What will learning look like in the future (Aug 15)

It may be in a constant state of change, but Duncan Brown and James Cory-Wright’s comprehensive feature makes some well-reasoned predictions about the future of learning.

Let’s assume first that we’re talking about technology and second, about learning in the workplace, in which case it’s not really about ‘what will learning look like in the future?’ It’s more about what the ‘learners’ of the future might look like. Or, even more to the point, what might their appetite for and attitude towards learning be and should we even be referring to it as ‘learning’ in the first place?

We’ll start here with a few thoughts about the big picture, especially some of the tech with which you may or may not be familiar, and in part two we’ll end with some thoughts around the familiar medium of video; in particular interactive video and its immense potential for genuinely immersive learning.

Learning at work?

Whoever went to work to learn? Where did that conceit spring from? Chances are that in the future there will be significantly less to ‘learn’ in the traditional sense of the word and it’ll be more about accessing information that’s relevant and useful as and when you need it. Besides, there may not be enough time to actually learn anything beyond the bare necessities: the compliance, the induction, some soft skills, leadership, change maybe and brand. Apart from that, most of what people will need will be just-in-time information and smart, personalised training.
Don’t forget the data

One key element that will contribute to increasing the personalisation of training in the future is the data that can be collected and used not just to monitor activity but also to shape it. Gathering and analysing personalised data allows the delivery of content that’s both relevant in formats that suit the learner and helps build in reward mechanisms such as an element of competition.

Aggregated data can help to identify ways in which any learning content can be made more effective and more readily available. The more people live their working lives through Internet-connected technologies the more data can, and will, be collected.

First let’s deal with what is actually being delivered to learners - the training bit – and what might that look like. Let’s start as we mean to finish:

Start at the end

Our vision for the future of learning needs to begin at the ‘back end’ as it’s known – the analytics, management information, tracking, records, evidence, scoring, measurement etc. without this we will still be left making assumptions rather than dealing with realities.

Expect the good old learning management system to be around for some time to come but no longer in ‘splendid isolation’. An LMS might host some content such as formal assessments, course booking, admin and enrolment but in future with Tin Can (xAPI) and its successors we’ll see more tracking and reporting of informal learning events, real world performance and experiences tracked at the level of ‘I did this’.

So as well as downloading content, a typical learner may be uploading learning content in the form of documents like pdfs, PowerPoints, video clips, websites and web pages – all of which can be recognised as learning experiences and recorded as evidence of training and development activities.

Now and in the future, all this information needs to be presented and made available in a flexible and easy-to-use way.

Perhaps maybe

Fortified by a dose of realism, let’s take a positive guess about what the future might look like - and the good news is:

- People may be more prepared than ever to do some training outside, as well as inside, work whether that’s while travelling to and from work, in work breaks or at home
- Learners are better equipped to train on their own devices: laptops, tablets or smartphones
- People may be prepared to train, not just in bursts, but on a continuous, ongoing basis
- People may be prepared to read more stuff, provided it is part of a mixed media offering
- Information will be everywhere so there may be a reduced need for formal training as people direct their own learning

So, mindful of the idea that learning is not necessarily an end in itself but can be instrumental in achieving a required outcome, and the need to track and record achievement, let’s assume that the statements above are distinct possibilities and explore the future accordingly.
Smart learners on smart phones

Perhaps the answer to the question 'what is the future of learning?' is literally staring us in the face, assuming you’re one of the estimated 38m people in the UK who uses a smartphone.

If you start by thinking of learners as consumers and then read the research conducted by IPSOS for Google ‘Our Mobile Planet: United Kingdom’. You won’t need us to make the connections for you as regards the future.

On the hoof

According to the IPSOS research, the learners of the future will be much more inclined to do their training on their mobile devices, including the smartphone. Where once we wouldn’t have countenanced using our own kit for work stuff, now we have bring your own device (BYOD).

Provided cost isn’t an issue, we can assume that the new 'learner-consumer' is prepared to use their own smartphone for training, but as we stated at the start of this piece, they’ll only do so provided their achievements and training activities are tracked and recorded. This has to happen for them regardless of where they are, when they do their training. In other words the tracking and recording needs to work 'offline' as well as online i.e. even when not connected to the internet. Enter the training app.

Apps ‘n that

In the future learners will be able to manage and consume their training using apps on their smartphones. These apps will be connected to the web; and if native apps connected to a Learning Record Store (LRS), they’ll be able to track progress even with only an intermittent internet connection.

