

Advance

07

The Sage of Paradox Seasoning your Blended Learning

By Brian Sutton

Introduction

Ten years ago that great writer and business guru Charles Handy gave us “The Age of Paradox”. For Handy the book was triggered by the realisation that “so many things, just now, seem to create their own contradictions, so many good intentions have unintended consequences, and so many formulas for success carry a sting in the tail.” As I look around the world of Corporate Education, I reflect that much of what I see embarked upon in the name of innovation, or even “best practice”, often produces consequences that result in people like me spending their days engaged upon damage limitation rather than learning development.

About three years before I first read Charles Handys’ book I woke up one morning and found myself dead. This was particularly annoying as it turned out that brain death had occurred some 10 years earlier and nobody had had the good manners to tell me. Fortunately a cure was at hand; my brain was catapulted back into life by the simple, yet elegant, act of learning. I am pleased to report that I am now very much alive and learn something every single day. At the end of a day or week I reflect on the period that has just passed and I ask myself – not ‘what have I learned’ but rather ‘what new ways have I found to learn’. Learning is the difference between being a member of the walking dead and doing something worthwhile. In our organisations it is the difference between success and falling short of achieving goals.

Why is it then that so many of our organisations invest vast sums in activities designed to promote learning but end up producing no discernible change in performance, or worse still produce an environment that inhibits learning?

This is the great paradox of corporate learning. We can better understand this paradox if we first spend a little time examining four contributory elements that individually or collectively have brought us to our current impasse.

Paradox 1 – Training can produce learning, but learning can produce surprises.

Make no mistake; training is not an acceptable synonym for learning. Learning is something that people do; training is something that is done to them, as a result of which learning may or may not take place. Learning is centred on the individual and requires he or she to be intimately involved. Through a process of reflection, new mental connections and models are created, new understandings are achieved.

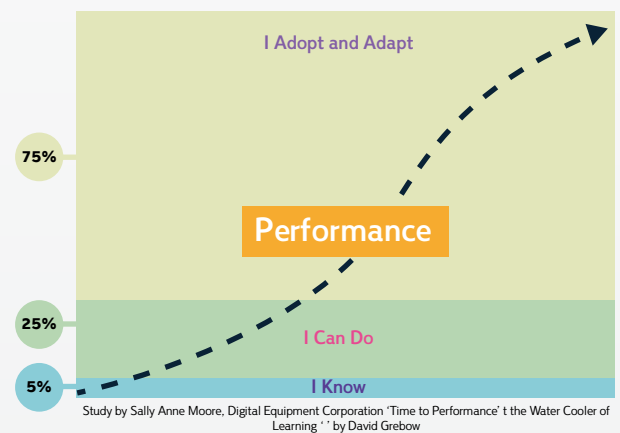
Training, by contrast, is centred on the deliverer or mode of delivery. The first, and often only, measure of success is the entertainment value. Training produces conditioned response and can only ever anticipate a limited subset of possible situations, whereas learning produces discriminating behaviour, which can be adopted and adapted to suit changing circumstances. We are interested in learning in the workplace because this is the mechanism through which people attain new levels of performance. Paradoxically, understanding what we have learned is less important than understanding how we have learned it.

From this we should conclude that our programmes should create and foster conditions that both create learning and encourage active reflection upon the process of learning. When did you last see a programme of any description that encouraged the participants to examine how they learned what they know?

We are comfortable with the idea of learning styles, indeed we are often happy to be classified by some external measure as a reflector or an activist; but how about encouraging

participants to go beyond labels and explore how they really learn and how they can do it at will. Having gained an understanding they should be encouraged to build an individual learning plan, individual insofar as it pertains to them, but collective in that it may well include others in their process of learning. Once people understand how they learn and start to take responsibility for their own learning, we find that learning ceases to be an event planned by others and becomes a process triggered by self-need, a process that sits comfortably alongside working and becomes indistinguishable from it.

Paradox 2 – We direct our resources to formal learning but the greatest organisational benefit stems from serendipitous informal learning connections.



Numerous studies show that between 70% and 75% of all our workplace learning takes place as a result of informal networks, processes and haphazard activities. By contrast formal learning (that is the deliberate stuff that we invest in) is responsible for only about 25% of any uplift in productivity. By formal we mean activities that are constructed specifically with the aim of acquiring new knowledge, polishing skills and, occasionally, modifying behaviour.

Typical methods used are classroom, role-play, e-learning, video, seminars and workshops. Paradoxically it appears that the informal, spontaneous learning is the stuff that really makes a difference to performance. Could this be because it is situated and relevant, that it occurs naturally when it is needed and therefore is put immediately into practice? Interestingly, informal learning is just as likely to happen when providing advice as when asking for it. How odd then that despite these studies, over 90% of corporate investment in learning is directed at facilitating formal activities rather than supporting informal ones.

Given that informal learning appears to be so important, and will happen almost despite our efforts, it would appear to make sense to build learning programmes that reward and foster it.

When I put blended learning programmes together I stress the importance of creating informal study groups and study pairs, enabling communities of practice and clubs, providing opportunities to share experience such as brown bag lunches (lunch and learn sessions). Even simple things like placing collections of internal white papers or short extracts from journals next to coffee machines can help stimulate discussion and sharing. Never underestimate the ability of people to seek out and learn from each other; you can help to facilitate this by providing a yellow pages of who knows what. Aim to facilitate the creation of networks not inhibit them.

