Is the formal training room obsolete? (Jul 10)

by Laura Overton on 23 July

As the learning environment become increasingly flexible, traditional training rooms are being replaced by newer, more innovative learning methods. Laura Overton explores the issue.

Recent figures from Lifelong Learning UK revealed that half of all office workers felt they would waste less time at work if they had better knowledge of technology. According to the CBI, one of the biggest challenges for business over the next 10 years will be how to build, retain and make the most of knowledge and experience in the workforce while finances for training are increasingly restricted.

We have to face up to the fact that the classroom, as the only focus for acquiring skills, no longer cuts it with the learner in the workplace for a number of reasons. In fact, technology has an important role to play in ensuring that the availability of workplace learning becomes more flexible.

I need it now

"I am not advocating throwing the classroom out with the bathwater, but using some of the extensive resources available to us to build confidence in using IT for learning."

Firstly, many just can't afford to wait. When we need to do something differently in our jobs – we need to be able to do it yesterday, not wait until the next available gap on a classroom schedule or join the next cohort of students. Those new into the workplace are even more demanding. Born into a digital world, they are constantly connected via mobile and social networking sites where they can get immediate answers and help. To keep up with business and learner demand, L&D professionals need to be able to respond faster than the schedules allow, as they have a vital role to play in ensuring that all learning, by both formal and informal means, delivers the skills that the business needs.

Building skills for time-starved staff

These days, most staff have so little time but so much to do. For many, who may be struggling with work/life balance, shift patterns or family life, having to take time out to go to class can be a disincentive that takes them away from their day job. Taking staff away from the ward, the production line or their customers for any extended period can have a knock-on effect on patient care, productivity or sales. However, the converse is also true – keeping unskilled staff in position can also have a negative impact on the business, and we mustn't shy away from building staff skills. But we need to think again – is the classroom always the most effective medium to use in every situation?

Innovation doesn't just mean converting class to online courses

Whilst the classroom has its place, it's not right for all learners. Innovative learning solutions are needed if we are to reduce time away from the workplace and improve skills. It is not surprising that more and more organisations are looking to technology to lend a helping hand. According to the CIPD, 62% of organisations in their 2010 Learning and Talent survey said that they used elearning practices more than in 2009.

"Is the classroom always the most effective medium to use in every situation?"

In the Towards Maturity Impact Indicator, we discovered that 69% of respondents found that using technology to enhance learning sped up the amount of time it took for learners to reach competency.

Used well, technology also delivers efficiencies, saving time by 28%, compared with classroom learning, and saving 11% in financial costs.

However, just converting a course to run online won't deliver results. Technology used badly, as a quick, cheap fix could even make the situation worse. Our Towards Maturity Benchmark has shown that staff reluctance is the number one barrier to the successful adoption of elearning in the workplace – this reluctance is fuelled by poor experience (most can testify to the boredom of being forced through a self-paced, text-heavy online course) and lack of confidence – both in L&D staff who are not comfortable with the new media available to them and in some staff who are not confident online.

The right attitude to learning innovation

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It is clear that we need to think innovatively about how the technology can enable new types of learning solutions, which extend the benefits of the classroom to those unable to get there. The web now offers the opportunity for staff to connect together, to learn together, to share together, and creates many opportunities to support and encourage learning outside of the classroom. But it is critical that L&D staff keep up to speed with the options available to them when designing solutions suitable for today's learners.

It is important not to repeat the mistakes of the past when using technology in learning and there are a number of ways to avoid this:

- For L&D staff in business, why not take part in the Towards Maturity Learning Technology Benchmark, free until end of July at **www.towardsmaturity.org/2010**, which can help you reflect on effective blended learning practices and highlight opportunities to improve the impact of your technology-enabled solutions
- If you are a provider-supporting business, Lifelong Learning UK has developed some easy-to-use guides and an animated map as resources to support learning professionals on their journey towards the effective use of technology in learning. These are available to download at **www.lluk.org/techguides.htm** and **http://www.lluk.org/connect.htm**
- If you are concerned about the confidence of staff in just getting online in the first place, then it is definitely work looking at the free Online Basics resources available at **http://partners.helppassiton.co.uk**.

I am not advocating throwing the classroom out with the bathwater, but using some of the extensive resources available to us to build confidence in using IT for learning – both for L&D staff and also for the learner themselves – we can make learning at work a much more successful, accessible and enjoyable experience for all.

Laura Overton is the managing director of Towards Maturity, a not-for-profit organisation providing independent research and resources to help improve the impact of learning technology at work **www.towardsmaturity.org**.

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