Learning and Development at the Crossroads (Aug 10)

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How has Learning and Development changed since its inception? Donald Taylor believes it's not just a focus shift from simple knowledge delivery, and the whole industry has to evolve just to keep up.

I believe this is a crucial time for Learning and Development (L&D). That word 'crucial' might sound overblown, and if you're sceptical reading it, I sympathise. I've chaired the UK **Learning Technologies Conference** for the past 11 years, and over that period I've learned how much people like to claim that right now is a crucial time for something, anything. Every year is going to be the year of virtual worlds, of mobile learning, of e-whatever. And it never quite seems to happen.

But if I've been chairing that conference for 11 years, I've been in L&D for longer – for almost all my adult working life. And contrasting the position between now and the mid-80s, when I started work as a trainer, I can state unequivocally that this is indeed a crucial time. We're at a crossroads.

The choice facing L&D is stark: change, or face irrelevance.

How we were

Back in the 80s things were different – very different. We didn't have L&D. We had training. We had one major delivery mechanism, the classroom, which we used along with books and a few media such as video and audio cassettes. Mostly, though, we got people into classrooms and we delivered information (or made it available for discovery) then we checked to see whether the delegates had learned that information.

It was all about knowledge transfer. It was – on a good day – very satisfying. And at the end of the day you could go home knowing that you had done just what the job needed and maybe a little more.
A lot has changed.

There are three drivers which have placed L&D at this dramatic crossroads since those heady days, they are:

1. How we learn for work has changed
2. Technology has changed
3. Executives have changed

Learning for work has changed

Robert Kelley's longitudinal study of knowledge workers at Carnegie-Mellon University is famous, but worth repeating. He asked knowledge workers what proportion of the knowledge they needed to do their jobs was stored in their heads. The figures are:

1986 75%
1997 15-20%
2006 8-10%

This dramatic change is not just because the amount of information we need for work has increased hugely – it has, but not as much as these figures would suggest. It is because the pace of change of that information has accelerated. Once upon a time a graduate would learn plenty of what they needed at university, some more during induction, and then top it up with annual classroom training.

Now we still need people to learn plenty at college and during induction, but in addition they need to be able to find information and to learn quickly while on the job – and much more frequently than once a year.
Some people are very good at this. They use modern technology to find information (typically using search engines) or people with expertise (through social networks). Others will need to be shown how to best use such tools.

But technology plays a far great role in all this than just being a useful sidekick in daily work. It has transformed workplace learning – and threatens to completely out-flank the L&D department.

Technology has changed

There's a subtle change here in learning. Not only is technology used, frequently and in an ad hoc manner, but it's used differently to the centralised, push mechanism of the traditional training of the 80s. This is personalised, individually-driven, 'pull' learning. And often this sort of informal learning is used not – as we use traditional training – for long-term capability building. It is used for short-term performance support.

In L&D we know this in our heads, but we don't always accept it in our hearts. For example US company Ruder Finn has what it calls an internet **intent index**. They ask people what their intention was at the moment they went onto the internet to browse. Here are the seven choices they give people:

- Advocacy
- Learning
- Socialise
- Shopping
- Have fun
- Express yourself
- Do business

Ranked in terms of popularity, where do you think learning comes on that list? Where do you think shopping lies? Almost universally, L&D folk say shopping will be number one, and learning will come at the bottom.

Wrong.

Learning is number one – more popular than socialising and having fun – while shopping lies at the bottom of the list. Strangely, if you show this ranking to L&D professionals – and I have, often – the reaction is always the same: "Yes, but they don't really mean learning, do they? They just mean finding things out." Yes, they do. And that's a type of learning, too – an increasingly important part, yet it seems that L&D sometimes has difficulty accepting that anything which takes place without its intervention can be real learning.

Google automatically shows you how search engines are used for performance support. Begin typing a search term and it will suggest a completion of the term based on the most common entries made by other users. For example, on Google.com if you begin by typing 'how to', Google will suggest 'how to tie a tie'. The reason: most US boys go through school without needing to tie one, and then find themselves at their first job, or on prom' night, needing to put one on. That's classic performance support.

Do these personal learning tools mean the death of the classroom? No – it's simply that workplace learning has expanded beyond the traditional training remit of knowledge transfer. The problem is that the L&D department hasn't fully expanded with it.

