies that are still immature but which promise to deliver significant value' and may even have some technical maturity – but as yet relatively few actual users?

The future of L&D may well lie in new styles of working, such as collaborative or

online communal experiences – but I'd hesitate to throw any babies out with any bathwater quite yet and commit to radical new ways of delivering training that is so far away from where we are today.

But, you know what? I may be wrong. Maybe I'll still get a jetpack...

To read Part One of Mark's overview visit [Look how far we've really come](http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/a02cd238#/a02cd238/126) <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/a02cd238#/a02cd238/126>

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