

MAKING INFORMAL LEARNING

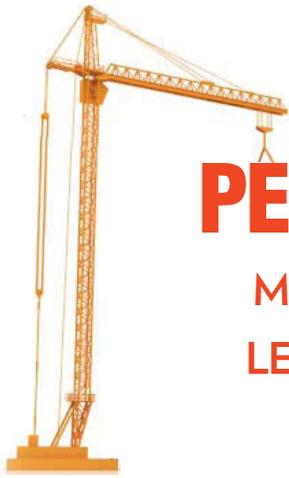


BY BOB MOSHER

For years the learning industry has been throwing around the term “informal learning.” But, to be frank, the phrase is too soft, too abstract. Imagine asking a CFO to pay for “informal learning.” To make the discipline real, it needs to be approached in a more defensible way.

“Performance Support” is a better way to describe this critical function.

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Getting to Performance Support

As a discipline, performance support has matured tremendously since it was introduced as “Electronic Performance Support System,” or EPSS, by Glory Geary in her groundbreaking 1991 book, which shares the same title. It has truly come into its own partly because of the current economic climate. It also has risen in importance and impact due to a change in the way we look at learning. Thanks to the innovative thinking of leaders such as Dr. Conrad Gottfredson and Dr. Allison Rossett, we now see learning as more than just a series of formal events, but rather as a journey between both formal and informal learning.

Part of the reason we have struggled to make performance support work is that we have fundamentally misunderstood the learning needs we are attempting to address. Many have used Gottfredson’s “5 Moments of Need” as a guide to better understand and design for this very powerful concept. They are:

1. When learning for the first time.
2. When learning something new.

3. When trying to apply or remember.
4. When things change.
5. When something goes wrong.

The learning organizations that are building learning solutions across these five moments are the ones providing a level of service learners have been waiting for and needing for years.

Unfortunately, many training departments tend to put performance support into a box, limiting its potential. The “shiny penny” phenomenon often distracts our industry. When a trend or “cool” approach/technology comes along, we tend to gravitate toward it and leave other approaches behind. We can become so enamored with these methodologies that we lose our perspective of the overall learning landscape and offer unbalanced and ineffective learning strategies.

For example, social learning is a current “shiny penny.” This is not to deny all that social learning has to offer. Social learning includes all the powerful collaborative Web 2.0 technologies that have emerged over the past several years. It also includes many non-technology-based ap-

proaches such as mentoring or peer instruction. Social learning is, and will continue to become, a very powerful part of any effective learning strategy, but it is not performance support.

Some have positioned performance support as a subset of embedded or contextual learning systems, but this sequence or classification needs to be reversed. Embedded or contextual learning systems are actually a subset of performance support. If we want to promote performance support to the level of effectiveness and influence it deserves, we need to move its overall positioning to its rightful place.

Defining Performance Support

Performance support may actually be the “informal learning” many of us have been struggling to define, fund and defend for years. It can be defined as “providing intuitive, tailored aid to a person at his or her moment of need to ensure the most effective performance.”

This is meant to be an all-encompassing definition. It is not technology-dependent, although many offerings are technology-based. If we look at it from this

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perspective, emerging and other long-standing approaches such as EPSS, social learning, coaching and mentoring, help desks, job aids and FAQ Web sites are all subsets of an effective performance support strategy.

To say that performance support is limited to a job aid or an online support tool is limiting its overall effectiveness within your learning organization. It is limiting its ability to be designed, funded and integrated as a larger and more powerful part of an overall learning architecture.

Making Performance Support Work

Would it be appropriate to stop speaking in terms of “formal and informal learning,” but rather group them into “formal and performance support” buckets? When we use as broad a term

as informal learning, we begin to bring in assets such as parking lot conversations, which, though clearly a place where learning and knowledge transfer occurs, are an area where we as a learning profession have little impact and control. Performance support should include all the informal assets we can and should impact, design and facilitate.

The irony of making performance support work is that, although the discipline is utilized on the job, the best place to introduce the concept is in the classroom and in the context of formal learning. Buy-in and support from our trainers is critical and should involve the following factors:

1) Involve the trainer early in the development process: In many learning organizations,

developing training courses is a well-oiled machine. Trainers may be asked to participate, and they have learned to create fairly standard courses. Once you begin introducing performance support into the mix, the trainers need to be involved as early as possible so they can understand the intended outcome, design and presentation. If they feel that the approach has been thrust upon them, many will not engage. In fact, trainers may even disrupt an initiative if they feel removed from the process. Many trainers see performance support as a threat. It's perceived as a tool designed to lessen their role. Again, not true! In fact, a trainer is key to making performance support successful, and it will actually enhance the classroom experience.