Paradox 3 – We remember least when we listen, most when we teach others.

Style of Information Transfer	% Remembered
Reading	10
Seeing	20
Hearing	30
Seeing & Hearing	50
Collaborating	70
Practice	80
Teaching others	90

Source: Self-explanations How to study and use examples in problem solving. Cognitive Science 1989

Studies that examine the impact of different information delivery mechanisms on retention provide interesting insights. On average we only remember 10% of what we read. This is quite alarming given that the dominant form of information transfer in our organisations is the written word and even in e-learning, reading is the primary activity. We remember around 30% of what we hear but combining seeing and hearing together can raise retention to levels close to 50%, this is why we emphasise the use of visual aids in classroom training; it also explains why audio is more than just a gimmick when added to an e-learning package. In order to achieve retention levels of over 70%, it is necessary to introduce collaboration and individual or collective practice. But as anyone who has ever coached anyone knows the highest levels of understanding and retention are achieved when you teach something to someone else.

The key message from this research is that if retention is important, as educators we must strive to connect people together, encourage collaboration, get them to discover information together, solve problems collectively and teach each other.

The great news is that increasingly technology is enabling this. Virtual classroom technology (Centra, WebEx, Placeware etc) is at its heart a medium for collaboration not merely a broadcasting tool. These systems allow us to instantaneously connect people in remote locations, to share applications and knowledge, to work simultaneously on problems or obtain instant context sensitive coaching. We have seen that coaching and teaching are not only good for the recipient but also promote retention in the coach. Use this in programmes to build networks of internal coaches; encourage each person to find a mentor and meet with them regularly. Consider the value in peer review where staff/employees routinely ask respected peers for their opinion of important elements of their work. Take every possible opportunity to connect people; collectively they will create new knowledge.

Paradox 4 - We cram facts into people's heads, but increasingly professionals rely on external repositories of knowledge.

Year study carried out	% of knowledge you need to do your job that is stored in your head
1986	75
1997	15–20
2004	8–10

Source: Robert Kelley, Carnegie-Mellon University

Studies carried out over an extended time period by researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University in the USA have shown a remarkable shift in the percentage of knowledge that we hold in our heads in order to do our work. Less than 20 years ago, it was estimated that as much as 75% of the knowledge needed for a professional to function was held in memory. Within ten years this had fallen to less than 20% and now in 2004 the figure is below 10%. It would appear that this change is both a function of the rapid increase in published information and knowledge but also a recognition that the value that a professional brings to a situation lies not in the ability to remember stuff but rather in the ability to synthesise and interpret information, make judgements and recommend appropriate action. Paradoxically we continue to build learning programmes that emphasise the cramming of facts and test the recall of knowledge. This is particularly true of much e-learning where the instructional model replicates the pedagogy of the Victorian classroom with its emphasis on tell and test.

So what can we draw from this research? When building learning programmes we need to place much greater emphasis upon discovery. Rather than learning information, we need to learn how to rapidly find relevant information. We need to be able to quickly discriminate between the superficial and the important; to use information from multiple sources to construct innovative solutions to unique problems. This points to a new set of skills to be learned. It also highlights the importance of creating structures to access both corporate and commercially available knowledge.

Within our organisations we need to understand the dynamics of organisational learning and the importance of corporate memory. We need to deploy ways of identifying, classifying, storing, retrieving and sharing information that is in the public domain. We need to provide access to electronic publications and journals or web based full text repositories of published works like those provided by Books 24x7 or Safari.

Seasoning the Blend

So much of what we think and do is based upon received and unquestioned assumptions about how the world works. I have used the concept of paradox, as a means of highlighting just some of the areas where our assumptions may not just be wrong but may be producing consequences totally at odds with our intentions.

I have argued that we need to place the emphasis squarely on learning and facilitating learning in all its guises. We need to stop thinking of learning as an event that is organised by one set of people and imposed upon another. Learning is a natural consequence of living and working; work has always involved problem solving, judgement, conflict resolution, and choice – these are all learning events and learning opportunities. The trick is to raise individual consciousness of how, when and under what conditions learning takes place and what support structures are needed; in this way we can turn a naturally occurring process into an organisation transforming process.

In building and implementing blended learning programmes for large multi-nationals, I start from the premise: how do I remove the existing barriers that are inhibiting learning. The first and foremost task is always to understand how to connect people together and how to give them what they need in order for them to learn. Blended learning should not be about gluing together disparate elements of technology to communicate a message more efficiently. It should be about finding ways to connect people and, having connected them, give them the things they need when they need them in the format that best suits them. All you need to do then is sit back and watch learning happen.



Dr Brian Sutton is owner and managing director of Learning4Leaders. He divides his time between learning consulting assignments, writing books and acting as a visiting professor for the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex University. Brian's most recent book is **30 Key Questions that Unlock Management**. He is currently working on the 2nd Edition of Teaching and Learning OnLine to be published by Routledge in early 2013.

You can contact Brian at Brian@Learning4Leaders.com

Web - www.Learning4leaders.com

Ground Floor,
Marc House,
13-14 Great Saint Thomas Apostle,
London EC4V 2BB

t: 020 7651 4960
f: 020 7651 4961
e: info@saffroninteractive.com



Design by Saffron Interactive
ISSN: 1478-7641
© Saffron Interactive
All rights reserved

www.saffroninteractive.com