The L&D function needs a broader role to be effective. The capability building that we always did in the classroom is just one of at least four things that we need to be doing:

1. **Capability building.** Centrally-controlled 'push' learning that builds individual employees' long-term knowledge and skills. What we've always done.
2. **Performance support**. Personally-driven 'pull' learning that answers specific short-term performance issues. We're familiar with this as what's often called the 'Googlisation' of learning. Actually, this term trivialises an increasingly significant part of L&D's role.
3. **Personal learning support.** We need to ensure that organisations select social and other learning tools wisely, instigate and maintain a positive learning culture and stimulate quality user-generated content. At the same time, we need to support employees in their meta-cognitive development. A graduate now is very unlikely to have all the learning skills they'll need for the next 40 years of work. They will need explicit help in developing themselves as learners and also as good communicators to other employees, because that's a crucial part of organisational learning, too.
4. **Skills management.** We need to provide both a long-term view of how we grow organisational skills both for the corporate vision of three years' time, and to meet managers' needs for their projects in 3-12 months' time.

Do we need to be doing all this things? Well, executives seem to think we do. And that's the real game changer.

Executives have changed

Back in January 2009 I predicted – along with many others – that L&D departments in the UK would be hard hit by the recession and that layoffs would be plentiful. While some people unfortunately did lose their jobs, this last recession was notable for the fact that, unlike in 2002 and in previous recessions, organisational executives explicitly said they were going to retain employees and training departments because they believed that skills would be essential to come out of the recession strongly. In some cases companies reduced wages across the board rather than cut staff.

This anecdotal evidence of executives' understanding of the importance of skills was given quantitative support with the release in July 2010 of Coleman Parkes' survey of CEOs for UK-based company Capita, **Learning to Change**. 70% of those surveyed said that inadequate staff skills were the greatest single threat to their firms' ability to capitalise on economic recovery.

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Very good. So executives now understand that skills are important. However, a shocking 46% of all those surveyed also said they did not believe that the L&D department was providing those skills. Only a paltry 18% believed that L&D's activities were actually aligned with business goals.

Why, with the executive spotlight so firmly on skills, is L&D not delivering? There is a variety of possible answers. Perhaps we are doing the job the executives want, but not letting them know about it. Perhaps we're doing the job that needs to be done, but which the executives are unaware of, because they're too far removed from training and skills.

But perhaps there's another, less comfortable, explanation.

Perhaps we're a little too comfortable where we are, doing what we've always done. Perhaps we stick to the role of information provider – whether in the classroom or online – because we like it too much. It's

our zone of expertise, and we do it very well. We're generally less comfortable with business conversations with management where we might not be so expert.

An example: earlier this year I was running a Learning and Skills Group (LSG) webinar with Laura Overton of Towards Maturity and about 150 members of the LSG community. Laura has six years of data from 1,000 companies on how to make a strategic success of implementing technologies in your organisation. While she was very clearly laying out the steps to ensure a successful elearning implementation, I noticed a vibrant discussion taking place in the text chat area that runs alongside the presentation slides. What was the topic? Nothing to do with the strategy of elearning. It was this: 'Which tool is better for creating my elearning course – Articulate or Captivate?'. As always we seem happier in the detail of knowledge transfer than the strategy.
We'd rather focus on 'how' than 'why'.

At the crossroads

So these three drivers have brought us to the crossroads: workplace learning, technology and executives.

In this new environment, L&D needs to be doing at least these four things:

1. Capability building
2. Performance support
3. Personal learning support
4. Skills management

We're probably doing only one of these well, and almost half of all CEOs believe that we can't deliver the rest.
And you know what? I'm delighted.

This is where we've wanted to be for a long time. It is finally understood that skills matter.
Ten years ago you wouldn't have found skills on the financial pages of the newspaper. You wouldn't have found them in the newspaper at all. Now they are an essential business issue and we have the tools and the understanding to do something about it.

"We can't duck the issue of expanding our own understanding of the business we work in and of L&D in wider terms than our own delegates and courses."
Of course the stakes are high. And that's great – when executives want something, it will happen. The downside: if L&D can't deliver these skills, someone else will be tasked with it. It might be HR but I believe it's more likely to be operations or an external consultancy. In either case, L&D will be relegated to an internal training fulfilment house, a rump of what it could be, delivering only part of the bigger skills agenda. We will be – more or less – an irrelevancy.

But don't we want the stakes to be high? We cannot say that skills are important and then flinch from having to make tough decisions about providing them. We can't duck the issue of expanding our own understanding of the business we work in and of L&D in wider terms than our own delegates and courses.

From the conversations that I've had with L&D professionals over the past few months, I'm confident that we have the skills, understanding and willpower to establish L&D where it deserves to be. Not as an ancillary fulfilment house, but an integral, essential part of the organisation.

We don't have a road map yet of how to do this, but the conversations around establishing L&D in its proper role have already begun.

For all the risk involved, this is a great time to be involved in learning.

This article is based on Donald's introductory talk to the 2010 Irish Learning Showcase, organised by the Irish Learning Alliance in Dublin, and is reproduced here with their kind permission.

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