

Learning in the Cloud

A forecast for the future of learning includes microlearning and learner-created learning paths. **By Darren Nerland**

Upon meeting new people at conferences or meetings, I often request, “Name something you learned in the last two weeks,” followed by the more compelling question: “How did you learn it?” Inevitably, they answer in one of two ways: through one-on-one coaching or an online resource.

Learning isn’t happening in classrooms, and collaboration has left the building. The action is online and “in the cloud.” Through our mobile devices, we have constant connection to our e-mail, intranets, the Internet, and other great resources for learning. Consequently, it’s now commonplace to hear someone say, “Hmm. I don’t know. One second, I’ll just Google it.”

How does the power of unlimited information at your fingertips affect the future of learning? To answer this question, we need to leverage ideas from other industries in the learning forefront and draw on technologies that support virtual learning. Look at the K-12 and higher education spaces. They now are outpacing the business sector with innovative strategies such as informal learning and microlearning.

Bite-Size Learning

Microlearning improves learning outcomes by providing relatively small learning units and short-term learning activities over time. Typically, this learning takes places in small vignettes that employ

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resources such as short videos, job aids, and podcasts. Learners move at their own pace, receive information when they need it, and access it at a moment’s notice.

Deloitte recently estimated that digital skills have a half-life of just 2.5 years for any given role. Given the short life expectancy for today’s technical training, a modular and bite-size learning approach is far more sustainable than traditional—often “huge”—linear curricula.

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Building Learning Pathways

Another promising idea from the education sector is self-created learning paths, which enable learners to choose their route through a range of learning activities. When learners progressively build their knowledge and program, the role of activity sequencing, and to some extent, selection, moves from instructor to learner.

As it turns out, many learners already do a portion of this on their own: They research and find information that is important to them, and learn on the job and in informal ways. What if we could help them along that path? What if we could better curate content for our

audiences, rather than build and prescribe training?

With newer learning management systems (LMSs) and the new xAPI standard, we now have ways of tracking learning inside and outside our organizations. That makes it incumbent upon us, the Learning professionals, to harness that information to help learners build those pathways. We can do this by curating content based on needs and desires and what people want and demand.

According to EMC2, like the physical universe, the digital universe is large—by 2020, it will contain nearly as many digital bits as there are stars in the universe. It is doubling in size every two years, and by 2020, the digital universe—the data we create and copy annually—will reach 44 zettabytes, or 44 trillion gigabytes.

With this quantity of available information, the role of trainer as subject matter expert is becoming irrelevant in some industries. Instead, Learning professionals should focus on becoming stellar curators of content and architects of better online learning ecologies that support searching for and surfacing the right learning content for the learner. **■**

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