

Redefining E-Learning

by Marc J. Rosenberg, PhD

I'm writing this article on my way back from Rome. Great city; saw a lot. But I really didn't have much time to prepare for my trip. How did I learn enough about the city, its hotels and attractions? Did I take training about travel to Italy? Did some instructor then give me a test to see if I had learned what I needed to know? No.

A couple of months ago, I leased a new car. Great car; very happy with it. Because I was going to be stuck with it for three years or more, I wanted to be sure I made a smart choice. How did I learn about the car, its features and pricing including the wholesale price? Certainly not from the dealer! Did I take a class on automobile shopping, completing lessons on what to look for in a new car? No.

Unfortunately, like most of us, I've been compelled to learn more about anthrax than I wish I had to: the various types, how anthrax is transmitted, and how to protect myself. Did I go to anthrax class? Did I satisfy some learning objectives on bioterrorism? No again.

These examples, and countless others we can all relate to, illustrate two truths about learning. First, we learn all the time. Learning is not something that happens only when we are in a classroom. We learn from one another, from our friends in the next office for example. And, of course, we learn on the job, through trial and error and coaching, and by watching others.

Second, we learn from a variety of sources. I used guidebooks and websites to plan my trip to Rome. I read automobile magazines and browsed websites before I leased my car. I paid attention to the news media and, you guessed it, visited websites to learn about anthrax.

What's the lesson for those of us who value learning as a critical instrument of business success? It is, I believe, that to think of learning as just training, and to think of e-learning as just online courseware, draws such a small circle around the choices we have and the strategies we can employ that we run the risk of diminishing the impact of learning within our organizations. The consequences can place our businesses at a competitive disadvantage.

For sure, training is necessary. And training played a crucial role in the examples above. What I learned about ancient civilizations when I was in school prepared me to make decisions about what I wanted to see in Rome, helping me make better use of my travel guides. And while I don't need advanced training in bioterrorism, I hope that those responsible for guarding against future anthrax exposures are well trained and have demonstrated a high level of competence.

In business, training is vital to creating a skilled workforce and enhancing customers' experiences with products and services. We cannot put salespeople on

the street without training; they would not sell much. We cannot expect people in the information technology (IT) department to keep the systems running without training. I would not want the pilot on my next flight not to have the best training in the world, nor would I be too happy if my doctor was not trained in the procedure he or she was about to perform on me. And when I bring my car in for service, I expect only highly trained technicians to work on it.

So we need to train, but too often we stop there. Most training departments, raised on the Holy Grail of instruction, tend to think of everything they do in terms of a course. Rolling out a new product? Offer a course. Changing a process? Bring out the training. Having a diversity issue in your company? Train everyone into compliance. And it has been this way, for most companies, for a long time. Unfortunately, we now equate learning with training, treating the words almost as synonyms.

But learning and training are not the same. Learning is a process by which we take in information and translate it into knowledge or skills. It is an internal, very human activity, almost like breathing. Training is one means to accomplish this. It is an external experience we go through. In the training world, we focus on instruction: a structured process for transferring skill and knowledge to people. Detailed instruction, designed for a specific group of learners or a specific role or task, is important when people must perform automatically. A pilot does not have time to consult the manual during an emergency, and a doctor cannot step out of the operating room to review the procedures for stopping a hemorrhage. A salesperson cannot consult the training manual when a customer challenges a price or a product feature. If manufacturing workers were not trained, assembly lines would slow to a halt.

Has technology reinforced or changed anything about training and learning? When computer-based training (CBT) came on the scene—and it's been around in one form or another for more than 30 years—the trend was to reproduce a classroom on line, using lessons, modules, quizzes, and other props of the physical classroom. Indeed, most innovations mirror the approaches they replace, at least early on. But for the most part, CBT was an afterthought of corporate training. For years, it was done in the back room of the training center and not taken too seriously. There were also technical problems and incompatibility issues: almost invariably, you had training software that did not work with your computer. But this didn't stop the hype, which was almost always followed by disappointment.

The advent of the Internet changed all that by creating a common, easy-to-use, and universally accessible platform that virtually eliminated compatibility issues. And even though the hype continued, many people began to believe that the Internet was actually different, a transformation of how businesses would operate. Most organizations began to run all their functions—customer care, sales support, human resources (HR), and business technology—on a single, interoperable Internet-based platform. Naturally, the training function went on line as well, and e-learning was born.

