



## What Lies *Beyond* E-Learning?

By Marc J. Rosenberg

*This article is based on Marc Rosenberg's new book, "[Beyond E-Learning: Approaches and Technologies to Enhance Organizational Knowledge, Learning and Performance](#)," just published by Pfeiffer.*

Just when we thought we had e-learning all figured out, it's changing again. After years of experimentation and the irrational exuberance that characterized the late 1990s, we find our views of e-learning more sober and realistic. This is a good sign; we can make more rational forecasts of how the field will evolve. It also presents some challenges, and the direction we are heading may not be the path we originally thought we were on.

For the most part, the e-learning changes and challenges that are fast approaching will help propel the field into a new evolutionary phase—if we're open-minded and ready to recognize them. Essentially, we will witness six fundamental, and somewhat interrelated, transformations in the field over the next few years:

1. E-learning will become more than "e-training."
2. E-learning will move to the workplace.
3. Blended learning will be redefined.
4. E-learning will be less course-centric and more knowledge-centric.
5. E-learning will adapt differently to different levels of mastery.
6. Technology will become a secondary issue.

### **E-learning will become more than "e-training"**

"We need a course" is probably the most overused statement ever delivered by—or to—a training organization. As prominent as that statement is, and as important as the training function is, when organizations follow it blindly, it presupposes that the best solution to an identified performance problem is *always* and *only* training. There are few instances where this is actually the case. Although e-learning began as a new way to deliver training, it cannot remain that way because it is no longer able to adequately support all the learning needs of individuals and organizations by itself—it every was. E-learning has moved in a new, somewhat unanticipated direction that is not always reminiscent of an instructional framework.

To be more influential, e-learning must be reinvented. While continuing to provide a viable instructional option in a formal learning setting, it must also move toward informational and collaborative solutions that focus more prominently on the specific jobs people do. It must move beyond courseware and classrooms and into work. To reinvent e-learning is, in many ways, to reinvent learning itself.

By providing such tools and resources as knowledge management, communities of practice, and performance support that support learning and performance directly in the workplace, practitioners are, in a sense, building a bridge from the classroom to the job. One way to do this, of course, is to provide workplace-accessible online training. But is this enough? Are people, in the context of performing their jobs, always able to stop working to take a course every time they have a question? Probably not. What workers are looking for is straightforward and reliable access to information and expertise that answers their questions, demonstrates a task or processes, provides advice, and makes their work easier and better. With technology as an enabler, these resources are available from the desktop—fixed or mobile—and provide a wealth of opportunities to learn quickly only what is needed, at the precise moment of need.

### **E-learning will move to the workplace**

Living and prospering on "Internet time" requires a complete rethinking of what it means to learn, where learning takes place, and what learning actually looks like. E-Learning is part of the journey to this new reality of business, and of work.

Training organizations, whether they are run as large corporate universities, small training departments, or as outsourced services, will have to focus far more on the workplace rather than just the classroom, and extend learning to support people directly on the job. This means that instructional solutions will be inadequate to do this alone.

Training organizations will have to become much more interdisciplinary. They will need to fuse many technologies and approaches that cut across formal and informal learning situations. And they must become much more involved in directly supporting work, and the processes and tasks that comprise work. It will become increasingly important to suggest how the processes and tools of work can be made easier, from the start, rather than developing training to compensate for poor work design. Doing these things is the only way to build and sustain human performance in the long run.

When practitioners begin to explore the interrelationship between formal classroom training and informal workplace learning and support, it will become clear that to be successful, each method and tool must be managed and woven into a seamless resource. When that happens, the line between learning and the actual support of workplace performance virtually disappears.

### **Blended learning will be redefined**

The popular, albeit limited definition of blended learning is the integration of group and self-paced instruction, usually manifested through classroom and online delivery. This view correctly recognizes that while there are situations where classroom training with a qualified instructor is most appropriate, there are also situations where online training works better, and there are times when a prudent combination of both approaches is best. Decisions on how to blend are based to some degree on instructional design considerations (such as how to best present training materials and content to facilitate effective learning), as well as on business considerations, including cost and productivity issues (such as speed of deployment, scalability, time in training, updateability).