Resources

- [“Job Aids and Performance Support: Moving From Knowledge in the Classroom to Knowledge Everywhere”](#) (Essential Knowledge Resource) by Allison Rossett and Lisa Schafer (Hardcover - Nov 3, 2006)
- [Innovative Performance Support: Strategies and Practices for Learning in the Workflow](#) by Con Gottfredson and Bob Mosher (Paperback - Jan 7, 2011)
- Blog – [“Performer Support: Learning at the Moment of Need”](#)



ONCE YOU BEGIN INTRODUCING PERFORMANCE SUPPORT INTO THE MIX, THE TRAINERS NEED TO BE INVOLVED AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE.

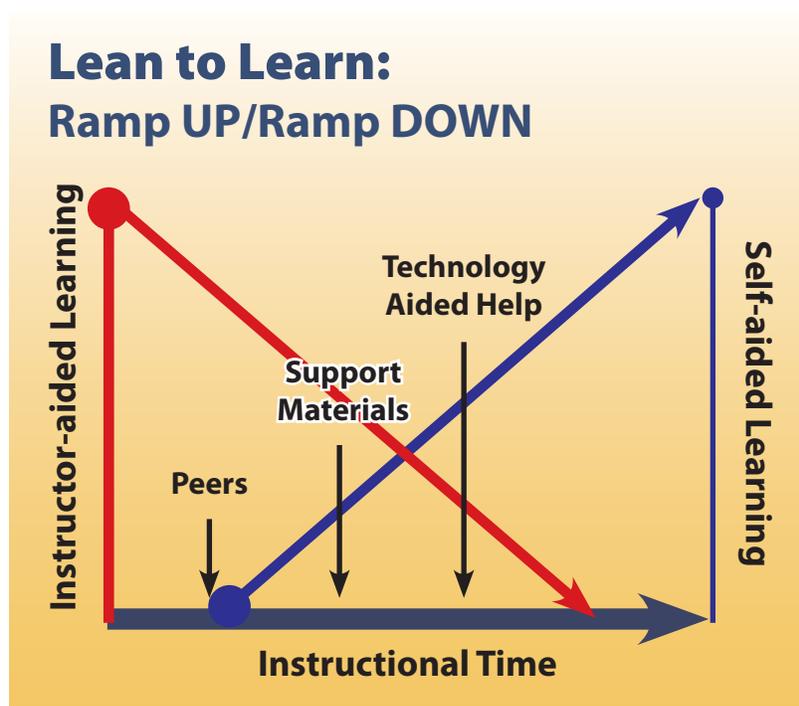
2) Help your trainers see their role differently: Integrating performance support into a classroom involves more than just “demoing the tools at the end of class.” For these tools to be truly internalized and seen as being helpful, the trainer needs to position them as an integral part of the classroom experience. They need to be seen as something that will help the learners in the context of their job, and as a tool that the trainer believes in! To make this work the trainer will need to teach a different level of skills than the ones they may typically focus on. Enabling performance support is not about learning a particular piece of content, but rather the critical thinking skills needed to effectively problem-solve and enable performance support tools in the context of doing their job. This will involve a different way of approaching instruction. It begins not with answering questions and guiding students toward the solution through the

performance support tools being introduced. The “industry term” for this type of learning strategy is “metacognition” or learning how to learn. It involves teaching a learner about when and where to use particular strategies for learning or problem solving. This is performance support’s greatest strength. The trainers who have mastered this technique are teaching at a level above all others. Performance support tools enable this to happen.

3) Teach them the “ramp up/ramp down” technique: This

is an approach to instruction where the trainer intentionally eases themselves out of the “support” business while introducing equally effective performance support strategies. As the graphic shown here illustrates, as the trainer’s level of support lessens over time, they replace that support with three tools: peer, job aids, and electronic performance support systems (EPSS). Each moves the learner that much farther away from dependent strategies and that much closer to self-directed learning. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1



Trainers have a new and vital role to play in the overall success of a performance support initiative. They simply need to be integrated and involved in a way that makes their role apparent and intentional.

When performance support is integrated into a formal learning program, the results can be amazing. But it involves an intentional

Takeaways

Informal learning, or performance support, can be a powerful complement to any formal learning program if properly positioned. The problem for many is that we haven't taken as intentional a focus on the informal as we have on the formal. Here are some key takeaways to help make that a reality:

- Always design for all five moments of need that learners experience, focusing first on the last three and then supplementing with the first two.
- Elevate performance support to a dominating discipline within your learning offerings.
- Don't be distracted by any one tool. Consider all the appropriate options and tools to create a true blended solution
- Always consider the important role trainers play in the implementation of a performance support strategy.
- Introduce and teach performance support in formal training where the learner can become familiar with how the tool works once they return to the job.

design and change management effort on part of the learning organization to make it successful.

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