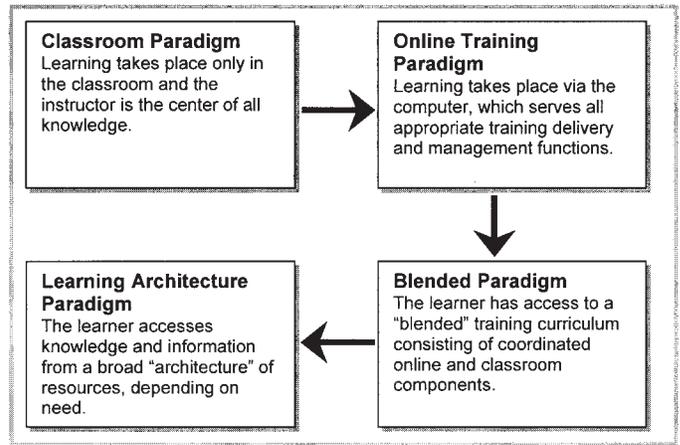


Figure 1. The Evolving Paradigms of Learning.

Unfortunately, e-learning is looking an awful lot like e-training. To be sure, online courseware is an integral part of any training strategy, just as classroom instruction is. But are we now making the same mistake we were making before the arrival of the Internet? Many of us in the learning or training business are satisfied with delivering high-quality online courseware. We believe this defines our role. Yet this thinking limits our tool kit and thus our ability to solve real business and performance problems. If all we have is the courseware “hammer,” everything out there looks like a nail.

There is no question that learning takes place through good training practices. But if that were the only way people learned, I would never have survived Rome and would have been incapable of making a decision about my next car. And think of the implications for organizations if people learned only through formal training: Salespeople cannot rush to the training center, or even take a course on line every time a price or a product specification changes; they would be in class all year! Customer-service people cannot go through training for every price or service promotion. Programmers cannot return to the classroom every time the code changes. But all professionals can use well-structured, accessible, and highly accurate information to get the right amount of knowledge they need, when they need it.

Corporate training has not traditionally focused on providing access to information and expertise. But a transformation is under way. The instructor-centric model is being replaced by a learner-centric view that extends beyond just blended classroom and online training to embrace a far richer architecture of online and human resources (see Figure 1).

When we focus on the organization of information or on access to expertise, and when we use technological (websites) and nontechnological (guidebooks) tools to make this knowledge accessible, we are working in the area of knowledge management.

Knowledge management is, quite simply, the ability of an organization to get information from those who have it to those who need it. It includes the capability to collect, archive, manage, evaluate, and distribute information and

expertise across the enterprise. It uses technology but depends primarily on human interaction to succeed. Whether someone is searching for a process guide, the person who wrote it, or people who have used it, there is a central human component: the need to know. Knowledge management is the “yin” to training’s “yang.”

Today, web-based technologies for searching, document management, collaboration, and community building are creating knowledge networks across businesses. When people avail themselves of such services, they are learning as surely as if they were taking a course. So when organizations recognize that learning takes place through instructional systems, in the classroom and through online courseware, through informational systems, and through access to documents and collaboration with experts and peers, they will be far closer to the promise of a true learning organization.

Take sales. Instructional approaches, in the classroom and online, help build fundamental sales skills. Presentations by role models and simulations of actual sales calls build competence that is further reinforced in the field under a mentor’s watchful eye. But salespeople also learn to rely on information sources, like an online repository of product specifications that is updated daily, or an online performance-support tool that helps people cut in half the time it takes to create a proposal, or a collaborative website that provides all members of a team with the very latest information on the industry, customers, and competitors. Resources like these are instantaneously available. Change a price or recognize a new competitor and everyone, across the room or around the world, can know about it the same day.

How about financial services? A financial advisor provides information on stocks and advice on where to put money. They, in turn, access real-time analyst expertise to help them. All are fully trained. In fact, the government requires that they be trained and certified before they can advise us or execute trades. But every investment firm understands that training has its limits and that real-time information is not a substitute for training but a valuable enhancement to it. Anyone can use the Internet to get much of the same information directly. Most of the best financial services websites provide not only stock prices but also a treasure of well-organized information and tools across a variety of investment topics, resources that make learning possible.

Customer-service representatives are also trained, but when they interact with customers, they rely on well-organized knowledge systems, creating an image of competence that results in a satisfying experience for customers. When we get frustrated when we call a business and no one seems to know us or even what product or service we are talking about, we may be looking not at poor training but at poor knowledge management.

There are many places on the Internet that illustrate the importance of learning through well-designed information.

Java.sun.com by Sun Microsystems is a complete online community for Java programmers. Rich information, collaboration with experts and other programmers, the latest news, sample code, and other rich resources make this site extraordinarily popular. There isn’t a course anywhere on WebMD.com, yet millions of people go there to learn about health issues. In fact, they rely on it. The site delivers indepth information to various communities—including consumers, doctors, and nurses—and connects them with other people who have similar interests and needs.

There are many Internet sites that are learning-centric but not training-centric, and you can find good examples in the consumer sites we look at every day. The Home Depot’s website is all about learning and confidence building. Information on how to complete a variety of home-improvement jobs, like fixing a faucet or installing a fan, are provided along with parts lists. The site also lets visitors save their own project files for future reference. The Home Depot knows that if people can see how easy these tasks are, their confidence in their ability to accomplish them will rise, and they will come into the store for supplies.

