

LEARNING RANTS, RAVES, AND REFLECTIONS

A Personal Essay

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Learning is a topic that yields an incredible volume of rants, raves, and reflections. It is one of the only topics about which almost every person on the earth has a strong set of opinions that he or she can quickly articulate. Over the past three decades, thousands of people sitting next to me on airplanes have been asked a few gentle questions about their feelings and perspectives on learning, and during this time I have listened and learned.

Learning is something that is human and natural. Some of the most complicated tasks that we will ever learn—speaking our first sentences or taking our first steps—are accomplished without the assistance of a certified teacher or graduate of a train-the-trainer program. Instead, we have nature and the human touch of our parents. I often wish that we could recapture the natural aspects of learning in our organizational efforts.

Learning is something that often happens in spite of official efforts. Ask anyone how he or she learned to do a job and 95 percent of the time you will hear about informal processes, including observation of peers, conversations with fellow workers and managers, reading, and even web browsing. In many instances, the learner will tell you outright that the formal course (classroom or online) was of little assistance.

Learning is something that is deeply personal. What works for you may not work for your colleagues. Some people learn in a very logical, end-to-end process. Others, like this author, like to start at the end and make their way backwards in a trial-and-error process. For some people, the PowerPoint® slide is a great structuring tool. For some, we want to pull out a shotgun and blast the screen when the fifteenth slide appears in a training program. Learning also changes for us throughout our lives and throughout the year. When you are starting a new job, full of expectations and excitement, low on relevant experience, a residential orientation program may be a wonderful launching process. Yet six months later, self-paced learning may be the only training model that will help you gain new information or continue to build/refine your competencies.

Learning is often social. There is something so exciting about working with a group of fellow learners on the acquisition of new knowledge. When the team is clicking and the content is relevant, the social nature of story telling, context seeking, peer remediation, and work-based learning is awesome. Then again, there are those who prefer to learn on their own. I can feel schizophrenic about the social nature of learning. Personally, sometimes I need to retreat to the solitude of my office or den at home, sip a cup of tea, and tackle my learning solo and in a quiet setting, while other times, I thirst for the social interaction of a great class.

Learning gets dangerous lip service from leaders. It is so easy to say that “We are a learning organization!” or to tell an employee that “We want you to continually improve your skills and we will support you.” Yet when real workers want real time and resources to do real learning activities, the commitment is challenged. Just yesterday, I found myself denying two of my staff’s requests to go to a week-long institute on meeting planning. I looked at the cost and the calendar and made a reflexive decision and said, “Let’s look for something else.” I know that I will try to find an alternative, but even this executive in an organization that is very focused on learning could be accused of giving token support. I worry about whether

the widespread interest in e-learning is always a commitment to expanding learning or if it reflects the desire to minimize the impact, visibility, disruption, and cost of learning.

Learning is a longitudinal and long process. As organizational trainers, it is always tempting to confuse the delivery of learning activities with learning. Trainers can always deliver more learning faster than learners can or want to absorb it. Let's go back to the infant taking first steps, learning new words, or even tackling bladder control. We would never think of sending that infant to Potty School. Rather, learning encompasses an integrated intervention, changed environment, evolving culture of support, reward, feedback, and ritual. Learning takes more time and happens more continually than most organizations admit or integrate into their planning.

Learning may not be seen as learning by the learner. Most of the best learning was not done at a moment when the person thought of himself or herself as a learner (or even a student/participant). When I was in college, the best learning that I did took place in the offices of my professors and at the big round table at the back of the snack bar. I discovered that most of my professors actually were in their offices during the hours posted on the door . . . and were impressed that a freshman or sophomore would want to stop by and chat. I made it a habit of visiting and entering into content dialogues with my professors. It wasn't brown-nosing in an attempt to up my grades. But it had more value to me than most of the lectures or seminar discussions. Likewise, the conversations with friends and occasionally with strangers in the Harpur College snack bar were filled with great knowledge acquisition. In both of these instances, I didn't feel like a learner or a student. And I continue to wonder if the best organizational learning happens when the learner isn't aware that he or she is learning.

Learning in the age of Google is different. To continue on this point, look at how people use search engines like Google. Got a question? Type a few words into Google and you get a massive, random, and imperfect list of resources. One of them might contain

your answer or launch you on a new discovery pathway. Today's Google is just the beginning. In a few years, we will see much more personalized, social-network-based, Google-like learning tools. The system will know my learning style, my job focus, my past searches, my reference group of peers and mentors that I trust, my language skills, my text versus graphic preferences, and other knowledge acquiring traits.

