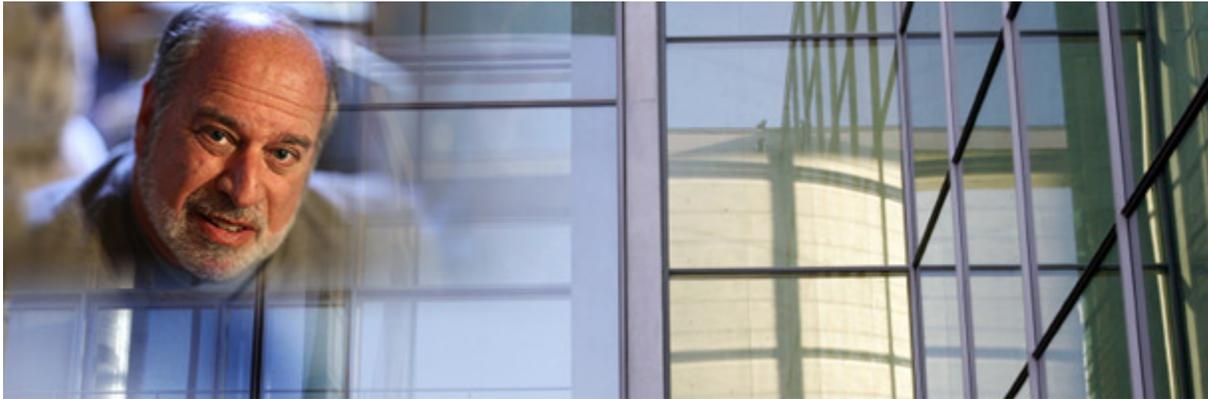# fLearning (Jan 15)

by Marc Rosenberg

January 13, 2015

"New learning strategies are not going away; in fact, they're sure to grow. But sometimes, if we're smart about it, the old ways may still be the best ways. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of formal classroom training are greatly exaggerated. Formal training is changing, and being used more carefully and strategically, but it isn't dead by a long shot."

First eLearning, then mLearning, and now fLearning, or, more precisely, "f-training." But it's not what you think (shame on you!).

I'm referring to *formal training,* particularly formal *classroom* training. With all the enthusiasm for learning technology, as well as informal, collaborative, and social learning, it's a good idea, I think, to start the New Year re-looking at a strategy some of us disparage, but all of us should value.

Formal classroom training has been with us forever. Sure, we all get what it is—or should be: a structured, instructionally sound program, delivered by experts who are both solid SMEs and great teachers who can do it all—present content, evaluate learner performance, facilitate group work, and more. We try our best to create formal training that is efficient, effective, and engaging, and we use a variety of instructional design tactics and technologies to make it work.

Why formal classroom training is still important

There's been somewhat of a backlash against formal classroom training for a while now. To those who want to close all the classrooms and move everything online or to the workplace … be careful. We estimate about 90 percent of learning derives from a variety of informal solutions (about 70 percent through workplace-based tools and experiences, and 20% through expert guidance via coaching and mentoring, give or take). That leaves just ten percent of learning from formal solutions, predominately formal training (and most of that is in the classroom). So, if people only learn about ten percent of what they need in the classroom, why not just get rid of it?

The reason: think of the three strategies—workplace tools and experiences, expert guidance, and formal training—as a three-legged stool. Disrupt or remove any one leg, including formal training, and it all collapses. We need formal training as much as we need the other 90 percent.

Formal classroom training's value is often overlooked or minimized because of its high cost (personnel, facilities, travel, time off the job), difficulty to scale, or because of a perceived low "cool factor." Its value

has too often been diminished by inappropriate application and overuse. Nevertheless, when done for the *right* reasons, for the *right* people, and at the *right* time, it can be the *right* thing to do.

When formal classroom training may be "just right"

You might be tempted to move all formal training out of classrooms and into eLearning. A lot can be moved, but not all. Some situations demand a more traditional approach. Formal classroom training is expensive and time consuming, so if you are going to use it, do so where it does the most good. Here are four suggestions to consider (you can probably think of more):

1. *Training novice learners.* In the [path to proficiency](#), novice is the starting point. Novices have little experience and lack the basic skills and knowledge to perform to any acceptable standard. Good formal training—including classroom training—can work here. Most novices have similar learning needs, and because of their newness, can have difficulty learning on their own. This necessitates more formalized and structured training strategies. And, real-time guidance and evaluation by qualified instructors can be very supportive in the early stages of learning something new, and in getting them ready to learn more on their own down the road.
2. *When the consequences of failure are extremely high.* Formal training, combined with extensive and realistic practice, can contribute to higher levels of learning in the most critical or risky jobs. Medicine, nuclear safety, military combat, and similar fields focus on training through intensive, structured training, including simulations and follow-on guided real-world experience, as well as stringent performance evaluations under the watchful eye of an SME/instructor. Expensive? Yes. Worth the investment? Probably so.
3. *When there is no history or standard operating procedure.* There are times content is so new, so unstable, and so evolving that only a few people have the expertise to talk knowledgeably about it, and what they teach must be adjusted constantly. As the content becomes more stable, it may be transferable to other types of training—like eLearning; to a broader array of expert solutions— like coaches and mentors; and ultimately to more informal workplace solutions—like community collaboration, knowledge management, and performance support.
4. *When the culture is a big deal.* Sometimes, it's the place, or the experience that matters as much as the content. Immersion in the mission, history, culture, and environment of an organization may be important enough to bring people physically together. In addition, you may find that occasional, well-chosen classroom experiences help build a sense of team and shared purpose.

Of course formal classroom training doesn't stand alone. You may have a variety of informal activities built into, or following the course and the overall curriculum. Also, putting some of it online in a virtual classroom may work, as well as save money and time. One size rarely fits all, especially in L&D, but positioning quality formal classroom training where it's most appropriate and useful can benefit your entire learning strategy.

When formal classroom training may be "not-so-right"

We don't always use formal classroom training wisely. When reviewing your formal training efforts, you might benefit from weeding out situations where other approaches—including eLearning and, ultimately, much more informal approaches—would be more efficient. As workers become more competent and experienced, they can take more control of their own learning. And while they may come back for a formal class from time-to-time, this would no longer be the dominant approach.

You should also weed out situations where a learning solution—formal or informal—of *any kind* is not appropriate. If your solution is compensating for bad documentation, ineffective work practices, or poorly designed tools, try fixing what's broken instead of developing training or other "workarounds." If you discover L&D is "carrying the water" for bad management, get better managers and management practices on board instead.

New learning strategies are not going away; in fact, they're sure to grow. But sometimes, if we're smart about it, the old ways may still be the best ways. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of formal classroom training are greatly exaggerated. Formal training is changing, and being used more carefully and strategically, but it isn't dead by a long shot.