To many organizations, blended learning seems so logical that they have embraced it as a fundamental tenet of how they will work going forward. But this view of blending is far too limited. It assumes only an instructional approach, when other approaches may be more appropriate and more cost-effective. When the solution (online or classroom training) is pre-ordained, other opportunities are too often off the radar screen. Sometimes, this is a result of an organization's limited viewpoint. At other times, the concept has not had sufficient time to mature. Either way, the concept of blended learning is changing and expanding.

In the emerging view of blended learning, the course is no longer the default or only "container" for the solution. An expanded view of blended learning includes the combination of training (formal) and non-training (informal) approaches that support the smart enterprise and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning and performance. More limited definitions, ones that simply focus on integrating online and classroom training, may improve the quality and efficiency of the instructional solution, but they don't do enough to move learning—and e-learning—where it needs to go: to the workplace and into the workflow.

### **E-learning will be less course-centric and more knowledge-centric**

Online training catalogs, whether supported by a learning management system or not, tend to organize content by domain (for example, sales and marketing, IT, or leadership), and ultimately by curriculum and course. For the training organization, providing easy access to courseware is paramount. The problem is that navigating through a course catalog, no matter how well designed and how comprehensive, usually serves up just one type of knowledge "container" — courses.

What should be apparent by now is that there are many other knowledge resources that are unsynchronized, and therefore go untapped, because they are either undiscovered or inaccessible. A knowledge-centric view is a far different picture of online content.

Enter the knowledgebase, which is far more robust than an online course catalog. When a user queries this knowledgebase to learn about a topic, the amount and variety of resources served up, such as documents, websites, experts, communities, tools, and events, as well as courses, is much more comprehensive. A knowledge-centric, rather than a course-centric approach embraces an expanded and more inclusive definition of e-learning, and adds more value by systematically bringing more content to the surface where it can be found.

### **E-learning will adapt differently to different levels of mastery**

What many organizations are discovering is that the way people learn often varies by their level of mastery in a job. This can have a significant impact on the learning approaches and technologies employed. The role of learning technology changes as workers move through four levels of mastery: novice, competent, experienced, and master/expert. People new to a job generally require more formal, structured learning solutions around more common learning needs and common "program (push) driven" curricula.

As workers progress and become more skillful, their primary learning requirements begin to shift to more informal, on-the-job learning that is more personalized,

"performer (pull) driven" and based on their unique learning needs. The more "masterful" the performer becomes, the more important knowledge management, collaboration, and performance support components of a robust learning and performance architecture become in their learning.

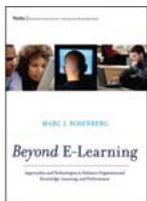
Of course, workers will avail themselves of all types of learning and performance solutions throughout their careers. For example, master/experts may take more advanced courses in their field, and novices may use a performance support tool or job aid to move to competency faster). However, recognizing and supporting different learning strategies based on levels of mastery can be very effective in enhancing and sustaining performance over a longer period of time.

### **Technology will become a secondary issue**

The fabulous success of the Internet, not just as a communications or educational tool, but as a business tool, has led to wide and quick adoption of interoperable infrastructures and platforms that facilitate and enhance the value of the Web. Although late to the game, learning technologies will be integrated into our networks and applications to a point where they will be taken for granted. Then, learning and performance professionals will once again be able to focus on designing and delivering new and innovative solutions that are more efficient and effective than we have today.

While traditional e-learning and associated technologies are important, practitioners have often been too quick to embrace them, especially to solve current problems—a "cure all" mentality—without considering what future challenges and consequences might be. We should think of e-learning and learning technology as enablers, not as a strategy. It's the highway, not the destination; the means rather than the ends.

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