Learning in the age of technology is totally different. The impact of Google is only a sliver of the broad spectrum changes that the world of learning and training is feeling from the explosion of technology. In many ways, there is a revolution of knowledge afoot that resembles the impact that the Industrial Age had on the nature of making things. Just as we went from craftsmen to factories, there is a parallel shift underway from taking courses to flows of knowledge. This profound change can be seen more clearly from the learner's experience than from the language or actions of training professionals. Learners quickly "get" the big deal that technology adds to the knowledge process. They in fact see e-learning more as a natural extension of the web and the browser. If learners can confirm the status of the checks that they have written or investigate the best and cheapest airfare for an upcoming trip, it is a short leap to see the web as a natural vehicle for gaining the skills, information, or knowledge that they need to do a task or a whole job. In fact, most learners don't see e-learning as learning. They experience it as yet another marvelous way in which the web shrinks the world and explodes their access to "stuff."

So with these observations, let me use my role as editor of this book to share my personal rants, raves, and reflections about the "L" word, learning. I write these with a sense of trepidation, since our field is changing at an incredible rate. To hedge my bets, and to cover the likely reality that much will change between the time that I type these words and when you read them, please go to www.masie.com/rants/ in order to read the latest version of this chapter.

Rants

These passionate “bursts” of thought reflect things that anger or frustrate me:

Learning and Training Are Not the Same Process! I become really incensed when I see organizations confuse their training efforts with employee learning. Training is the set of activities that the organization provides for workers to (hopefully) assist them in gaining key skills, knowledge, competencies, and certifications. Training is an occasional activity that represents only a small percentage (usually less than 1/10 of 1 percent) of an employee’s time at work. Learning is the process by which a worker gains some of those skills, knowledge, competencies, and certifications. Many learners succeed *without* participating in training. Many learners succeed *in spite of* the training. And many training activity participants *do not* learn anything. We need to be much clearer about our use of the terms learning and training. For example, I could argue that many learning management systems (LMS) are really more like training management systems.

Invite Thy Learners! Organizations must do a much better job of the invitation process. This is the process by which learners are invited to participate in a training or learning activity. There has been much research over the past four decades about the critical role that *invitation* plays in the success of a training experience. Yet most organizations have actually taken a step back in their investment and support of invitation. For example, if you contracted with me to provide a briefing at your company, there would be a flurry of activity to make sure that the room was filled when I arrived. Yet if you contracted for an online seminar, the invitation process might be reduced to a simple email that was blasted out to hundreds of employees. We know that personal and managerial invitation is very powerful, yet we have fooled ourselves that we can use technology

to lower the time spent on the motivational elements of the invitation. Here is a simple step that our field could take to deal with this:

Learning management systems should build in potent invitation systems to identify, invite, and re-invite learners to participate in critical learning activities. Consider this an Invitation Wizard, which would systematically invite workers to participate in learning. It would use style, demographic, and HR data to personalize and target both the content and spirit of the invitation. The Invitation Wizard would do more than just send out emails. It might “ping” a key manager with a message to have him or her call or meet with an employee and invite him or her to a future learning process. Hey, if Amazon can find ways of inviting millions of customers to future purchasing moments, our LMS technology can be used as a high-powered invitation “engine.”

Managers Give Mixed Learning Signals. One of the major reasons why there are “no-shows” at classroom-based events is that the manager of a learner changed his or her mind at the last minute. When first approached about a worker attending a three-day class, the reaction was positive and supportive. But once the class appeared on the calendar for the upcoming, very busy, and hectic week, the *value* of attendance was less than the *value* of the worker staying at his or her desk.

Even in the world of e-learning, the message from the manager can be mixed. A manager might be excited about a learner saving travel time and expense by attending a class online. But there might be an unstated assumption that the e-learner should do the learning on his or her own time, or at least find a way of doing all of his or her current work without any “give” to allow the learner to focus on the e-learning assignments.

Give Them a Chance to Apply New Skills. Wow, this is one of my most blood pressure boiling rants! When learners have gone through a class, course, or other knowledge acquisition process, they *must* be given a chance to actually use their newly gained skills. We have to

view this as a non-optional step in the road to *transfer*. Without a chance to apply the newly gained skills, they slide into a fuzzy and risky tentative zone.

Sometimes, one must do training a while before the actual application is available. Sometimes, cross-training is provided as a succession or emergency capacity. But even in those situations, the absence of a real-world need to use these skills changes the learning and retention process dramatically. I believe that our LMS systems should actually track and measure the application of newly acquired skills. When a learner is registered for a program, I would have the system ask for the real-world application that he or she will accomplish.

