Instructional design is a marriage of emerging learning trends and technology. It’s a gateway for today’s learners to enter the ecosystem, collaborate with peers from communities of practices, learn through interactions, and follow their path of choice towards a desired performance goal. And today, learning is driven by learner motivation: desire to achieve performance outcomes, and their peer and social networks – trends popular among today’s learners.

Learning is all-pervasive, although defined by a structure in which the knowledge can be accounted for and recognised. Some of the learning models that have risen to prominence in response to the current context are Pervasive Learning proposed by Dan Pontefract; the 70:20:10 framework popularised by Charles Jennings; Evidence-Based Learning and Adaptive Learning Systems; and the now ubiquitous MOOC. While the latter is more of a dissemination model and not really a learning design approach, it provides opportunities for making online learning collaborative with greater peer-to-peer learning opportunities – whether in higher education or in the corporate world.

LEARNING AT THE SPEED OF NEED

Pervasive Learning with its three components of formal, informal and social addresses the challenges that organisations and individuals face today, i.e., the inadequacy of structured formal top-down training to support the constantly changing and complex learning requirements. In his book, Flat Army: Creating a Connected and Engaged Organisation, Dan Pontefract defines pervasive learning as: “Learning at the speed of need through formal, informal, and social learning modalities.” Pervasive learning encapsulates and ‘formalises’ what employees have been doing anyway for a long time – reaching out to peers, sharing experiences and tacit knowledge over a cup of coffee, connecting with their networks when in need, keeping ‘learning at the speed of need’ at the core. This model, hence, would be a good starting point for L&D to move from their role of managing top-down training programs and don the hat of community facilitators, social connectors, curators and aggregators.
This model merges learning with work and gives equal weight to each of the three components. Ubiquitous technology, especially the advent of mobile technology, augments the modalities of this model by enabling anytime-anywhere access to information, communities, and experts – thus making learning both time and location agnostic. This model highlights three components to support learning and performance:

**Formal learning**: The onus of delivering formal learning in organisations typically rests with the L&D department and is equated with structured, top-down push learning through courses, modules, online classes, classroom trainings, compliance trainings, and so on – designed in response to business needs and skill gaps – perceived or real – existing in employees. These are delivered either as e-learning or instructor-led training (ILT).

**Informal learning**: This has its roots in research dating back to the late 1990s by educationalists like Bentley (1998) who called it ‘learning beyond the classroom,’ Marsick and Watkins (1990) and Dale and Bell (1999) who described it as ‘informal and incidental learning in the workplace,’ and McGivney (1999) who called it ‘informal learning in the community.’ It is characterised by learning that:

- Takes place outside of the conventional framework or organisational boundaries
- Is not pre-defined or curriculum driven
- Often originates in response to a need
- Is related to problem-solving, being just-in-time as opposed to just-in-case

Informal learning picked up momentum with Jay Cross’ book, *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance*. Jay Cross defined it thus: “Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs. Formal learning is like riding a bus: the driver decides where the bus is going; the passengers are along for the ride. Informal learning is like riding a bike: the rider chooses the destination, the speed, and the route.”

Today, in the rapidly changing and complex work environment, exceptions are the norm. And predefined training programmes can no longer meet desired performance goals or learning needs. Informal and social learning are thus taking over – both in ease and time of access and in currency of information. In the workplace, informal learning can be both individual-driven and social, ranging from coaching to job shadowing and job rotation, forum discussions to reading books, listening to podcasts and watching videos. L&D today needs to be facilitators and enablers of informal learning in the workplace – more of learning concierge (as Jane Hart describes them) than learning gatekeepers.

**Social learning**: Banduras (1977) described social learning thus: “Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling ...” The modelling and observation has taken on a whole new meaning in this era of uber connectivity where proximity is no longer required for people to learn from another. It lies in one’s ability to connect, network, and create personal learning environments (PLEs) for personal knowledge management – both concepts socialised by Harold Jarche – as a part of workplace learning and professional development.

Social learning today is characterised by connected workers, availability of social networking platforms, access to expertise, ability to access, create, and share content freely, facility to network with globally spread individuals, technology and mobile devices, and the economy of individuals.

**Designing the entire ecosystem**

To remain competitive and relevant, organisations need to weave together all three components in their workplace learning and performance strategy. Clearly, the approach is a lot broader than developing just e-learning modules. It’s about ecosystem design, using all of the available resources to support formal, informal, and social learning. And e-learning could be a piece that plays a role in each of the components – as courses in formal learning, as performance support tools in informal learning, and as the basis for contextual discussions and sharing of tacit knowledge in social learning.

With the help of dissemination models like MOOCs, organisations can bring all the three components into play in learning ecosystem design. The formal content (e-learning modules) of the course(s) can be the trigger for discussions, exchange of opinions, and sharing of knowledge. This helps to keep the course content alive while also capturing the tacit knowledge of the workforce. The discussions that take place around specific courses have the following advantages:

1. Facilitate a culture of ‘working aloud’
2. Integrate learning into the workflow
3. Foster the practice of ‘peeragogy’ (peer-to-peer learning)
4. Initiate new and emergent practices from the amalgamation of shared experiences
5. Enable the learners’ experience to become front and centre while keeping the course as a trigger and source of the foundation knowledge required
6. Facilitate the building of communities around topics and areas of interest which can potentially become centres of excellence
7. Breakdown organisational silos by bringing together diverse communities of people on a common learning platform
8. Provide opportunities for L&D to acquire new age skills like community management, content curation and aggregation
9. Move an organisation from a culture of learning events to a learning ecosystem and, eventually, to becoming a learning organisation

**Learning Beyond Doing**

Today, forward-looking organisations are investing in enterprise collaboration platforms that enable content creation and sharing, discussions, blogging, microblogging, and other forms of collaborative and connected learning for many of the reasons mentioned above.

Pervasive Learning and 70:20:10 are aligned on the philosophy that performance requires solutions that go beyond one-off interventions. Both create the requirement for interventions that use social collaboration, create experiences, include effective feedback mechanisms, and move away from a push to a pull strategy – a strategy that is best suited for the adult learner.

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