

Are the ways in which Learning & Development deliver learning in the modern workplace fit for purpose?

At our recent roundtable event, members of the Virtual College team and 20 external L&D professionals got together to debate and delve deep into what the landscape of modern workplaces now looks like and what impact this is having on the Learning & Development profession. Read on to find out more...

After breaking the attendees down into two groups, each group debated a number of questions linked to the changes in delivering L&D and, unsurprisingly, there were many similarities between the two conversations.

Has organised formal learning taken precedence over situational and informal styles?

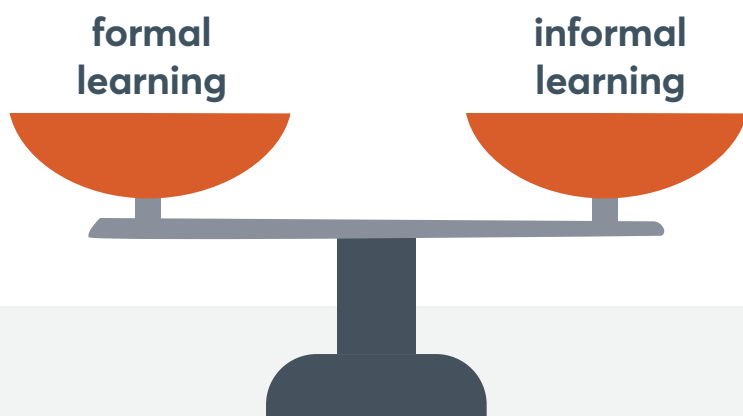
This was a hotly debated point, which overall saw participants stating that there is a need to question and challenge what learners' perspectives of learning really are. Learners think they prefer organised learning, and in a world where learning is so much more accessible, perhaps it's understandable that learners judge organised, formal learning as pre-prepared. But what they don't realise is that learning is continuous and is happening all the time through our experiences, in everyday situations, and even while chatting with colleagues. Yet the only learning they see as 'official' is that which is done formally.

Aside from this, the perspective of what 'formal' learning is can differ between the learner and the organisation. For example, there is always an element of formal learning when the company tries to control how people learn. Learners will also feel there is an element of formality to their learning if they are asked to learn something new, which they have not requested themselves.

"There is always a level of formality when it comes to learning. In our company they control what people learn but class it as 'informal' learning once it's delivered via our LMS."

"Surely we can merge the two? Have organised formal learning events, but provide online forums and discussion areas to enable continued learning."

"We try and blend the two. As a company we set the agenda around what needs to be learnt, but the learning itself is often led by the learner."



Does this therefore mean that the 'formal' side of learning is viewed as the creation of the learning, packaging up the solution into a means to deliver it, and the 'informality' comes from the fact that learners have the ability to access this learning at a time and place that suits them? Perhaps there is no 'one size fits all' solution and, instead, there needs to be that blend of both formal and informal learning for it to work for both organisation and learner?

The democratisation of learning (personal and professional) is underway. All we need in order to access a world repository of knowledge is a click of a button on the internet. What experiences have you had of this type of learning?

This opened up the conversation to a big topic of the moment – curating content – where a common theme was the problem of vetting the content's quality and making sure it is both correct and able to provide the learner with the relevant information. To this end, a number of participants discussed trying to stop people from relying on search engines (which can bring up many different answers to the same question); however, it is evident that knowledge sharing is always happening and, if a company can see what people are liking and sharing, then they can actually use it to their advantage and take inspiration from it for training ideas.

The suggested solution was that L&D teams should now curate their own content. This will allow them to still use content that is recommended by learners, but also set up a process to check that it meets their requirements before it is put in the resource bank.

But with so much information available at the click of a button, it almost takes away from the fact that L&D teams were previously the fount of this knowledge, and many now feel that their role has now changed to facilitating this by using external resources, encouraging collaboration and providing a tool for learners to share their learning.

There is also a nervousness from senior teams about the use of such social learning, with concerns about the lack of control and whether people will be putting the wrong information out there, or information that doesn't tie in with the organisation's approach. However, it can't be denied that it creates an opportunity for these senior teams to get close to their learners, understand where the knowledge gaps are and create a training programme linked to both their and the organisation's needs.

Josh Bersin coined the expression 'learning in the flow of work' which coincides with the emergence of Microsoft Viva, a tool which will place both curated and learner-directed content on your computer's desktop – will this type of tool enhance or disrupt workplace learning?