Stop Using Silly Numbers. Measure What Counts! There are so many “silly” numbers in the assessment and measurement of training and learning. My colleague, Naomi Karten, calls these “silly numbers” because they give us very detailed and meaningless data points. Here are just a few silly learning numbers:

- *Total Learners Trained*: Every organization has a graph with the total number of “butts in seats” in class and online. Why is this silly? What does it really tell us? Very little. It does not tell us who the learners were, why they went to training, who was *not* trained, and what the difference in performance was between the trained and non-trained.
- *Learner Evaluations of Classes*: Kirkpatrick won’t like me for this one. But the older I get the more “ranty” I become on this topic. Why do we always ask learners if they “liked” the class? Why do we focus on the delivery dimension of customer satisfaction in the training department rather than other departments? We have all filled out really damning evaluation forms for instructors and seminars only to find the same people teaching the same stuff over and over again. I think we should stop asking! Let’s really get to Level Four and Five *now!*
- *e-Learning Completion vs. Abandonment Rates*: When was the last time that you “completed” a website? Did you “finish”

your visit to a corporate intranet or Google page, or did you “abandon” it? As e-learning proliferates, we have to give up our fixation on completion. By definition, learners will be leaving most online courses before the “end.” Unless there is a penalty or reward, learners will take the components they need and then move on to other work tasks. Yet our LMS systems kick out these elaborate indicators of “completion.” But it is not the fault of the LMS alone. We have to start at the instructional design and look at competency as the point to target and measure. And many times competency won’t happen until the learners finish with the learning phase and do some real practice and application. So let’s not do the silly measurement of “completion!”

Universities Are Off Base on Instructional Design Programs.

Every week, I receive several emails from undergraduate students asking for advice on where to go for a master’s degree in instructional design. I always have to take a deep breath before answering these students. We want them to go into our field. We need lots of motivated and talented people to help design the next generation of learning and knowledge systems. Yet many of the current graduate programs in instructional design are legacy in nature and way out of step with future trends in our field.

Design Does Not Have to Take Long. One of the phrases that rolls off the tongues of line-of-business managers these days is rapid learning development. They have already been sold on the experiment of e-learning. And now they want it to shift from the pilot to the fully enterprise level. This translates into *scalable*, *massive*, and *affordable content*.

Organizations are starting to ask for really large amounts of content to be developed in a short amount of time, with minimal disruption to subject-matter experts and at a cost level that is significantly less than what we are currently spending on development.

This requires a marked change in the minds of training and learning professionals. We come from a tradition of spending enough time on learning and development to get it “almost perfect.” Often, a response to the question of “How long will the design take?” has been: “Eighteen weeks!” This makes sense when you are doing a full-blown training analysis and are doing customized content and introducing a new form factor for the learning delivery. This makes sense when you are developing a highly branched computer-based training type of e-learning, loaded with behavioral oriented design elements. This makes sense when the content is stable and is going to be used by a large number of learners over a long period of time.

But it does *not* make sense in the era of rapid development. Organizations are needing brand new models for learning design. They want content to be developed quickly and used often. They want content to be dropped into templates that can be populated by subject-matter experts. They want the outcome to be less behavioral and to be able to be “digested” in small chunks. They want it to be searchable in Google style, printable in job aid format, and leveraged as a performance support tool. In other words, they want their content to be massive, scalable, and affordable.

The era of rapid development is already upon us. The only enemy of rapid development is our tradition and fear of the new. We must find a way to say “yes” to rapid development. We must find a way to embed great instructional wisdom into stable templates and form factors. We must evolve our metaphor for the role of an instructional designer from a person in a monastery with a quill pen who is hand painting each pixel to a learning “assembler” in a CNN newsroom who is doing an edit to transform news feeds into personalized content that yields performance for each worker/learner/viewer/user.

Rapid does not need to be weak, dull, shallow, or boring. Rapid development is moving the learning process to the speed of business. It will be the future. My hope is that the wisdom of instructional

design will find its way into this new model. Let's be open to it, so that we can influence and direct its future.

Content Is Lonely Without Context! While I love content, I totally adore context. Content is the authored wisdom of an organization. It is typically well-structured, organized, approved, and often the result of great thinking about how to acquire new knowledge or skills.

Context is the stuff that makes content come alive. Context is the story that the instructor tells about how he or she actually uses the procedures detailed in the content. Context is what other learners say about their reactions to the content. Context is what the learner herself discovers about the usability of the official content. Context is social. Context is current. Context allows the learner to sort, filter, and relate to the content.