Most of us hate user manuals, and we almost never have them around when we need them. They are often poorly written and have answers to every question except the one we are asking. Calling the company is usually not the answer; waiting on hold or calling after business hours is terribly frustrating. Nokia has a simple yet elegant answer: NokiaHowTo.com. Just enter your cell phone’s model number and get a quick and easy demonstration of every function. You can watch it at any time, for as long as you like.

The Ralston Purina Company sells pet food, but its website is full of information for consumers on pet health and assistance on how to select the right pet for your family and environment. The company knows that being a knowledgeable, first-stop resource for pet lovers is the best way to build customer loyalty—loyalty that will sell pet food.

In each of these cases, and hundreds more, consumers are accessing information. Is it training? Usually not. Is it learning? You bet. Does it work? Absolutely.

When a global sales team can collaborate and access competitive information, in real time, to win a multimillion-dollar deal, that’s learning at work through knowledge management. When you call a business and well-trained people on the other end quickly give the answers you need, they are likely using a knowledge management system. When a new idea developed by a team at a factory in California can be shared at six other plants in time to reduce costs or improve quality, that’s knowledge management supporting high-speed learning and transforming innovation into best practice. When someone in Tokyo asks the question, “Has anyone done this before?” and gets a positive response from someone in New York, in minutes rather than days, that too is learning through knowledge management.



What defines your mastery?

While it is easy to think that expertise is enough to satisfy the requirement of being a master, I view the two differently. Expertise is a prerequisite to mastery, but it is insufficient to attain mastery. To me, mastery is also giving something back, through coaching, teaching, speaking, writing, and role modeling. To be a master is to be able to transfer your expertise to others. As I have done this, I've gained valuable feedback that further enhanced the value of what I do. In the end, mastery is less a measure of your own expertise than it is of your professional growth and contributions to the profession.

So it is too limiting and perhaps too easy to define e-learning as simply online courseware. By ignoring the informational side of learning, we may be squandering huge opportunities for impact in our organizations. The best e-learning systems use both instructional and informational approaches. As e-learning moves forward, both as a profession and as a practice within an organization, it is important to keep in mind six points:

1. Think beyond just sending people to a course. Training is a powerful way to build skills and knowledge across the business, but people need to learn every day, and organizations certainly can't put everyone into a full-time training mode.
2. Focus on information as well as instruction. Look for opportunities to incorporate a knowledge management perspective. If your business operates with poor documentation, fix it. Don't use training as a way to compensate. If people need instant, accurate information to perform their jobs, provide it. It's the secret to a more agile, responsive business.
3. Don't think of e-learning as a technology problem. Technology is a critical enabler of e-learning, but your main challenges are more likely to be in content, strategy, and transformational change. What do people need to know, when do they need to know it, and how will they get it? How can learning, including e-learning and knowledge management, cut costs, improve productivity, create a stronger customer bond, or improve time to market? What needs to be done to get true buy-in from everyone who will be touched by these initiatives?
4. Encourage organizational collaboration. At the end of the day, learning is a people-to-people activity. Help people find the expertise they need, when they need it. Go beyond email. Provide ways for people across the business with similar interests to find each other and communicate on a regular basis. We learn from one another more often than we do from any other source, and that will never change.
5. Challenge the training function in your company to think differently about its role. Reorganize and integrate more fully with frontline business units and other support groups like IT, HR, and public relations. By changing just one metric, such as moving from relying solely on performance in class to focusing more on performance on the job, you begin to get out from under the "training is the only way" tradition.
6. Don't abandon instructional approaches. Ensure that what comes out of your training organization, classroom and online, is of the highest quality. But remember that one size does not fit all. Insist that training professionals focus on training where it is most appropriate and on other solutions when training is clearly not appropriate. Such decisions may have the greatest impact of all.

Online courseware extends the reach of training beyond the physical limitations of classroom and instructional resources. Knowledge management brings instantaneous and real-time information and expertise to everyone, everywhere. Together, they redefine e-learning in ways that make it more acceptable than threatening, and more a part of work than an adjunct to it. And this, in the end, is the key to the success of e-learning. 🏔️

NOTE: This article was recently published by the Darden Business School at the University of Virginia.



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A highly regarded and much-sought-after presenter, Marc has spoken at the White House and been keynote speaker at numerous professional and business conferences. He has authored more than two-dozen articles and book chapters and is a frequently quoted expert in major business and trade publications, including *Investor's Business Daily*, *Context*, *Knowledge Management* magazine, *Training*, *HR Magazine*, *Fast Company*, *Performance Improvement*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Marc holds a PhD in instructional design, plus degrees in communications and marketing. He is a 25-year member and past president of the International Society for Performance Improvement, and the recipient of numerous awards for service to the Society. He may be reached at Marc.Rosenberg@diamondcluster.com.