How this presents itself on your smartphone will be as a dashboard showing you what training you’ve completed. It might have a leader board if you like a bit of competition, plus any social dimension, whether that’s through existing sites like Yammer, LinkedIn etc. or via a dedicated social portal.

In essence this means you can do your online training on whatever device you like precisely at the point of need, whenever you want and wherever you are regardless of whether you have an internet connection or not. Future learners will be secure in the knowledge that what they’re doing is being tracked back at base, including their progress and achievement.

When smartphones and tablets become one

The use of apps to deliver the training of the future suggests that as well as overcoming possible cost barriers, old attitudes and connectivity issues, objections around screen size will also go away.

There is a school of thought that says the smartphone screen is too small for training content whether that’s presented as text and graphics or video but the screen size of the smartphone is still unfinished business. It’s on an upward trend and getting closer to the screen size of the smaller tablets - like the 'phablet' which is a smartphone with a screen that’s 'an intermediate size between that of a typical smartphone and a tablet computer.' So will the two fully converge and become one to the point where smartphones become the main device for consuming online training? It remains to be seen but at the moment it looks like a distinct possibility and one that may be adopted for just the kind of applications we’ve been examining.

The underlying point is that people want to access more information through their phones than the screen can currently hold, so there will be further revolutionary changes to the interface. This may be software
based with improved use of available space, or it may be a hardware change such as Head-Up Displays (HUDs).

Smartphones running native apps also offer the opportunity to design training content that taps into functionality, for example GPS or Bluetooth beacons, and trigger content based on location. Real-time features like that, aligned to the LRS’s flexibility around the sort of data it can use to personalise content for us, will mean we can be automatically alerted to the availability of useful content at the point of need: Whether that’s timing or location.

Expect the smartphone at its largest screen size to become the main device for consuming and displaying online training content; using apps to download, upload and keep track of things back at base.

**Seamless training across different devices**

Of course it’s not all about hardware and software, nor is it all about being on the move which often means being in a busy, noisy, interrupted environment. There will always be a need to concentrate free from interruption, somewhere quiet – at the point of need – which could be right now, right here at your desk or out on-site or on the shop floor.

So how the training of tomorrow is delivered and consumed will have to mirror the way we already move seamlessly from one device to another. After all, it’s not uncommon for people to be watching TV with a smart phone and tablet beside them on the sofa.

In the very near future, when we haven’t completely moved over to the smartphone for everything (which may not even be called a smartphone by then), it’s likely that we’ll use apps on our smartphones to help us monitor and manage where we are with our training via a dashboard. We may be willing to do some of that training out-of-hours either on the phone, a tablet or laptop but we’re still likely to do any more time-consuming training in work time, on the desktop, or on site etc.

**More immersive than ever**

What of the training content of the future – what will it look like? Or more to the point, what will it feel like? Will it be the falling down virtual reality (VR) of Oculus Rift and co or will it be immersion by interactive video, designed and executed to the max?

We’ve looked at the big picture – we’ll leave the VR technology for another day and cut to interactive video – a medium of the present that arguably has the greatest immediate potential for the future.

YouTube is the second most popular search engine after Google. People like to watch videos for all kinds of reasons and they are particularly good if you want to learn something. If you search for an instructional video on almost any practical task you are more or less guaranteed to find it, it’s a whole new way of learning and it’s a no-brainer to extend video based learning into the workplace.

**Interactive video - where reality meets virtual reality?**

Video looks real, it transports the viewer instantly to a time and place and it can convey the nuances of emotion and human behaviour like nothing else. Possibly its only drawback is that it can present quite a broad brush view and take the viewer along at a fixed pace skimming over things that they might not have fully grasped.

Interactive video can help to correct these issues with learners free to explore additional information at their own pace: the video producers will have identified in advance those areas that learners are likely to need and placed them as assets behind clickable hotspots.
So, instead of being a passive experience, learning through video becomes one in which the viewer is actively involved - they either choose to engage with the content or they can be compelled to do so if they need to for compliance reasons.

People will automatically relate to and learn through the video as they interact with scenes that show the challenges they face at work with the addition of the information and techniques they need to tackle them.

**Designed for online learning - tracking, scoring**

Any interactions the learner has with the film can be recorded via an LMS so that trainers and administrators know exactly what content has been seen by each individual. If the film is designed to test knowledge it does so without the need to always revert to a set of multiple-choice questions - the testing and learning are seamlessly mixed in the film.

It will run on the device the learner chooses and if current trends continue that is likely to be on a tablet or large smartphone. The tech behind this is available right now, we can create videos with learning scenarios that are dotted with visible or invisible interactive hotspots to test the learner and/or expand their knowledge.

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