Informal Learning: Style vs. Substance

Is technology-based informal learning more style than substance? Today, yes. Hopefully, that will change tomorrow as training enhances learners’ ability to perform right where they work. By Nancy J. Lewis

The future of learning has already started, and our challenge is to create learning strategies, approaches, and practices that are as dynamic as the businesses and organizations we support and enable. As such, I believe technology-based informal learning is a big part of our future. Significant progress has been made, but overall, I believe technology-based informal learning is more style than substance at this point.

What is fundamental to something maturing from style to real substance? There are three main criteria:

1. **Our professional mind-set.** Do we currently have a shared, compelling professional vision and strategy in technology-based informal learning?
2. **Codified science and practice around informal learning.** Can we create repeatable, value-laden technology-based informal learning solutions? Do we have real traction across all enterprises, organizations, and governments in this area?
3. **Ability to build expertise and capability in our profession.** Have we established professional incubators so we can readily share and transfer known capabilities, so others can stand on your shoulders, enhance the practice, and sustain the change? Can people go to university or a corporate version and get a degree in the science of technology-based informal learning?

### Professional Mind-set

All studies and most people believe the majority of learning happens experientially, solving problems, on the job, at work, at play, in life. The term, “informal,” came about as it was used for everything that was not “institutionally education”—that is, not offered by educators. How arrogant. There is nothing informal about teaching a child to not touch a hot stove or to ride a bike. There is nothing informal about being able to sell something, build something, bill it, and ship it. In fact, it is our responsibility to help people get better at doing these things. If you asked them, “How is it that you are so good at what you do?” none of them would answer, “It’s because I went to a class, a school...a ‘formal’ learning program.” If we believe most learning happens on the job (or while “doing”), how can we hold onto the notion of the majority of learning as “informal”?

Most studies show that 70 to 80 percent of learning happens on the job. If we are honest with ourselves and take a look at all learning investments, most of it falls in the 20 percent category, in the initiatives that today are thought of as “formal.” So whose responsibility is it to enhance how people learn in their current work/life context?

Isn’t the training profession’s purpose to formalize the best approaches to how people learn? At this time, if most of our work is still in the 20 percent—the educational component, what we still call “formal”—then we need to realistically assess the state of our practice as more style than substance. We should be spending the majority of our time in the 80 percent.

The world uses and depends on technology—this is a fact. It is also a fact that the use of technology has grown exponentially and will continue to do so. To mirror the world in which we live, technology-enabled workplace and life-long learning—the “informal”—is not only our mission, it is our professional responsibility. Have we made that needed leap yet? Not yet. No one debates that 70 to 80 percent of learning happens on the job. No one debates that the nature of people’s work has changed dramatically. We need to make the mental shift that the work of work and learning already has changed. The whole label and notion of “informal” keeps our collective work and wisdom on this subject more style than substance.

### Codified Science

So that brings us to the question: Are we ready to step up to the hard work required to better understand how to help people learn better in their new work and life context? Are we deliberate in
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that substantially enhance informal learning?

Compared to the standards of excellence we already have in the “formal” learning world, do we have a technology-enabled informal learning practice that is more substance than style? Right now, not even close. Will it get there? I have no doubt.

In learning, technology allows us to do things we could never do before. It puts vast amounts of information at our fingertips in real time; it connects us; and it gives access to people and resources in ways we never dreamed of. With all this new technology enablement available to support learning, have the questions changed for us? The questions used to be: Can you build us the best leadership development program, the best sales program, the best employee onboarding program? Now the questions are: Can you accelerate people’s time to performance? Can you help a seller make quota in six months instead of 18. Can you develop a general manager in seven years instead of 15?

This is what the workplace is asking us to do. To do our jobs now, we need to formalize better ways to learn and clone expertise on the job. We need to repeatedly guide people to the best experiences, the networks, the resources, and the learning mind-sets that accelerate their development in their professional area.

BUILDING EXPERTISE

As for the last criteria—building expertise and capability in our profession—most every institution of higher learning offers advanced degrees in education. You can get a Masters degree or Ph.D. in education. Across the world, when you take a look at these curricula, you find that the field of study coalesces across five to 10 thought leaders with volumes of proven research on how people learn. Education is a codified field of study, and a science.

If you were to dig deep in those curricula you would find very few studies and proven methods to enhance informal or technology-enabled workplace learning. At this time, there are more conferences and magazine articles than replicable research. But that is just because we are in early times. There are examples of wonderful research in this area, scholarly books of best practice, and, yes, some published cases with repeatable methods. But we need to ask, at this point, do we have a codified field of study for technology-based informal learning? At this time, can we turn to our Ph.D.s from our best schools of education and ask them to lead our most critical informal learning initiatives based on what they’ve learned in school? Not yet….some day but not now.

I think we are at a seminal point in our field. I think we are about to shift our orbit; to meet learners where they work and play and be able to enhance their ability to perform right where they actually do it. I think the majority (but not all) of our work will shift to what now is called the informal—informal because we really do not play there now in substantial ways. The more “formal” we think about it, the more substance we will add and the more intentional and repeatable our learning value-add will become.