There is a general feeling that hopefully this approach will complement rather than directly replace more traditional ways of learning. Some organisations are finding that their learners are using resources such as YouTube videos and guides, which they've found themselves, and then asking the question as to why these types of resources aren't made available in the office. This is inspiring L&D teams to consider new formats to include in their resource bank.

At this early stage, L&D teams need to be given the opportunity to fully understand the new functionality these solutions can provide and how they will integrate with existing technology currently in place.

'Learning in the flow of work' is a culture change for many, and something that companies need to master before rolling out to their learners. Many have found that time is a huge barrier to this, where learners, and in some cases the L&D professionals, have struggled with managing their time in this new remote working world. They are booking out their diaries back to back, not leaving any time in between to schedule their learning.



In circumstances where you had face-to-face learning, you would turn up early, maybe prepare some notes in advance. But as many organisations are still working virtually at home, people are not allowing themselves the time to prepare before a session like they would have done previously. If people are asked to prepare something for a training session, or asked to do a piece of e-learning, there is often a lack of urgency, and some learners don't even complete these.



The bottom line here is that platforms should enable learning, not restrict it, and currently there are mixed feelings around this. Many companies introduced virtual learning and sessions online for the first time, as different organisations have different appetites. When implementing this the first time, there's a risk of taking a 'sheep dipping' approach, and only through testing and learning will these resources improve. Early adopters of the learning in the flow of work approach are likely doing very well, as they've had chance to learn and adapt. Newly adopted companies aren't there yet and this will take time.

Another big topic area for discussion was **DATA!**

"We still don't use data well in Learning & Development."

As L&D are finding themselves in the early stages of new technologies, one expert was keen to point out that he feels teams are struggling to conduct useful evaluations due to the lack of baseline data to evaluate against. This can cause problems when L&D teams are trying to evidence the success of learning programmes to senior teams, as they try to gain further investment in the programme.

Does this show though that evaluations need to change? Do they need to reflect the learner behaviour change? If the business is going to trust this learner-led approach, they need to be able to effectively capture the success.

In this way then, evaluations probably need to be unique to the organisation as they need to reflect their aims and outcomes.

However, to counter this, another good point was raised suggesting that perhaps it isn't the lack of data that is the problem, but the lack of clear problem identification? Maybe a better understanding at this stage, and development of training to tackle these problems, would naturally ensure that the data evidenced the learnings and required behaviour change?

BUT ... should learning & development be a numbers game? Surely it should be less about a tick-box exercise and more about how this learning can create real change, solving real business problems.

In summary

To try and bring the session to some form of conclusion (although this was a topic people could have talked about all afternoon) Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant talked about theory regarding how self-learn (heutagogy) is the new way forward. Could this be the solution to modern day workplace learning?

As we move through the L&D cycle, it seems that we have gone from a traditional teacher-led learning phase (pedagogy) through to a mid-point where it was self-directed learning but under the facilitation of a teacher, into what is now learning determined by the individual.

However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have any structure whatsoever. As one participant quite rightly asked, **"but how do they know what they don't know?"**. Therefore, structure and organisational input is still needed to make sure learners get the skills they need to fill the gaps they are experiencing.

Culture needs to change. It's often the case that learners are given a 'menu' of learning and are able to pick what they want. If they aren't given a menu, they don't know what they want. But what if something's not on the menu? It doesn't mean it's not offered, you need to ask the waiter, so to speak! It should be less about pushing content, and more about problem solving, giving stakeholders the information to see the value of investment.

BUT we also need to think more about how we present the learning. Think more about how learners learn, and how we can best use technology to enable this learning. It isn't about using the fanciest things all the time, it's about deciding what is best for that piece of learning and for that individual learner.

We need to acknowledge the different ways people learn and the different scenarios in which they require learning. An e-learning course may work in one scenario, but in a scenario where they need to quickly pick up some tips or advice, a 30-minute course probably isn't best solution, but a video or PDF may be.

So can all forms of learning work together? Do they all still have a place in learning? Do L&D professionals need to assess what works for their learners and their organisations to create a tailored experience to suit the needs of both?

Josh Bersin, global research analyst and advisor, sums it up quite nicely. **"As I study technology markets over the decades, I've learned that the obstacles to growth are not always technical, they're in our own minds. We don't really use technology well until we change the way we think."**

