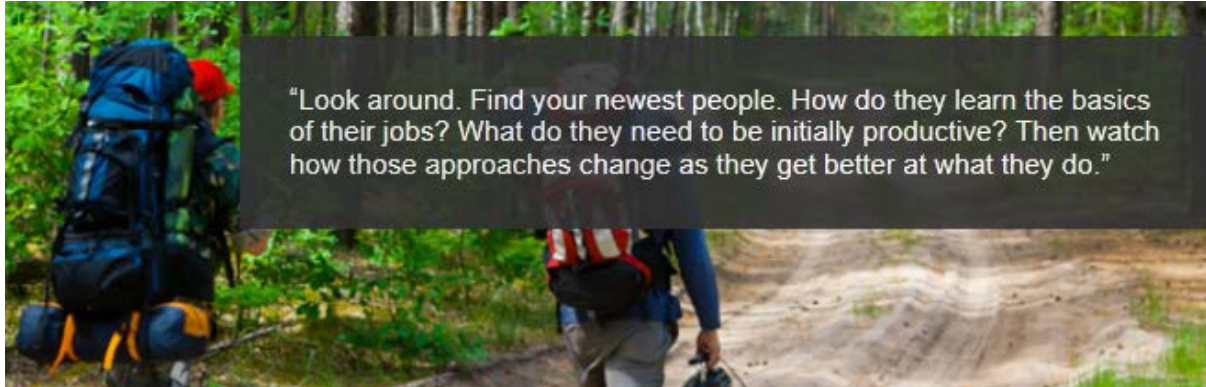


Beyond Competence - It's the Journey to Mastery That Counts (May 12)

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For millennia, humans looked into the night sky and saw stars they believed were fixed in space. And, of course, the earth was the center of it all. Now we know that nothing is fixed. The stars move, the earth moves, and we move. It's all relative, depending on where you stand and what's around you (thanks, Albert Einstein).

We can apply this perspective to the notion of "competence." We have tended to think of competence as a fixed point: either you are competent or you are not. With this thinking, Dr. Einstein was just a competent physicist, the Beatles were only a competent band, and Seal Team Six are just a bunch of competent sailors. And try telling Olympians that they are merely competent athletes. Are you thinking about going in for some medical tests? If they told you the doctor is "competent," would you be concerned? What an uninteresting and stagnant world we would live in if everyone was just competent at what they do.

So the whole idea of competence seems incomplete. We develop dozens, if not hundreds of competencies, and we strive mightily for everyone in the organization to become competent in their work. But are we finished?

The fact is that competence is not really the ultimate goal; it is simply one stop on a four-stop road to mastery. And if you are going to make decisions about learning programs and training strategies (including eLearning), it's important to understand that capability and performance are moving targets. It's all relative to where learners are, where they have been, and where they are going. So let's drop the narrow focus on competence and competencies and instead look at a continuum of performance from novice to master.

The novice to mastery model

The model in Figure 1 illustrates a number of important ideas about this journey.

First, there are four distinct stages of mastery:

1. **Novice.** A novice (or apprentice) is, by definition, new to a job. Novices know little or nothing about the work, certainly too little to be able to perform to any acceptable standard. Novices must be taught (or shown) the basics of what is to be done before they can have any chance of being productive. The learning strategy here is overwhelmingly instructional. "Show me (teach me) how to do my job," they ask.
2. **Competent.** Competent (or journeyman) workers can perform jobs and tasks to basic standards. They've had their basic training and now look for more coaching and practice to get better at what they do. "Help me do it better," is their primary request.

Learning Through Four Stages of Mastery

"The way we learn changes as we get better at what we do."

