

Organizational Learning Strategy and eLearning

Situating the Current Popular eLearning Offering

When one decides to venture into the world of eLearning, he or she will quickly come across the following terms:

Learning object: a pre-defined parcel of learning that elaborates on a subject or a notion. It is usually developed with rich multimedia.

Learning Content Management System (LCMS): a system that enables the organization and sequencing of learning objects to follow a preset learning path.

Learning Management Systems (LMS): a system that manages individual learning paths and tracks the learner's participation and results. It usually interacts with an LCMS and many systems today integrate both.

These technologies are usually worked into a training oriented design where information is essentially pushed to the learner. A certain degree of computer programmed interactivity is planned with the objective of keeping the learner engaged. However, the overwhelming majority of learning objects, at best, transfer a small amount of procedural knowledge—how to do something—and are often limited to declarative knowledge—what is something.

This approach, if properly developed, can be useful when a content push is required such as in the case of introducing new information, demonstrating a step-by-step procedure or other similar processes, etc. But it doesn't even begin to address the need to develop situational, critical and creative thinking skills at an individual level. This approach cannot transfer contextual knowledge, causal knowledge or foster the development of transferable skills. In essence, it is an incomplete solution and we must push the eLearning offering further.

Organizational development experts began to really expand on the concept of a Learning Organisation in the early 1990s. Peter Senge, a leading expert defines learning organizations as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." (Senge 1990: 3)

The idea that was brought forward by many experts in this field was one of transformation through systems thinking primarily at three levels:

- **Aligning Objectives:** Building a shared vision by linking individual performance and objectives with organizational performance objectives.
- **Empowering Individuals:** Enabling individuals within an organisation to develop personal mastery and reach their goals by providing them with mental models and continuous learning opportunities as well as encouraging creative and critical thinking.
- **Cultivating Communities:** Promoting team learning, cultivating inquiry and dialogue, addressing differences and tensions and using them to stimulate innovation.

Now fifteen years later, the American Management Association reported in their 2005 Global Study of Leadership that "fostering creativity and innovation" was the fifth most highly ranked leadership competency today. They insisted that the leader must foster creativity and innovation, both by providing the opportunity to tackle big business issues and by creating a culture where risk-taking and decentralized decision-making are encouraged and rewarded. All too often, executives preach risk-taking and the encouragement of change, but practice control and adherence to established policies and practices." (AMA 2005: 61)

That said, in order to entrust employees with the mandate of being change agents, the manager needs evidence that employees have the requisite skills and competencies. The plan to develop these skills and competency needs to be embedded in the organization's learning strategy.

Dynamic eLearning Environments for the Learning Organization

eLearning expert Stephen Downes explains that today's Web user expects more than a content push. With the advent of social networks, online communities, blogs, wikis, podcasts and other types of conversational Web usage, online users are creating connections in a complex self-directed learning network. Many Learning Management Systems such as Moodle, in recognizing that a series of sequenced learning objects will not suffice, are strategically integrating these functionalities within their systems with the intention of fostering a socio-constructivist learning environment.

Downes, as well as many experts in the field, insist that eLearning must look at these current networking and information sharing practices and embed them into our eLearning strategies. "Learning is characterized not only by greater autonomy for the learner, but also a greater emphasis on active learning, with creation, communication and participation

playing key roles, and on changing roles for the teacher, indeed, even a collapse of the distinction between teacher and student altogether.” (Downes 2005)

By developing learning strategies that incorporate these social networking concepts, the potential for designing and developing learner-centered environments that foster reflective, creative and critical thinking is limitless.

If you’d like to hear more on how to design Dynamic eLearning environments, our Director of eLearning Kristina Schneider will be presenting a conference on this topic on September 29th 2006 at the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) Regional Conference “Perfecting Performance: best practices and lessons learned”.