Back to Class

New learning methods have their place, but classroom learning is still king, with a twist. Companies are combining the best technology with a physical presence to breathe new life into traditional learning.

According to the hype, technology has overtaken more traditional learning delivery methods. Social media, apps, virtual classrooms and telepresence are replacing classroom learning or at least relegating it to specific and rare programs. But don’t believe the hype.

According to new data from the Human Capital Media Advisory Group, the research arm of Chief Learning Officer magazine, classroom instruction is still going strong. In fact, many companies are using new technology to give their classroom learning activities a shot in the arm by enhancing the learner’s experience, promoting engagement and collaboration and preparing leaders for the modern business environment.

Instead of replacing the classroom, technology is most often used to enhance the benefits found in a live learning environment. In the past simulations — a great way to give learners an opportunity to practice new skills and safely fail while learning to apply them correctly — were dominated by computer-based applications. They too have evolved their own face-to-face components. With gaming at their heart, today’s learning simulations emphasize not only knowledge gathering, but comprehension, application, analysis, discovery and growth, and much of it happens in the classroom.

The Digital Divide

In a 1995 Harvard Business Review article, Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen introduced the idea of sustaining vs. disruptive technologies. Sustaining technologies, Christensen said, were innovations that gave customers a product “more or better” than what they were already using.

Disruptive technologies, on the other hand, introduced product attributes different from the ones customers historically valued, Christensen said. Improving undervalued dimensions creates new markets and displaces older technologies.

Corporate learning in 2011 is a combination of sustaining and disruptive technologies. While classroom-based, instructor-led training (ILT) remains the leading method of learning delivery, emergent technologies — such as self-paced e-learning and informal learning through social media, blogs, wikis and discussion groups — offer cost and time savings. But these methods often lack the personal, human element many companies value.

Forty-one percent of respondents to a 2011 survey by the Human Capital Media Advisory Group, the research arm of Chief Learning Officer magazine, selected classroom-based ILT as their organization’s leading learning delivery method (Figure 1). This was followed by self-paced e-learning at 17 percent — driven by factors such as convenience (24 percent) and cost (17 percent) — and formal on-the-job training (OJT) at 14 percent — with effectiveness (17 percent) being cited as a key reason for its increased use (Figure 2).

Since 2009, an average of 43 percent of respondents said classroom-based ILT has been the primary method of learning for their companies. After modest gains from 2009 to 2010, e-learning and formal OJT saw numbers dip even as other learning delivery methods inched upwards: coaching/mentoring at 9 percent, virtual classrooms at 7 percent and informal online learning at 5 percent.

While nearly half of the survey respondents chose classroom-based ILT as their company’s primary learning delivery method from 2009 to 2010, the overall trend has been downward. Respondents cited increased expenses and a drop in effectiveness as the reason for the decline.

Asynchronous learning — self-paced e-learning including mobile learning — continues to trend upward because of associated cost savings and convenience. In fact, 4 percent of respon-
dents expect some or substantial increase within the next 12-18 months (Figure 3). Further, coaching/mentoring — considered to be an ideal method for teaching diversity and skills — also is expected to rise, with 51 percent of respondents stating they expect to see some or substantial increase within that same time period. Fifty-five percent of respondents also expect an increase in informal learning usage, which includes social media, blogs, wikis and discussion groups.

Classroom-based ILT is used for nearly every organizational training need, with 65 percent of respondents using this vehicle for business skills training; 63 percent for leadership development; 54 percent for on-boarding/new-hire training; 39 percent for core competencies; and 33 percent to teach technical skills. In 2011, compliance training was the only category where survey respondents didn’t cite classroom-based ILT as their preferred method, with 60 percent opting for self-paced e-learning.

As potentially disruptive technologies, self-paced e-learning and informal online learning may represent cost savings and conve-
niere, but they do not meet all needs. For the majority of employee training at all skill and leadership levels, classroom-based ILT, formal OTJ training and coaching/mentoring are still preferred due to the interactions available between instructors and students.

The continued interest in traditional learning delivery methods is evidence that technology falls short when it comes to human interaction. Emerging technologies have the potential to provide new value and maybe even replace traditional methods, but replacing the personal touch is one revolution that may still be years in the making.

— Ronnie Reese

Bricks (and Clicks) and Mortar

Despite the increasing use of virtual and social network-based learning methods, companies are making large-scale investments in their physical corporate university spaces. Designing special rooms to enhance collaboration and reflection, global organizations such as Whirlpool and General Electric (GE) are placing a premium on face-to-face learning not by replacing instructor-led or classroom learning with technology-based options but by leveraging technology to enhance the learning experience and maximize classroom investments.

Whirlpool's corporate university, which sits on 120 acres, has 50 hotel rooms, a 10,000-square-foot great hall and a lodge-like resort, opened in 1994. In 2008, leaders took another look at learning delivery methods to assess where changes were needed. At that time, 98 percent of learning was in the classroom, but Tamara Patrick, global director of Whirlpool University, said the company had to start using the virtual world in a way that went beyond blended learning.

Whirlpool developed its closed loop learning approach, which incorporates four elements into every program: leverage virtual space, use traditional classroom learning, ensure ways to apply and practice new skills and hold managers accountable by improving their coaching abilities and the tools they need to promote employees' use of these skills.

"We feel very strongly about the physical space," Patrick said. "It's an excellent place for reflective learning. Content delivered there is primarily around leadership development and strategic levers like innovation and go-to-market skills, cost and quality, Six Sigma, action learning, higher-level skill building, networking, role playing and applying skills learned online."