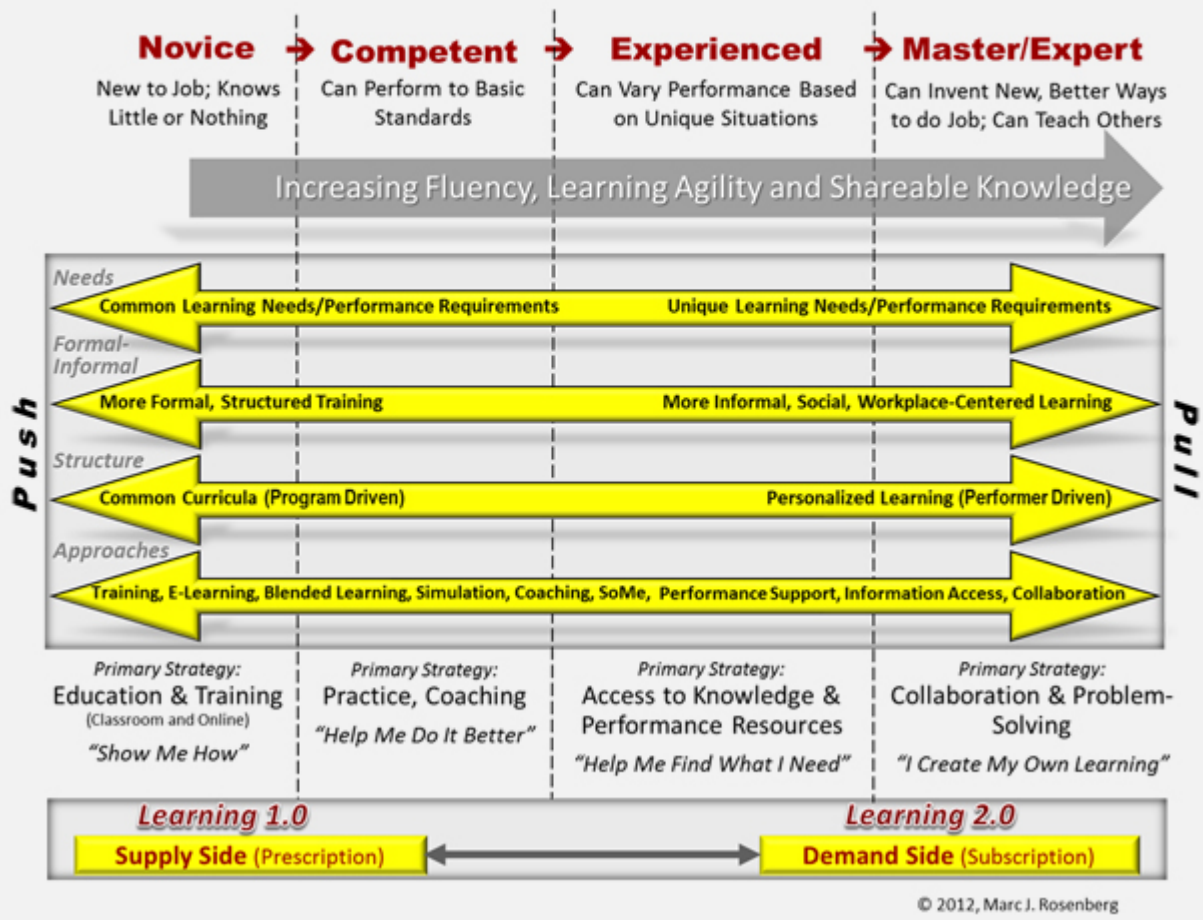


Figure 1: The journey from novice to mastery

- Experienced.** This is where it gets really interesting. Experienced workers are beyond merely competent. They can vary their performance based on unique situations. Because they encounter a variable and often unpredictable set of work problems and challenges, they need access to knowledge and performance resources on demand, and the ability to search those resources in ways that are flexible and customizable by them, depending on the situation. "Help me find what I need," they ask, as they search for information, from sophisticated online systems to the coworkers around them.
- Master/Expert.** Masters and experts create new knowledge. They invent new and better ways to do a job, and they can teach others how to do it. They are truly unique individuals and seek to learn in unique and personal ways, primarily through collaboration, research, and problem solving. "I'll create my own learning," they say.

In any dynamic workplace, people are usually at multiple levels at the same time, making learning decisions even more complex. An IT expert may be a novice in personnel supervision. An experienced salesperson may be just barely competent in selling a brand-new item. A terrific customer care representative may be asked to train new reps, making her a novice in this new role.

The line between these four levels is fuzzy even beyond the fact that people may be at two or more levels at the same time, depending on what they are doing. It will be difficult to determine when exactly someone moves from novice to competent, or from experienced to master/expert, but this is okay; we can live with some ambiguity as long as we look primarily at job performance (how people

do their work) rather than learning gain (how people score on a test). The more data points we get (including anecdotal evidence), the better.

Certainly, not everyone will reach mastery, but we know that as people strive to move up the ladder they get better at their jobs. As they do, they exhibit increasing performance fluency, agility, and ability to share knowledge. Fluency refers to the smoothness with which they perform their jobs. The lack of hesitancy and the ease at which they perform tasks all improve as workers move up the mastery ladder. Agility, the ability to adapt and react to new situations, to “shift on the fly” based on new information, also increases as people go through the four phases. And as people get more expertise and experience, they become better at sharing it with others through collaboration, coaching, mentoring, and teaching.

This four-stage mastery model (Table 1) tells us a lot about the best learning strategies to employ along the way (note: smartphone users may need to use landscape mode to view table correctly):

Table 1: Learning strategies at the four stages of mastery

	Needs	Formal/ Informal	Structure	Approaches
Novice	Most novices have similar common learning requirements and need to learn similar skill and knowledge content.	Novices require learning strategies that are more formalized and instructional, providing similar learning experiences and opportunities to all novices.	Learning content for novices predominately comes from a common program-driven curriculum. Learning is driven by the instructional design.	Training (including eLearning and blended learning) is the primary learning approach for novices.
Competent	Competent workers seek to hone their skills as they become comfortable on the job.	Competent workers rely on more advanced training programs that include more practice, simulation, and problem solving.	Learning for competent workers is still program driven, but we introduce more variability and collaboration into the learning design to meet their emerging individual needs.	Coaching, simulations, and problem solving are essential for improving the performance – and comfort level – of competent workers. Introduction of social media facilitates collaboration.
Experienced	Experienced workers have increasingly unique learning needs and performance requirements that the previously dominant training programs often do not meet.	At the experienced level, we introduce more informal learning strategies as the learning environment transitions from the classroom to the workplace.	Learning content for experienced workers becomes more personalized and less structured. Performer-driven design replaces program-driven design.	Knowledge management and performance support play a key role for experienced workers. Social learning emerges as a critical workplace learning and performance opportunity.

