The Times They Are A-Changin' (Feb 07)

As Bob Dylan once said – The Times They Are A-Changin', and this is just as true in the realm of training, development and education as it is in any other forum of society today.

If you follow the comment within our newsletter, you probably realise that at Just Learn we have some concerns about the sustainability of the market models currently used within e-learning. We do see the technology as providing opportunities to revolutionise the way we do training, development and education, but far too often we see negativity shown towards these opportunities, and hostility to changing the way training, development and education are delivered. Sure, there are examples of the technology in use, but this is tinkering at the edges.

In our view, traditional education and training delivery was developed for an era of mass production. But society and expectations have changed, and the traditional methods now focus on the wrong people. It is now the learners who should be the focus of attention and not the gatekeepers of knowledge.

In the last few weeks, we have had another high profile message delivered about the inertia in the training, development and education market, as Reed Publishing have said they are to sell their Harcourt Education division. The basic excuse being that progress in moving to the digital era in this division is too slow when compared to the other sectors they serve. This follows a similar excuse for Thomson selling their NETg division to Skillsoft.

At Just Learn, we sometimes feel we are hitting our heads against a wall in our effort to get this message out, so perhaps a different approach is needed. Perhaps we should be looking for something that will change the industry from within, instead of looking to the market to encourage change. Perhaps if we had an instructional model that focused on the learner and not the mass production of "learning", then the "marketing" will naturally fall into place.

For the past few generations; training, development and education has focused on formal learning which takes place in centres of education. Whilst the formal education process will always exist, an ever increasing amount of today's learning now comes from less formal technology based processes - communities of practice, personal networks, Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, games environments, and so on.

So the question is: Are the instructional theories used for mass producing training, development and education within a traditional environment still relevant in an on-line and connected environment, where mass communication and knowledge generation is "always on"?

George Siemens is one person who thinks that it's time for a re-think, so he has put forward an alternative theory – Connectivism. The momentum behind this theory took a major step forward recently as e-learning practitioners and professionals from around the world came together for a conference and debate. And, as an example of best practice in action, this event took place wholly on-line, and at no cost.

You had the usual conference regulars such as key note speakers, but we also had a dedicated virtual environment within Moodle which allowed us to follow-up on the speeches, as well as discuss topics relevant to participants.

George describes connectivism as "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories." Which really means that "Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is

vital. The ability to recognize when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical"

The theory of connectivism has now overtaken George Siemens and is beginning to grow and evolve as the community takes it over (a little bit like learning in the real world). As the theory has evolved, so several principles have been established, these include:

- Thinking and emotions influence each other. A theory of learning that only considers one dimension excludes a large part of how learning happens.
- Learning has an end goal - namely the increased ability to "do something". This increased competence might be in a practical sense or in the ability to function more effectively in a knowledge era.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources. A learner can exponentially improve their own learning by plugging into an existing network.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances. Learning (in the sense that something is known, but not necessarily actuated) can rest in a community, a network, or a database.
- The capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known. Knowing where to find information is more important than knowing information.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate learning. Connection making provides far greater returns on effort than simply seeking to understand a single concept.
- Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions.
- Learning happens in many different ways. Courses, email, communities, conversations, web search, email lists, reading blogs, etc. Courses are not the primary conduit for learning.
- Different approaches and personal skills are needed to learn effectively in today's society. For example, the ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning.
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate impacting the decision.
- Learning is a knowledge creation process...not only knowledge consumption. Learning tools and design methodologies should seek to capitalize on this trait of learning.

How people work and function is altered as the technology is used, but the field of education has been slow to recognise this, just as they have been slow to recognise the impact the tools are having on learning. So Connectivism is an attempt to provide insight into learning skills and the tasks the learner needs to flourish in the digital era.

If it becomes widely accepted, the theory will have radical implications for training, development and education departments. Learning new skills and knowledge is only part of what needs to be done, a far greater emphasis on developing techniques for learning and for developing networks of potential knowledge will be required as the speed which new knowledge is created and required increases.

The success of the conference should send a message to those who, so far, have seen limited value in using technology within the training, development and educational environment. The continued growth in the popularity of networked communications as well as delivery mediums such as wikipedia, YouTube and podcasts and the upcoming opportunities presented by games platforms (such as Second Life) all point to changing times for training, development and education, and as Bob told us, "Don't stand in the doorway, Don't block up the hall ... For the times they are a-changin'. "