

Beyond Blended Instruction

Learning in the 21st century

Our industry needs to be courageous in taking the next step and deft at encouraging those we work for to do the same.

⋮ American Idol Problem

Thomas Friedman calls it the ‘American Idol Problem’, when over-confident youngsters are astonished when they lose or are even criticised. Is the west as a whole facing a similar wake up call?

While parents in the developed world worry about the laissez-faire attitude of their kids to education and training, wallowing in a culture of ‘fun’, developing countries are gagging for it. Alan Binder, the Princeton economist claims that we need to ‘transform our education systems so as to produce workers for the jobs that will actually exist in their societies’. Compulsory secondary school education and the university system were, as Paul Romer, a Stanford

economist says ‘big ideas’. We are, he claims, in need of another big idea. Our universities are stuck in medieval modes of teaching and training which are still largely classroom-based. We need to wake up and smell the stink of the felt-tip pens. But is training responding to globalisation?

⋮ Developed and undeveloped

The old language of developed, developing and underdeveloped is looking a little tired. The new measure is the degree to which people have connectivity and a thirst for education. This is why the



internet will be the most significant education, training and knowledge sharing medium of the new millennium. It is already bigger than any individual education or training institution on the planet and its growth is irreversible.

As we entered the new millennium China roared, India awoke from its slumber and the Soviet Union embraced capitalism, between them folding another 1.5 billion workers into the global workforce. Yet, according to Thomas Friedman, less than 10% of these new workers have the necessary education and connectivity to compete.

But these new entrants have a hidden weapon – a high education ethic. They're mad for skills; especially in business, maths, science, engineering and technology. India sends more students to the US than any other country in the world and soon the western brands in education will lose their allure and home-grown institutions will flourish.

In this new, flat world, access to learning is becoming faster, easier and cheaper. The opportunities are literally limitless as the internet seeps into every state, school, college, university, businesses and home. There is no absolute between developed and developing, only connected or not connected.

⋮ Global and local

Is training global or local? It's both. (Let's forget that horrible term 'glocalisation'.) Training has been



delivered largely through localised buying, as the deliverable was classroom training and warm bodies. Globally, the old classroom model can't respond to the global scale-ups that large companies demand. Huge amounts of training needs to be delivered quickly to thousands of people in dozens of countries in multiple languages. On top of this there's real pressure to do this cheaply. E-learning, therefore, plays a more significant role. The global/local blend involves a spine of consistent e-learning content with local support in blended delivery and localisation. Companies such as LINE have global and local projects running alongside each other.

⋮ Top-down and bottom-up

The internet is the great leveller and for global training it has the promise of global access, consistency and scalability. But it reaches a level from both the top and the bottom.

From the top-down it's all about consistency and reach. This is why most large companies have a centralised training function, install an LMS, deliver lots of generic content and track usage. They want consistent application to standards, regulations and productive processes. We still need structured learning as leaving everything to ad hoc processes and chance is a risk few are prepared to take.

On the other hand, the internet also operates bottom-up. Google, social software, P2P, open source, blogs, wikis, video sharing, and other innovations emerge every few months on the web. They have and will ultimately play a role in shaping the e-learning landscape. None of these ideas even come from the large companies, as dinosaurs don't give birth to gazelles. They're the products of visionaries and drop-outs, the real geniuses of the web and e-learning – Page, Brin, Torvalds, Bezos, Wales, Hurley and Chen.

The interesting area is the zone in which these two forces collide and mix. We are seeing that courses are not always cutting the mustard leading to rapid development, microcontent, even disposable learning. Companies need velocity and access. At times they need to get it out and build libraries of simple content. On the other hand there's also a great deal of formal learning to be delivered. ⋮

the internet will be the most significant education, training and knowledge sharing medium of the new millennium

⋮ Formal and informal

This is a false opposition if presented as mutually exclusive concepts. As Jay Cross states in his new book *Informal Learning*, it's a continuum. The internet is wired into our working lives, a resource that often quietly works its magic below the radar but it is increasingly used to deliver a mix of formal and informal learning. There is a rebalancing of formal and informal not a replacement of one by the other.

People have been led to that hidden mother load of knowledge – the web, at school, at work and in the home. It is growing exponentially and becoming a greater and greater presence in all of our lives. This has led to the huge growth of a parallel world of informal learning. It has also led to more structured learning experiences delivered as simple resources such as documents and PowerPoint, through rapidly developed content (PowerPoint plus) to more complex content, simulations and games. This continuum is a broad church and getting broader.

⋮ Insourced and outsourced

As large companies respond with these different species of training, delivered at different speeds, we see more in-house production with help from outside. This can be partial-project outsourcing, with help on instructional design, portions of media production, even project management. Another way to cut the pie is to do microcontent in-house with larger or more complex projects outsourced. The new world does

not see these working in opposition but in tandem. In practice there is always a mix between outsourced and insourced activities.

⋮ Work and learning

The Leitch report has given work-based learning big billing as this blend of task and learning is much more fruitful than the delivery of offsite courses. It is recognised that work gives learning its true context allowing immediate application, reinforcement and transfer. In the past training has interrupted work. It now has to learn how to integrate itself into work. Again, the two are not mutually exclusive.

⋮ Technology and learning

The 'learning through technology' culture in many organisations moves faster than the culture of training. Yet technology is not the enemy of learning, it is its friend. Good technology and media work when they both become invisible. We're not aware of the projector in the cinema, or TV set when watching good TV, or computer monitor when absorbed in the internet. Neither should we be aware of the act of learning or all too common technical trainer-speak (learners, learning, learning objectives, competences etc). The more invisible technology and learning seems, the more integrated they become. It is yet another false opposition. ⋮

⋮ Learning and marketing

At a recent DTI conference we heard about Workforce Attention Deficit – the idea that employees have little spare time to attend to training as there are plenty of other competing communications forces. Training is now in the business of selling experiences. To compete, one must compete for attention. The design, build and timetable model for courses is no longer enough. We must sell the hell out of our services and create the experiences which people willingly want to use. This means sharper, shorter content and a marketing component in all learning initiatives.

⋮ Blend of opposites

Electronic knowledge knows no borders and with wireless it floods like water into every nook and cranny of a country, company, schools, college, university and home. Electronic knowledge flows through any available pipe and 21st century training will, like any other business commodity, take the path of least resistance. It will flow to the fastest, cheapest and smartest solution providers.

Blended learning has become a blend of classroom and e-learning, a blend of online and offline, a blend of synchronous and asynchronous. These are merely forms of blended INSTRUCTION. What's needed is blended LEARNING.

The new model is not some simplistic blend of classroom and e-learning. It is a blend of east and west, global and local, top-down and bottom-up, insourced and outsourced, formal and informal, work and learning, technology and learning, marketing and learning. The sooner we dissolve these false opposites, the sooner we'll hit our goals.

This article was first published in e-learning age magazine december/january 2007

Donald Clark is Director of Strategy for
LINE Communications.

donald.clark@line.co.uk

Piers Lea is CEO of
LINE Communications.

piers.lea@line.co.uk

⋮ London: + 44 (0)207 243 5110

⋮ Sheffield: +44 (0)114 223 8550

⋮ email: info@line.co.uk

⋮ website: www.line.co.uk

LINE