<p style="text-align: center;">Master/ Expert</p>	<p>Masters and experts are more likely to be “learners of one.” That is, each master/expert’s learning needs and performance requirements are likely descriptive of that particular person alone.</p>	<p>For masters and experts, learning is very much a peer-based, collaborative, and social activity. They learn from each other.</p>	<p>Customized learning strategies and environments are made available for each master/expert, likely including opportunities for lots of independent research and peer associations.</p>	<p>Collaborative learning is a key for masters and experts, as is the ability to learn through innovation and invention processes. Becoming a teacher, mentor, or coach to others is another important learning strategy.</p>
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This table is a guideline, not a hard-and-fast rule. Certainly, novices will be coached and mentored, use job aids, and access knowledge bases, and masters/experts will attend a course now and then. And all learners, at all levels, collaborate; but how they do it, the degree to which they do it, and the relative importance of the collaboration shifts with their increasing know-how. Bottom line: as people move up the mastery ladder and their capabilities grow, predominant learning strategies change.

Push vs. pull

Over the continuum of this mastery journey, learning, including eLearning, starts out as predominately a “push” strategy. That is, we push learning program content, design, and structure to all learners in the same consistent manner. However, as learners become more competent and experienced, and especially as they approach master/expert levels, learning embraces much more of a “pull” strategy, where learners take what they need from the repositories of knowledge, tools, and advice available to them. How they navigate these resources is increasingly a decision they make.

Implications for training (both classroom and online)

Based on this model, 10 important implications and recommendations arise for training managers and designers:

1. **One size does not fit all.** A consistent instructional strategy across the differing capabilities of a worker population may be a mistake.
2. **Pass control to learners.** As learners become more knowledgeable and skillful, they can benefit from taking more control of their own learning.
3. **Entry-level learners are unique.** Putting too little structure on entry-level learners may make learning more difficult, confusing, and demoralizing for them.
4. **Advanced-level learners are also unique.** Putting too much structure on advanced-level learners may make learning boring, frustrating, inefficient, and off-target for them.
5. **Learn how to learn.** We must give learners the skills and tools to learn on their own or they will become too dependent on more-structured learning programs when they should be evolving to independent learning. Focus on this as early in the learning path as possible.
6. **Learning technology usage evolves with increasing mastery.** How learning technology is used changes as learners become more masterful, and control of the learning technology should be increasingly placed in the hands of the learners themselves.
7. **Learning evaluation is not the same across the model.** Evaluation strategies for learning increasingly take their cues from the learner’s level of performance. From testing to observations to work products to organizational contribution and innovation, people at different stages of the model should be evaluated differently.
8. **The workplace environment is critical.** The more skillful a learner becomes the more important positive and supportive workplace and supervisory environments are in learning design, implementation, and effectiveness.

9. **The definition of eLearning is expanding.** The nature of eLearning changes as learners move up the mastery ladder. Performance support, knowledge management, mobile apps, social media, and more augment synchronous and asynchronous eCourseware.
10. **Instructional design must become more flexible.** As learning designs shift when learners move up the mastery ladder, the role of instructional design also changes. Course development yields to information design, collaboration, performance support development, job design, knowledge management, and so on. Instructional designers would be wise to move up their own ladder of skills as well.

Evolving to Learning 2.0

The movement to “learning 2.0” is accelerating. What makes learning 2.0 different from traditional learning approaches (learning 1.0) is the transition from classroom to workplace, push to pull, prescription to subscription, and formal to informal (and social) learning. Essentially, this parallels the movement across the four levels of mastery. While many people see these as new ideas, we are not really instituting new or different strategies as much as we are finally adapting our processes and methods to reflect what is already taking place in the real world.

Beyond competence

Look around. Find your newest people. How do they learn the basics of their jobs? What do they need to be initially productive? Then watch how those approaches change as they get better at what they do.

Now notice how your best people learn. See how they differ from novices and newly competent people in the way they improve their skills and abilities. Watch their transition from classroom-based structured learning to workplace-based independent learning. See the movement from learning 1.0 to learning 2.0. Once this phenomenon is apparent, and it will be, it will open up tremendous opportunities to accelerate individual and organizational learning.

Being competent at something is good, but insufficient. As the saying goes, “it’s not the destination that counts, it’s the journey.”

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