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Why ‘The Curve’? Because our world is full of curves...

In our industry, we’re all on a learning curve. We’re all on a forgetting curve too – the one defined by Ebbinghaus that reminds us how difficult it is to make knowledge stick.

Buy side or supply side, we’re all about inflection points … we dream of hockey stick take-up curves for our programmes … and sometimes we achieve them.

In our adoption of innovative new learning practices we tend to fall along a standard distribution curve (or ‘bell curve’) – some of us behind the curve, some of us ahead of it. And as we look to the future, the curve that many keep a close eye on is that described by the Gartner Hype Cycle. New technology developments scale the peak of inflated expectations, only to plunge into the trough of disillusionment, where they either disappear for good or crawl their way painfully up the shallow slope of enlightenment towards the plateau of productivity.

Learning technologies sit at a point of intersection between science and the creative arts. Surfable waves, Fibonacci sequences and the Hogarthian Line of Beauty can all be described as equations. And the best equations (or so say those who know about these things) have a beauty to them. E=MC². Gravity only appears to make things fall in straight lines – splanetary orbits, a type of falling, are elliptical.

When you look at the bigger picture, the truth is curved.

John Helmer
Editor
It’s 2016, and what a fantastic opportunity we have ahead of us all!

Digital transformation is shaking up everyone’s world, none more so than the world of learning, and at Lumesse we are rising to the opportunity presented to us.

We’re launching this new learning read, The Curve – a sort of in-flight magazine for leaders in learning.

We will share our thoughts, and those of our guest collaborators. Let’s face it: if we can’t socialise learning, then who can?

So it goes without saying that we hope you enjoy your copy of The Curve. Do get in touch if there any are topics you’d like to see us cover.

Andrea Miles  
Director, Lumesse Learning

Welcome aboard and thanks for flying with us!
Insight-driven learning can improve learner engagement, learning effectiveness and delivery against business goals – but it takes a change of mindset.

How listening to the learner’s voice drives better business results
How listening to the learner’s voice drives better business results

An organisation wanted to improve the presentation skills of its executives. Trouble was, the executives in question didn’t see that there was anything to improve.

Middle-aged, empowered males for the most part, they reacted incredibly negatively to any suggestion that they might need training in this area – or in any other area, for that matter. Offers of training fell on deaf ears, or worse, were interpreted as a primal challenge to their personal authority. Meanwhile, poor communication and miscommunication from these executives were holding the organisation back.

So how do you train people who have such a strong psychological investment in their own unimprovability?

The answer, in this case, was a learning campaign that avoided anything the executives might recognise as ‘learning’. Rather than producing another course, the team created a glossy magazine-style publication to get the content across, positioning it as exclusive, inside information just for this cadre – but definitely non-mandatory and to be accessed at will.

Reception has been enthusiastic and the company now has the tools to tackle this important skills gap effectively.

Insight-driven learning

The example we have just given shows insight-driven learning in action. Insight-driven learning is an approach that sees the learner as the most important individual in the creation of learning, and tapping into deep insights from the learner community as the key to achieving the sort of business benefits organisations look to get from learning programmes – such as improved productivity, costs savings, and so on.

Fulfilling the business goal should certainly be the prime driver for any piece of learning design, but in Carole’s view, failing to reach out to learners as part of the process is “missing a trick”.

At the beginning of a programme you can very easily make wrong assumptions by not engaging with learners: “You’re probably tapping into different groups of advisers – L&D people, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), people within the business line – to work out what learners need to do in order to meet business goals. But if you don’t join the dots with the learner, to put it bluntly, it probably won’t work”.

It’s also important to recognise that, as in our example, learner insights should be used not only to define what your learning actions and outcomes are, but also how you can best reach and engage that audience. Insights gained through working with groups of learners might tell you, for instance, that a course won’t work – you need to create a video, or an interactive pdf (L-Book) instead. Or that digital technology won’t work on its own and you need some human intervention. Or that there are diversity considerations that simply haven’t been raised.
How learners are changing

The drive to make learning more insight-driven is all the more timely given the way in which employee behaviours are changing around learning. We are seeing the rise of the self-directed learner. According to Towards Maturity’s recent Benchmark Report:

- 88% like to be able to learn at their own pace
- 87% know what learning they need to do their job
- 76% want to be able to do their job better/faster
- 42% learn at weekends or evenings

The modern workplace is an information-rich environment where staff are bombarded with demands on their time and attention. L&D must compete with all these other sources to get its message home. Today’s learning professional is engaged in a war of attention and has to think more like a marketer trying to snag the attention and interest of consumers.

How does it work?

A good way to understand how insight-driven learning changes the process of programme design is to dwell a bit further on this marketing analogy by considering how advertising campaigns get made.

In the initial stages, ad agencies draw heavily on sources of research – both qualitative and quantitative – using surveys and focus groups to get right to the heart of how their target consumers think and feel. They look at motivations and emotional triggers, which they use to generate creative messages they know will engage their intended audience and have the right kind of impact on attitudes and behaviours to make people buy.