Most courseware and learning design focuses on content. Trainers often add the context in their classrooms. Online, context can arrive as part of an electronic discussion board or via interactions with the instructor. Sometimes, context takes place covertly, at the coffee break or in an instant message between two participants in a web conference session. We have to start *designing for context* as well as *content*! Instructional design needs to increasingly include the activities, formats, and cultures required to help the learners access and create context.

As the title of this rant suggests, content is lonely without context. And learners are lonelier learners without context.

Sometimes Learning Should Happen Slowly . . . Even “Drip” Style. Advocates for e-learning will often talk about our ability to use this new delivery method to accelerate the learning process. I have given hundreds of talks about the need to operate faster and at the “speed of business.” Yet, there is another side of the opportunity that e-learning creates—slower and stretched out learning.

Imagine if you could enroll for an MBA program that took ten years. You would not have to stop anything that you are doing. Per-

haps you could take a half course every few months. Ah, the ability to pursue something slowly, rather than at a rush.

I know that I would enroll in several new courses of study today if I could take them slowly. If I could have a low intensity “drip” of learning, it would be a delight. Organizations might see this as a great way to deal with cross-training and skills for succession.

So let’s try to avoid the concept that fast is always better. Some learning might take a while, and if I don’t need it all today, why not turn that slow drip on?

Raves

My raves are in the form of a personal list that I have been building over the years of things that I really appreciate about learning and training:

Great Teachers. The joy of being a student with a great teacher is unbelievable. I have always asked participants in my class to write a few words about their favorite teachers, the ones who had the most impact on their lives. Here is what I say:

Mrs. Ham. She was my second grade teacher at PS 173 in Manhattan. Mrs. Ham had the accelerated class, twenty-five high-energy and smart kids who were put on a track to learn as much as possible. Mrs. Ham used two techniques that I have practiced myself over three decades as a trainer:

- She asked impossible-to-answer questions. She would ask questions that didn’t even have a real answer, but that provoked maximum learning opportunities. For example, one day she asked what it would be like to eat peanut butter in a zero gravity environment like the moon. She posed the question at 8:30 a.m. and said we would talk about it at 2:30 p.m. For the next several hours, my mind roamed and rambled around that impossible-to-answer question. She trusted the discovery process.

- Mrs. Ham used peer learning as a key tool. When she gave us a quiz, she would have us grade each other's papers. She would have us provide feedback to each other, and that was in the second grade. When she taught a new set of content, the first thing she would do is have us group in clusters of three or four students and have us re-teach the new concept to each other.

Books as Learning Tools. As a learner, I love to find new books to read. I regret that with the growth of information at our browser's fingertips, the formal use of books in classes is descending. The immersion in a great book is an incredible learning process. Here are some suggestions for keeping books alive as organizational learning tools:

- **Create At-Work Reading Clubs:** Oprah has done it for her viewers. Why not replicate reading clubs at work? One might focus on leadership or other management issues. Another might be vertically focused on procurement methods. Or they might be a heterogeneous mix of fellow employees who meet to share their learning from a common book recently read. The book club can even meet using a virtual classroom system.
- **Peer Group Best Seller List:** No insult to the *New York Times*, but I am not very interested in what the top ten books in the country are on a given week. But I am intrigued by what the current best reads are for the executives in my company or for a peer group of colleagues across the country. That is a piece of context that really helps.
- **Enter Thy Books into the LMS:** Make sure that there is a way for books to be engaged by the LMS process. For example, a course might kick off with the common reading of a book, followed by an online dialogue, followed by corporate procedures taught in an asynchronous fashion.
- **Write Your Own Books:** Why not ask some of your subject-matter experts to create a multi-author book on a key topic?

Publish it as a PDF. Students in a leadership program would be fascinated to read a book on leadership successes written by twelve executives from around your company.

Learning Objects. Build them small, make them reusable, give the learner more control!

Quick Videos. Set up a small studio in your organization, perhaps using a simple \$1,000 camera. Have it ready to roll at a minute's notice. Get into the habit of taping small interviews with key staff members and outside resources. Video does not need to be produced to Hollywood standards. Start experimenting with small, focused, and just-in-time video objects. They work and are deeply appreciated by learners.

Talent Search. Experiment with emerging systems for locating key staff members with relevant talent or expertise. It is funny to find out that someone sitting three cubicles from you has twelve years' experience at a company that you are just starting to work with. We have to find ways of cataloguing and accessing the knowledge and talent resources within our organizations. Every time that I have done this, I have been absolutely impressed with how much talent and how many resources are available throughout the organization.

