



Technology and the rise of the enterprise system

Written by Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant

Since the industrial revolution, learning in the workplace has been a highly structured and managed process. Organised, formal learning has taken precedence over more situational and informal styles. Whilst some shifts have occurred in training pedagogy, (see Malcom Knowles – Andragogy vs Pedagogy) many of the practices and processes around workplace learning & development echo our strong and established educational delivery methods.

Our systems for managing learning have been built with this underpinning philosophy. A philosophy which situates the power and the choice for learning not with the learner but the employer. Our learning systems have traditionally reflected what the great South American philosopher and educationalist, Paolo Friere, would describe as the 'banking model.'



However, as the technological revolution continues to gather pace, the changes it's driving have been felt across every aspect our lives, and how we all access information and acquire knowledge is no exception.

With the shift in how technology serves our needs, our expectations of how we learn shifts too. The democratisation of learning (both personal and professional) is under way. All anyone needs to access a world-size repository of information and knowledge is a click of a button to the internet. Gone is the middle-man – the teacher, trainer, instructor...learning has become a consumer-driven industry.

Towards Maturity (now Emerald Works), in their pre-pandemic report **Back to the Future – Feb 2020**, heralded consumerisation of learning as the key influence in how organisations will be shifting their strategic approach to how they support learning & development, recognising the shift in ownership of learning and democratisation of learning in the workplace.

Josh Bersin has been describing this democratisation too. His coining of the expression 'learning in the flow' in a 2018 blog post **A New Paradigm For Corporate Training: Learning In The Flow of Work – June 2018** has attracted the interest of learning & development professionals and technologists alike. Bersin's vision has been brought to life with the emergence of new tools such as Microsoft's Viva, a tool which will place curated, open source and learner directed content right on your computer's desktop. Along with other new 'learning enterprise and experience systems', the potential to shake-up to the more traditional structures and process of workplace training is very real.



So, what if this new development is not just another learning technology 'fad' but is the start of how new workplace learning will be organised, managed and delivered?

Of course, the use of learning technologies is not new, the majority of mid to large size employers use some form of learning technology to support their learning & development strategies already. However, things have quickly changed. After all, its only 15 or so years ago since digital learning was written and stored on CD-ROM and the Learning Management System (LMS) was in its infancy.

Whilst learning delivery systems have been developing rapidly, things like VR and AI are becoming more commonplace. For many years, L&D's overall adoption and use of learning technologies has been mixed at best. However, as we all now know, the global COVID-19 pandemic has changed that. As the expression goes, 'necessity is the mother of invention', and the necessity to rapidly shift from traditional learning delivery methods to those that are digitally enabled created a need to rapidly digitise workplace learning.

For some, this change has been a challenge, not only having to get to grips with using technology personally but also adopting new methods and approaches for delivering training and learning remotely. Organisations with existing technological capacity may have fared better than those with more limited access and expertise. But what is true for all is that, as a result, the headlong dive into digital has forever changed how workplace learning is supported.

"What does this new landscape look like, and what does it mean for the Learning & Development profession?"

The traditional focus of training has always been about courses, and the need to deliver content in a way that meets the learning objectives of the organisation. Not too dissimilar to the arguments eloquently offered by Sir Ken Robinson in his classic RSA lecture **Changing Education Paradigms**, looking at our education systems.

If workplace learning has, for decades, been structured to provide a 'standardised' learning system that was geared towards fulfilling the needs of homogenous job competencies then what will the effect of today's preference for individualisation, consumerisation and democratisation be?

Of course, a balance between a completely learner-centric and classic trainer-centric approach is required. Organisations and their learners will still require formalised, structured learning pathways and training that is designed to meet specific role and performance needs. But what is also required is that learning is seen as something far more accessible than a course – even a short one. As a result, learning & development professionals should start to think differently about their roles, a point recognised and illustrated by Josh Bersin in his article **The Disruption of Digital Learning – ten things we have learned.**



By managing the training process (from analysis through to evaluation) the main power and control lies with L&D and, as a result, they control the tap of content by defining what is delivered, when, how, and where. Whilst many still take the recognised and traditional approach to how workplace learning is managed, this is not necessarily compatible or congruent with a learning strategy that is digitally enabled and reflects the shifting democratisation of knowledge-based content.

There is increasingly an argument to say that L&D teams need to be not only more digitally savvy, but recognise the fundamental cultural shift in workplace learning that is taking place. As 'learning in the flow' takes hold, and not just as a concept, but in technological reality, the ability to think differently about how learning is supported is required.

Whilst most people recognise that change is required and the shift towards digitisation is well and truly underway, learning technology is just one part of the equation of the digital learning transformation process. If Learning & Development teams are to succeed in the future, they must not only get comfortable with using digital in the best way, but understand how their learners' expectations and behaviours are changing as a result of their relationships with technology.

Of course, there are no silver bullets and, probably, more questions than answers. So maybe a good starting point is to reflect on some of the following discussion points to help define some of the areas that you may need to think about as you navigate your way through your digital journey.

L&D is the learning enabler

L&D should be seeking to use modern technology delivery platforms to enable learners to access the knowledge content they need, when and where they need it. By letting go of some of the control around what learners learn, and where and how they learn it, L&D should seek to enable learners to seek out and use what they need to know, when they need to know it. Explore how your learning platform can deliver a more learner-centric, in the flow learning experience.



Resources not courses

There is nothing new in that expression but, more than ever, technology can support its realisations. Courses, and curricula of courses, provide necessary structure to meet specific needs. But consider how you can maybe break down your existing courses and learning content into bite-size, re-usable chunks that you can use in multiple settings and your learner can better access 'in the flow'.



Define what it means to 'go digital'

So much more than delivering the same content over Zoom or Teams. It's okay to be on the journey, and look to those who have already paved the way. Going digital doesn't have to mean massive budgets, just clever use of the technologies you may already have.



Curation is a new skill requirement

Think about how a museum curates a new display, it's not just a matter of lumping all exhibits together that start with the same letter. Curating digital content will require an ability to understand need, as well as how to locate and manage both self-generated and third-party content.

Get serious about evaluation

For many in L&D 'evaluation' is a bit of a unicorn. That is 'wouldn't it be wonderful if it existed'. Adopting digital means access to data. Even the most basic LMS can generate information that will help you understand what's working and what's not.



Outcomes not output

Most training strategies are output focused; seriously review the outcomes you wish to support and how you'll measure them. If you are to consider and adopt a 'learning in the flow' approach within your strategy, consider how you'll measure its effectiveness.

Learner preference is front and centre

The learning experience should come first. From design through to hosting, engaging modern learners is no longer just about the content, it's about how it's accessed, how flexible it is, how easy it is to find, and how relevant it is to the learner's day-to-day job.