Substitute the word ‘learn’ for ‘buy’, and you start to get a good idea of how insight-driven learning works.

This is not to say that rapid development is out of the window, or that learning programme design has to involve a lengthy research phase. Our own customers often find they have more insights than perhaps they realise, which we can draw out within a normal design process. Often it’s simply a matter of asking the right questions. And gathering insights is an ongoing, constant – sometimes iterative – process. The more we work with a particular client, the more programmes we have launched and learned from together, the greater becomes our mutual understanding of their different learner groups.

What is an insight?

Many have called over the years for L&D to become more evidence-based in its judgements – less reliant on outdated instructional theories and more resistant to ‘snake-oil’ salesmen parroting the latest pseudo-academic models and buzzphrases.

To be insight-driven is to be perhaps something more than purely evidence-based, since insights go somewhat beyond data. However, meaningful insights are always firmly rooted in empirical observation. An insight involves data-gathering, analysis and judgement – filtered according to an expertise born of long experience – and perhaps there is also a flash of intuition in there as well.

But what are the types of insights that feed into designing effective learning programmes?
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Four types of insights that drive learning campaigns

Steve George, Learning Solutions Consultant at Lumesse Learning, has highlighted four of the primary categories of insights (below) that feed into successful learning programme design. These insights from different sources will often interact in interesting ways.

For instance, listening to the learner’s voice will sometimes highlight a disparity between the actual learner’s needs and the content that it is planned to be delivered. In order to bridge this gap it might be necessary to probe the business need – the ultimate ‘why’ behind the programme – in order to focus on what will satisfy the needs of both groups and create a win-win. This idea of finding a win-win is important because, as Steve says, “Without both those needs being satisfied, neither the organisation nor the learner will achieve their aims.”

By listening to and engaging with the project team effectively, an external developer will gain valuable insight into the company culture that provides context for the learning, as well as how to work effectively as a learning partner with the organisation. At the same time, the internal team will gain insights from the external development team, both from specialist skills and knowledge that they bring to the table and also via the fourth category of insights. This category covers insights from the external environment as represented by the learning technology industry and many other relevant sources – from academic journals, to the news, and much in the middle.

Hard-working L&D departments don’t always have much opportunity to survey what is going on in this wider world, or don’t have as much experience to draw on from working and delivering within other organisations and sectors in the past.

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Learning analytics

Another important source of insights that can feed into programme design are those gleaned from analytics and, increasingly in the future, big data. This is a burgeoning area, and one we are exploring with our clients to help them build a more evidence-based and insight-driven learning practice.

No longer restricted to measuring take-up, completions and test scores through the limited metrics delivered by SCORM, L&D can now tell all sorts of things about how learners interact with digital content – and can benefit from the ability this provides to tweak and iterate. Indeed, the process of gathering insights and learning about your learners’ needs can no longer be confined to an initial design phase of the learning programme. Instead it becomes an ongoing feedback loop built into the programme delivery itself – with your insight-driven learning programme generating more insights as it is rolled out to the learners – to guide and hone your delivery of high-quality learning opportunities.

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Ten things I know about learning

Clive Shepherd
Founding Director at The More Than Blended Learning Company

1. We will not learn without paying close attention. We will only do that if we regard what’s going on as relevant to us.

2. Novices are easily overloaded with new information. Paying close attention is tiring.

3. Five minutes is probably as much time as most of us want to spend attending to new information. On the other hand, we are happy to spend hours engaged with stories or solving challenging problems.

4. We can’t attend to two verbal stimuli at the same time (i.e. text and speech). We have to choose one or the other, and this can be distracting.

5. For learning to take place in the long term, we must work with new information. We don’t necessarily need to interact with other people or with content to do this, but it will help.

6. Pictures, stories and emotionally charged situations are much more memorable than abstract ideas and instructions.

7. All new learning must be connected with prior knowledge through association and pattern recognition. Good teaching helps us to do this.

8. Recall of knowledge is aided by rehearsal and practice spaced over time. Cramming provides a short-term hit, but the benefits fade quickly.

9. Practice without constructive feedback is ineffective. Feedback that just tells us we are right or wrong is not enough.

10. The process of learning is not always enjoyable, nor does it need to be (although it should not be overly stressful). It is the fact of having learned something that is enjoyable.
Ed Scruton’s top tips for innovating in learning

1. Go to where the energy is. If you have a particular group of people within one function who are receptive to the idea of changing approach and wrestling with new ideas and concepts, that’s a great place to start. If they’ve already bought in to change, they will more than likely have the energy and belief to try something different and persist through the inevitable challenges.

2. Try something different in one area, then publicise your success around the organisation. If a new approach works, and others see it working, this often triggers interest from other stakeholder groups who will then want to try it out in their own parts of the business.

3. Be bold. Sometimes, if you have real belief in what you are going to deliver, go ahead and try it out first, then show people what you did (as opposed to spending a long time explaining up front what you’re going to do). Showing can be far more powerful than telling.

