

Riding the Digital Stream: Integrating Modern Learning Practice into Formal Programs



by [Ben Carmel](#)

March 23, 2015

I was reading recently about the sad demise of the face-to-face meeting, and how much businesses would suffer from the loss of connections that can be forged only around a table. While this may be true to a certain extent, I propose that the loss of in-person time in favor of digital collaboration carries the potential for so many other benefits, intended and not.

Amplified by the interplay between formal learning programs and informal and continuous organizational learning practice, what may be lost at the conference table should lead to efficiencies and the increasingly agile responsiveness that are coming to define our era. Learning professionals are the ones best suited to grab the torch and lead us to realizing that potential.

I present a few ideas here to help begin the journey to break away from discrete training efforts and to join formal-personal and social-informal learning together in one continuous, systematic program. But before diving in to specific ideas, let me set up some assumptions on which I build my thinking.

Technology is (relatively) unimportant

Do you already have a well-accepted enterprise social network (ESN)? Great. Have no ESN in place or, worse, have an ESN that nobody finds useful? That's OK, too. The tools and technologies to integrate communication and knowledge sharing are freely available and needn't be a monoculture. Some may use an intranet, others Twitter, still others Facebook or (even) LinkedIn. That's fine.

Whatever platform and tools you use today will be gone tomorrow: email can't die soon enough, Twitter will be replaced, and Facebook might already be at the end of its professional shelf life. Whatever time and tens of thousands of dollars your organization has invested in that new ESN will only be as useful as the ways in which people use it ... that, and it will be obsolete in five years.

The key is the mindset you are nurturing. Getting integrated social learning off the ground is not a technology problem: it's harder than that, because the shift is more basic. It's a practice and workplace culture problem. But, as we'll see, it can be incremental and decentralized, which makes it much easier to begin, experiment, fail, and eventually find success.

Communication happens

We communicate in meetings, via email, on the phone, and in the hall. The fundamentals here are unchanged. What I'm proposing is that we substantively communicate as we always have, but adjust our practices to the digital technology we use to capture, retrieve, share, and synthesize our communication more meaningfully. We have changed and will continue to change the media for communication (when is the last time you wrote a standard business letter? Or even had a lengthy, substantive phone call?), but digital communication has native advantages that we've been slow to leverage effectively.

Collaboration happens

Again, nothing is being reinvented here. We collaborate on projects all the time. The difference is that the hierarchy of previous generations is being replaced by a network of hubs, with each player in a collaboration interacting much more freely with the other players than was previously possible (or desirable?). Not that we don't have clients and project managers, but we needn't wait for gatekeepers for each collaborative partner to freely find information—and each other—at the moment of need. Efficient collaboration in the digital age, or what I call “the learning age,” requires a somewhat different set of skills. Those skills are learned, and we need to be deliberate about teaching them.

Learning happens

People learn. Nothing trainers, instructional designers (IDs), or teachers do changes that. Even if you feel like nobody in your company learns anything, if nothing else they learn what they can get away with. Every day we continue to learn something about our jobs, our value to our organization, our place in the larger professional context. In formal learning environments (synchronous or asynchronous), teachers, trainers, and IDs work hard to hold learners' attention and deliver what we want them to learn. But we are social learners, and the folks we admire are those who take the initiative to learn the skills they need to thrive on the job. For the rest, we need to teach, guide, mentor, and coach. That is our job: not to simply make courses or deliver training, but to teach the skills to help our people thrive.

Integrate eLearning and formal training programs in the digital world

Our work as IDs, eLearning developers, trainers, L&D workers—whatever label you have that led you to this publication and this article—is to rethink how our people learn, and how our organizations collectively grow, change, and iterate from that practical knowledge. It requires thinking about our work differently, and it's high time we did.

When we separate and homogenize content to make it into training, we remove the contextual cues from the content's natural habitat and elevate that content to received wisdom: “This is how we do things here.” There may always be a place for that type of formal learning, but our approach should be to consider that as a last resort. If people could learn to function at a high level without the need for formal training, wouldn't that be better?

To move toward that ideal, we need to begin to integrate the “natural” way of learning—contextual, on-the-job, and informal—into formal learning. I suggest there are numerous ways to begin putting systems into place to align formal and informal learning efforts, but here I want to focus on how we can start to integrate our training and eLearning products into the broader stream of organizational knowledge.

Include social-digital learning in traditional eLearning and live training sessions.

When you have learners' attention during the short time of a formal learning activity, teach them social-learning practice.

- Direct them to add their thoughts or questions to a topic hashtag (#) or message board.
- Create a whiteboard (digital or not) or wiki for learners to learn from each other as they move through the training you design. This space becomes a living discussion and idea board for each cohort of learners.
- Ask learners to go (physically or digitally) to their manager, the appropriate SME, or a stakeholder to get an answer to a question or to deepen the context of a particularly complex subject. Stakeholders' work with novices helps solidify their own understanding, and helps integrate them

into social-learning practice, too. Make sure the key points are captured as an expectation of the learning activity.

Teach learning skills as a high-priority component of your organization's training program.

We expect that adults know how to learn. Looking closely, I have found that is far from true. Most think of learning as something that's done in a classroom, not a daily activity that needs time for thought, reflection, and continual sense-making.

- Challenge your learners to be systematic about how they learn.
- Teach them ways to demonstrate what they've learned, such as curation, categorization, mind-mapping, regularly sharing, etc.
- Introduce proven methodologies, such as personal knowledge mastery (PKM) and other knowledge management practices, and emphasize that ongoing personal learning is a top priority at your organization.

Promote all learners to become experts in their role or specific area of work, and let them know you expect them to share that expertise.

Make sure that they know they can share their expertise via whatever social-digital tools are in play (ESNs, company intranets, specific hashtags, professional blogs and publications, etc.).

Embrace the river

As much as we may bemoan the loss of conference tables, long strategy conversations behind closed office doors, and meetings with all stakeholders at the table, that world is gone. Our organizations are dynamic and require agility, our careers make many stops and rarely move in one direction, and our need to learn and adapt quickly only increases. Swimming in the digital river allows us to buoy to the top and ride the currents if we are skillful enough to do so. As learning professionals, we are in a unique position to teach modern workplace learning. I'm excited to swim in those waters.

Topics Covered

[Blended Learning](#), [Design Strategies](#), [Emerging Topics](#), [Social Media](#)

Learning Solutions Magazine
A publication of [The eLearning Guild](#)
Learning Solutions Magazine is a service of [Focuszone Media, Inc.](#)
Copyright 2015 Learning Solutions Magazine



Site by: [Cyclone Interactive](#)