

The Future of Individual and Organizational Learning

By Dr. William A. Guillory



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A decided shift is occurring in how we dominantly facilitate formal learning. I use the term formal to distinguish it from everyday experiential learning through human interaction. By learning, I mean the process of transforming information into knowledge. This process occurs by how we interact with and engage concepts which are not presently part of our working reality.

The most common, yet profound, concepts relating to performance, are the cognitive skills 100% responsibility and 100% accountability. In spite of the challenges associated with this way of thinking, at a fundamental level, we intuitively know that performance is in direct proportion to this predisposed mind-set. The reason I chose “100% responsibility and 100% accountability” as examples of cognitive learning, is because, in a not so obvious way, they are also in direct proportion to one’s personal integrity. Upon reflection, we can see that these concepts appear to permeate every part of our living experience. In any case, I define learning as an experiential process of acquiring the tools, skills, and mind-set to successfully navigate life, both personally and professionally. Success is, of course, defined by the individual and his or her environmental demands, such as job requirements and personal aspirations. The focus of this paper is on workplace learning.

The Rate of Events

In spite of the fact that time is a constant, the number of events we experience continues to increase. Thus, we experience a speeded up reality—more things to do in the same time frame. The result is greater anxiety, stress, and overwhelm; unless, we have the essential tools at our instant disposal, 24/7.

The tool is, of course, some form of information technology—a desktop or laptop computer, tablet, smartphone, and more recently a watch. These devices provide the information—not knowledge—we need to keep pace with the increasing number of events we encounter. For example, when shopping for college supplies with my daughter recently, we were trying to decide on a store. She whipped out her cell phone and informed me, that a very popular chain store was only five miles away. It also provided the directions to get there; both, forms of instant information acquisition.

Driving there was the process of acquiring the knowledge I could use anytime in the future. The point is we concluded our shopping in time for us to have a

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leisurely lunch. No phone books, no paper maps, and no telephoning the store for any information, which was probably an automated voice, anyway! In fact, she even scanned their inventory en route to the store. Again, the point is, as the rate of workplace events continue to increase, we will have little choice but to use information technology as an essential tool. In fact, most of us already do so, in one capacity or another, both at work and at home.

The area where we have not taken full advantage of IT is formal workplace learning. We still tend to have a dominant preference for live-facilitated learning. There is little question that this mode of learning is still the most powerful in creating personal and organizational transformation. That is, with our present level of online instruction; where the focus is on instruction. This is an appropriate mode of presentation for information transfer and technical training, but not for transformational learning.

The major challenge to the dominance of live, facilitated learning for everyone is the emergence of the Millennial and 2020 Generations—like my daughter. They have adapted to the multiplicity of events and instant information acquisition using information technology, as an everyday practice. Almost like it is a natural extension of how they function. This tool appears to be a way of life that's not going to go away. In fact, it will eventually become the dominant way of acquiring information. At present, learning appears to occur by putting that information into behavioral practice and experiencing its effectiveness, rather than having the learning programmed into the information provided. This former mode of learning is obviously ineffective and costly. In spite of this short-term shortcoming, online learning is inevitable.

The solution is not to get rid of the methodology and practice of delivery, but to improve the learning capacity of the information provided. In essence, the design of an online learning experience that is replica of what happens in a live workshop—with an emphasis on the individual user.

The Value Proposition

The value proposition of online learning begins with the observation that Millennials presently comprise 45% of the American workforce and will be 50% by 2020. In general, their major preference for individual and organizational learning is using information technology in small doses, anytime, anywhere. However, not

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at the expense of live, facilitated learning for top leadership, and senior and influential management, but in addition to online methodology. In fact, the online programs can be used to reinforce the live presentations. This appears to be today's reality. From 2015 through 2020 there will also be the strong emergence of the 2020 Generation into the workforce; and their preference is clearly obvious.

Another aspect of the value proposition is the fact that the broad base workforce of most organizations typically comprises 85% of the employee population; coupled with the fact that learning new competencies, skills, and initiatives is not an option. So, the question is how are they supposed to learn? Certainly not by some trickle-down effect. Most organizations do not have the resources to invest in live training for them all, if any. Based upon economy of scale, online training is not only the most viable option, but has become a viable necessity. Correspondingly, online products must have a transformational element. They must also integrate the most advanced learning principles, competencies, and skills for the presently existing diverse workforce. Not diversity as an add-on, but integrated into the learning programs.

Other factors affecting cost are the elimination of travel, time away from work, and cost per employee. The cost per employee for an online training is less than the \$1 per person; with unlimited repetitive use.

The ultimate value of performance-based online learning is its effectiveness in facilitating transformation to a more empowered mind-set, skills-based learning, and the ability to more competently execute workplace responsibilities; particularly, when the program is used in a repetitive mode.

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