During the past few years the corporate university also has been redesigned to promote informal, collaborative learning via special nooks and rooms designated for conversation and by replacing solid doors with glass. Patrick said it's Whirlpool's way of mimicking the movement toward online social networking in person. In 2010 the company installed a "classroom of today" in one of its major training rooms. The classroom is technology-enabled with interactive whiteboards, polling systems and high-definition audio and video conferencing to connect colleagues and bring in external faculty or subject matter experts as needed. All of these learning delivery methods should enhance the classroom experience and engage the learner, particularly during action learning projects.

GE's Crotonville campus in New York also has undergone what Jeff Barnes, director of the company's global leadership development team, calls tremendous changes. Those changes include the physical facility — with more space for individual gatherings, reflection and more rooms to accommodate more learners in the years to come — but also include changes in content and learning approach.

Janice Semper, manager of executive development at GE, said the organization is looking at class design and content not only to enhance the learner experience but to ensure learning is contemporary and aligned with the company's values and leadership model.

"People can get a lot of content outside the classroom," Barnes said. "They can do a lot of the theory through e-learning and social media, but we find in this global world there is such a need for people to gather together to have a chance to meet leaders in person — one of our key components is leaders in the classroom — and there's a huge advantage in people thinking and reflecting together and talking about how to take theories and concepts and apply them on the job."

Because time is scarce, it's critical not to waste face-to-face learning opportunities but to ensure they are spent connecting learners to the company and to each other in cross-functional courses. "Sitting with colleagues from different parts of the organization, [learners] get the bigger company mission and feel like they're part of the story," Semper said. "That helps not only to develop their skill set but to inspire them to go back and change their behavior."

The changes at Crotonville began in 2009 as GE was updating its company values to align fully with the rigors and demands of modern business. Semper said the organization recognized that "You can't teach 21st century leadership in a 20th century way or a 20th century environment. We want to make sure Crotonville reflects how we think about leadership today."

Physical changes to the Crotonville space began in summer 2011. The first phase should be complete in spring 2012, with a second phase to be completed by the end of 2013.

— Kellye Whitney

More Than Fun and Games

"Pong," one of the earliest arcade video games in the 1970s, has been eclipsed by online, multi-user simulations where people compete or work together to reach a common goal. Consumer game systems such as the Microsoft Xbox and Sony Playstation 3 allow thousands of competitors to interact in virtual environments simultaneously. As more people, corporate employees included,
play on such consoles for entertainment, they are becoming more comfortable with them at work. With this in mind, learning leaders are broadening their development techniques to include game-type activities in both instructor-led and virtual settings to boost engagement and make learning stick.

Games are immersive, engaging, provide instantaneous feedback on learner actions and encourage repetitive practice of techniques. Well-designed games combine content knowledge with critical skills, such as identifying and solving problems, and are not necessarily dependent on virtual interactions. Some organizations are using their physical training environments to engage teams in competitive gaming and simulations.

“We are continually looking at ways to take advantage of emerging technologies so that the classroom learning experience is highly interactive and experiential,” said Cheryl Tidwell, director of sales administration and learning at Humana. “Simulations help us expand our ability to appeal to different learning styles. As we are aware, people learn in very different ways. These technologies drive the learning for some in ways we would not be able to with a traditional learning environment.”

In Humana’s Winning Major program, teams of five salespeople act collectively as a salesperson for a robotics company. They handle three clients over three virtual years in three rounds of computer-based simulations held in a physical classroom. The objective is to understand the customer’s business and build relationships higher and wider in each account. The team with the highest cumulative revenue wins.

“They are free to experiment and try new techniques and approaches without fear of hurting bottom-line results or feeling foolish, and they apply the feedback instantly,” said Lori Wohlgemuth, manager of learning at Humana. “Yet because the simulations are completed in a team environment, they become very competitive. This competitive element adds a bit of tension, which appropriately stretches our sales associates out of their comfort zone, resulting in a more robust learning experience.”

Learning leaders note high levels of engagement during simulations, which they claim results in greater speed to mastery and retention. According to Keith Hazen, vice president of client services at Intrepid, a learning services provider, this shouldn’t be surprising as consumer games have had a captivated audience for decades. As organizations start to incorporate gaming technology into the classroom, he said they will be inspired by platforms such as Microsoft’s Xbox Kinect.

“As many companies revisit the idea of an onsite corporate university, the opportunity to integrate new technologies in the overall design of the classroom is exciting,” Hazen said. “Instructor-led learning has continued to flourish rather than stagnate. We are seeing greater integration of technology in the classroom as opposed to using technology solely as a means to eliminate the classroom.”

Over the years, McDonald’s has transformed its Hamburger University from small restaurant-based classrooms to large-scale, lecture-style teaching to facilitated group learning. The organization has invested more than $3 million to modernize classrooms. New classroom layouts allow for greater social learning among students and closer interaction between the facilitator and class.

“The classroom is ‘in the round,’ so there is no front of the room,” said Diana Thomas, vice president of U.S. training for McDonald’s. “Each of six team tables includes a large, high-definition display screen. These screens can display whatever the facilitator sees as appropriate but can also display from local laptops during small team simulations.”

One of the university’s offline simulations places learners in stressful situations within a restaurant where individuals must respond within seconds to resolve issues. Once back in the classroom, they are divided into small teams to conduct a root-cause analysis of two of the issues and devise a corrective plan to present to their peers. The individual and team portions of the simulation are designed to challenge learners’ old behaviors, reveal how decisions impact their team and the restaurant, and to broaden their perspective. They learn how well they lead under pressure and whether or not they can effectively communicate across and up to positively affect the business.

“Outside the classroom is where knowledge, comprehension and application occurs, and inside the classroom is where synthesis and evaluation occurs,” said Kimberlee Lewis, instructional design manager for McDonald’s. “Together these places enable discovery and growth.”

— Ladan Nikravan