

The future of learning: learning in a virtual world?

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A learning revolution?

Much has been written about the revolution that e-learning will precipitate. Typical pronouncements by gurus on the subject suggest a massive paradigm shift that will sweep away conventional learning and replace it with a more cost-effective system that is available at my space, my pace, just in time and just for me.

A pervasive error consists of seeing the technology as a way to improve the practices of contemporary school. In fact the technology makes them obsolete.

Symour Papert- in a report to the United States House of Representatives

Because over ten years, pretty well everything will be negotiable. Economics, technology, skills needs and changes in society will shape the future of education and training - structures, institutions and ideologies that are not fit for purpose will simply be swept away.

Clive Caseley , Learning and Skills Development Agency

Talk of a new paradigm is suggestive of the search for the holy grail, the philosophers stone, a magical solution - one that will absolve us from the baggage of the past. However, as Thomas Kuhn points out, any new paradigm draws on much of the knowledge and procedures of the one that it replaces. The new paradigm (if any) will not be one based on learning but one based on the development of environments that facilitate learning - and this should prove to be a catalyst for the development of a learning paradigm in which we can have some confidence.

Implicit in the question is the assumption that CPD needs a driver - a mechanism or a system that will somehow provide the means to establish it as the major paradigm for lifelong learning. It might well be that CPD is in need of a makeover so that the values and beliefs that underpin it will be more widely recognised and adopted - but is e-learning the tool for the job? One way of generating some answers to this question is to examine some models of CPD and to explore how these might fit with models of e-learning in a way that could be mutually beneficial.

CPD - quantitative or qualitative?

CPD is a concept that includes what a colleague refers to as the warm fuzzies; that is words that have a strong feel good factor and set ideals to strive for. Paulo Friere¹, the Brazilian educator and philosopher calls these generative words; words that resonate with people and provide a focus for making changes. Empowerment, democratising education, learner centred, personal growth and development, personal responsibility are some of the words and phrases that come to mind - and these are classed by philosophers as hortative; that is emotive calls to action rather than literal guidelines. Just what kind of action is required is not often clear and tends to exist within the tacit understanding of a group of people who are the product champions, the proselytisers, the agents of change. Of course the changes to be made do vary; for example CPD can mean the process of filling knowledge and skill gaps in an organisational profile - it can also mean a strategy for developing the potential of individuals. These two ideals are not mutually exclusive but

we do need to be clear which is the dominant motive in any organisation that is seeking to use e-learning as the driver for change.

Cutting-edge learning?

In contrast to the warm fuzzies of CPD, e-learning appears to have a number of cutting edges - cost cutting being the main one! The attraction of cutting travelling (transport) costs and of just-in-time learning have strong affiliations with the cost-effective production methods developed by Japanese companies. Computer mediated learning (CML) and computer based training (CBT) do provide the potential to bring the white heat of the technological revolution to education in a way that the field of educational technology has long aimed for. Arguably, in the recent past, educational technology has been let down by the technology that underpinned it, so much so that a former pro-vice chancellor of the Open University is credited with the claim that the only piece of educational technology that is anywhere near reliable is the school bus! Managers currently struggling with the complexities and vagaries of learning management systems (LMS) might well agree! However, the technology is getting more robust, more reliable and user-friendly. What we do need to bear in mind is that educational technology is rooted in the sharp-edged paradigm of behaviourist psychology which tends to treat the learner as a function learning to respond to a stimulus. Is this a desirable driver for CPD?

What do we mean by better?

Having exposed some sharp differences, what might the similarities be? Models of the reflective practitioner and the reflective learner are a useful starting point. Both imply that the individual has to take a large measure of responsibility for planning a way forward by analysing the way they do things in order to do them better. We need to re-visit later what is meant by better, but both concepts are based on the belief that we are constrained by custom and practice which can restrict and constrain change. Referring to the limited thinking of some trainers, Marcus Hill, writing in the May 2001 issue of Training Journal refers to this phenomenon as the comfort zone of mediocrity. In moving out of the comfort zone, learners can learn better by understanding how they learn and by selecting styles and methods that suit them best in different situations. Managers and companies that are prepared to change the way they think and work are more responsive to changing situations and tend to be more successful. This begs the question What is meant by better? Better for the individual or better for the company - and can it be better for both? There is inevitably a tension between a CPD model that encourages personal growth through reflection and decisions based on alternatives - and a deficiency model of the employee as lacking certain competencies that must be identified and rectified through the medium of new technology. E-learning can offer a rich choice of learning experiences that fit in with my need, my pace, my place, my aspirations and my learning styles, and so it can, as never before, facilitate personal growth and professional development. So can the new technology be harnessed to this end?

Who makes the decisions?

Writing in 1961 in The Long Revolution, Raymond Williams argued for the need for a technologically literate population able to make informed decisions about how technology would change their lives - rather than have the decisions made on their behalf by technologists. Decisions about the technology of e-learning are too important to be left in the hands of instant experts or the pressures of the market place. We do need to be cognisant of these influences but we also need to take responsibility for visualising how it can be and, as Jean Luc-Picard of the star ship Enterprise might say, to make it so. We also need to build on what we know of learning - both in and out of the comfort zone.

The real challenge for e-learning

Martin Sloman, another contributor to the May issue of Training Journal rightly points out that we simply do not know enough about how people learn. We do however know a great deal about creating face to face and distance-based environments in which people learn more effectively. We know the importance of making clear to the learner what will be learned, why it is important to learn it, how the learning will take place (in terms of structure and methods) and how s/he will know if the learning had been achieved. We know the importance of engaging learners in activities, of creating an inclusive environment and the provision of subtle support, challenge, guidance and encouragement - and you may wish to add to this list of attributes. The real challenge for e-learning is not in the use of technology to deliver the material but in using the technology to build on what we know about managing learners - and how learners manage themselves. There are promising developments; we are seeing evidence of e-learning providers using (with feeling!) the term learning experience in place of learning materials or courses. There is also an increasing awareness of the need to provide learning support using e-moderators, facilitated peer support and an appropriate blend of online and offline (face to face) environments. What is even more exciting is evidence of the growth in online learning communities; groups that share knowledge and generate new learning that can be mined later, and recorded for others. There are also moves to free trainers from the tyranny of ill-informed managers who want instant e-learning solutions and obstructive IT specialists who do not. Systems are being developed that provide a supportive environment and an appropriate delivery technology that enables trainers to make use of the resources that they are well used to and adept at producing. Full multi media it is not - but it does enable trainers to maintain control and provides a transition period in which to develop the skills needed for more sophisticated presentation.

So can e-learning be a driver for CPD? Instead of taking refuge in Well it depends on what you mean by e-learning and CPD, we need to answer with an unequivocal Yes, and take responsibility for making it so.

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