Ed Scruton
Digital Learning Consultant at SABMiller, the world’s biggest beer and soft drinks business.

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Jordan Woodward, Technical Specialist here at Lumesse, shares his top 3 opportunities for VR in Learning:

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(i) The prize draw (the “Prize Draw”) is open to people aged 18 and over who provide their business card on the day of the Learning Lounge event. (ii) The closing date of the Prize Draw is 23:59 on 3 February 2016. Entries received outside this time period will not be considered.

(iii) Full terms and conditions are at www.lumesselearning.com/learning-lounge/
Our childhood thirst for stories is educational for us, and there is an instinctive quality to the way children seek stories out. It has even been proposed that the story instinct is as powerful and innate a characteristic as the language instinct, and that this is apparent in play and much more. A not uncommon conversation with my young daughter might go like this:

“Daddy, why is that lady carrying a big bag?”

“Maybe she is coming back from the shops? What do you think?”

“I think she has all her favourite things and is going to see some friends to show them. They’ll probably eat cake.”

Why do children do this? They are creating a narrative – because narrative creates meaning, and meaning creates understanding of events they may be encountering for the first time. And as adults, we do exactly the same. Our behaviours of jumping to conclusions, stereotyping and making sweeping assumptions are all based on stories we tell ourselves to create understanding. We have a broader foundation of experience and context with which to guide our narratives, but the principles are common.

Human memory doesn’t really even begin until we are able to string events together and make connections. And the more we reinforce those connections between events in the real world (and between fictional and real events), the stronger those connections become. That’s an important point for learning – it’s why in learning design we look to create hooks that tie the learning experience to the real world, even if we necessarily use examples that are more abstract. It is these stories, and the connections they forge, that ultimately make recall possible.

So what five tips can you use for effective storytelling in learning?...

1. Keep it real. The temptation can be to go for a big shock or cataclysmic event to try and hook your audience. But often that’s disengaging – base your events in recognisable reality for a bigger impact.

2. Create a character (or more than one). Give them a personality – maybe base them on a colleague. Give them a backstory, too. Write a profile for them that will probably never make it into the learning but will make your writing of them more real.

3. Don’t lose the plot. What is your captivating opening? What is your big close? What is the struggle in the middle needing resolution (through application of the learning)? What surprises can you throw in? Understanding your audience is key here too – what insights do you have about them that can feed into the story?

4. Remember this is learning – and the learning outcome has to be considered. The style and tone also need to reflect your audience and your customer.

5. Role-play the dialogue. It’s the hardest thing to make believable.
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“The future is here”, said science fiction writer William Gibson, “it’s just unevenly distributed”. In this series we look at ‘learning hubs’ around the world – the towns and cities where learning companies tend to cluster.

Welcome to Kraków!

Kraków is a really great city to live and work in if you’re in learning. For a start it boasts over 20 higher education institutions and is home to one of the oldest universities in the world, Jagiellonian University, giving it a great ‘labour pool’ to draw upon. It also has a great creative heritage. The city dates back to the seventh century (the entire old town is on the UNESCO World Heritage list) and has always been one of the leading centres of Polish academic, cultural and artistic life.

It’s a city with one foot firmly in the future, however, and one of Poland’s key economic hubs. Many startups are being set up here in Kraków, and regular events are organised to inspire and empower young entrepreneurs who are learning how to launch a successful company. There are many communities of passionate mentors, investors and sponsors who are ready to speak, teach and help these entrepreneurs get started.

Altogether, I’d say this is one of Europe’s leading ‘learning cities’. But then, I’m biased – I live here!

Ewa Jankowska, Product Analyst, Lumesse Learning, Poland

10 things you may not know about Kraków

1. 200,000 (some 29%) of Kraków’s inhabitants are students.
2. 60% of the city’s population is below the age of 45.
3. The Old Town district of Kraków boasts around 6,000 historic sites and more than 2 million works of art.
4. It is forbidden to feed pigeons in Kraków.
5. Kraków is home to the International Soup Festival, the Great Dragon Parade, the Pierogi Dumplings Festival and the Dachshund Parade, where residents bring their dachshunds to the main square, many dressed in costumes including superheroes or pirates.
6. Jagiellonian University is the third oldest in the world. Alumni include the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus, Saint Karol Wojtyła (better known as Pope John Paul II) and Stanisław Lem, author of Solaris.
7. Wieliczka Salt Mine, 14km southeast of Kraków, is a 300km labyrinth of tunnels distributed over nine levels, the deepest being 327m underground. Hand-carved from salt blocks, it features an underground sanatorium, chapels with altarpieces and figures and even underground lakes.
8. Kraków is named in the World Investment Report 2011 from the UN as the most emerging city location for investment in global BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) projects in the world.
9. According to legend, mythical ruler Krakus built the city above a cave occupied by a dragon, Smok Wawelski, who protects it to this day.
10. Kraków features in the popular ‘Calvin and Hobbes’ cartoon as the noise a spaceship makes when firing laser guns at the enemy.
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