Local Localization. For years, we have assumed that content needed to be translated and localized at headquarters to maintain consistency. In fact, a number of companies are successfully implementing local localization. The idea is simple. Develop content in a primary language such as English or Mandarin. Then provide the graphics and text to contacts in each region throughout the world. Give them a template where they can "add" additional content in the local language as well as provide local information and perspective. This can be done overnight throughout the globe at a really low cost. By also providing the primary language to everyone, there is a built-in quality control. People will tend to correct inappropriate

translations or localization. If we are to operate globally, we have to learn globally as well.

Food as a Part of Learning. I am not joking! Most good learning experiences have involved some form of eating. I discovered early on that my end-of-class assessments rose as I added better food. This is probably a good complaint about the value of end-of-class assessments, but it is also a great comment about the central role that food plays in our learning.

But do use food wisely. One corporate university recently asked leadership class participants to bring a “covered dish” to the first and last sessions of their executive class. It built a level of sharing and communication that was unique. Use food as metaphors, engaging the learners in the themes of eating. Also, remember that every food has a chemical effect on the body. There are topics that should *never* be taught the first hour after lunch. And there are times when I want to have a doughnut dispenser at every table to issue a sugar rush to all of my learners (just kidding!).

Don't Forget the Jackets. Just as food is important, so are symbols. e-Learning participants deserve the trinkets and jackets that attendees at events often receive. These symbols become interesting “totems” in the organization. One company stopped giving a leather jacket to each participant in a blended learning model of a management class. They received strange and negative reactions from the employees, who were looking forward to returning to the factory floor with their jackets. Symbols are important . . . and just sending a graphics file won't cut it.

Usability Testing Rocks! We must find a way to increase the amount of usability testing that is done on e-learning projects. It can be done internally, with a few sample sessions and a trained observer. But we must also find a way to test the usability of our learning efforts. Too often, testing stops at the systems level. It is “done” when it does not crash. But in a usability sense, it is not “done” until

learners can easily access the features, functions, and value of the assets. Your learners and your learning investments deserve better. Test for usability!

Reflections

Last, here are some of my reflections to help serve as a common ground for all learners, organizations, and the world of learning:

The Fourth Stage of e-Learning. Our field is entering the fourth stage of e-learning. The first stage was the Pilot. Could we actually design and deliver learning via the Internet? The second stage was the Technology phase. Would our systems handle growing levels of e-learning usage? The third stage was the Management phase. How would we manage and track enterprise use of learning? This stage brought forth learning systems such as LMSs, learning content management systems, and collaborative systems. I call the fourth stage the Scalable and Integrated stage, one in which organizations are striving to:

- **Scale Content:** This takes us back to the rapid development approaches. Organizations are asking how they can develop large amounts of content and deliver them throughout the enterprise.
- **Integrate Systems:** e-Learning must integrate with a host of knowledge and HR systems, including learning content management systems, simulation systems, document management systems, enterprise resource planning systems, human capital management systems, calendaring systems, and others.

Yet the Infancy of e-Learning. While we are in this exciting fourth stage of e-learning, on another level we are just in its infancy. Go back and look at how primitive websites from just four years ago appear. That is what our current e-learning will seem like four years from today.

The Deconstruction of the Course. We are rapidly moving toward the deconstruction of the course. The unit of learning will less and less be the class or course (online or in person). Instead, learners will access a series of designer-constructed or self-constructed learning pathways. We will graze content, sample elements, test vigorously, and personalize to the max.

Benchmarking on Steroids. Organizations will seek high-powered benchmarking with other external reference points. In our Learning CONSORTIUM, Fortune 1000 companies benchmark with one another on key factors related to learning development costs, competency models, and design formats. In the near future, we will see the growth of balanced scorecards for learning and training efforts and other increased resources for peer-to-peer as well as industry-wide benchmarking.

Learners Are Evolving. The most exciting aspect of this field is that learners are evolving faster than our methods. The learner, empowered with a mouse, browser, collaboration tools, the Internet, search engines, and global access to peers and resources, is defining her next stage of learning. What we have to do as learning professionals is simple:

- Listen closely to the learners.
- Experiment honorably with new delivery and design models.
- Provide multiple pathways to knowledge, as people are quite different.
- Design collaboratively, using subject-matter experts and learners as key partners in the process.
- Don't worry what we call stuff. In fact, you call it "stuff" if it works. New inventions don't start with a new name; they start with cool thinking that yields real results. Later, you can always name or brand it. This is not a marketing exercise; this is about creating a new science and art for knowledge sharing.
- Be seriously playful about learning.