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Reshaping the learner mindset

*Randy Emelo on preparing
for personalised and
collaborative learning*

Leadership | Future of learning | Change

Reshaping the learner mindset

Randy Emelo explores how best to prepare people for personalised and collaborative learning

As learning and training professionals try to blend technology with learning programmes, it can sometimes leave people feeling confused, directionless, and disenchanted with their learning experience. A 2014 Towards Maturity benchmarking study showed that 90 per cent of learning and development leaders want to use technology to better adapt programmes to individual need/context, and 93 per cent want to use technology to speed up the application of learning in the workplace¹.

In order to make the most of learning opportunities, we have to realise that technology exists solely as the enabler for us to bring learning to people in a new and different manner. However, to enact real change and bring real value to our learning efforts via technology, we must help our learners change their mindsets about what to expect from their learning activities and how to participate in this new form of learning that is more self-directed, social, and personalised.

A company that has made remarkable inroads to achieving this in their workplace, through their online corporate university, is Xerox.

Xerox innovation

Within the Xerox Services University (XSU) platform is a recent addition called The Commons, which provides a peer-driven, collaborative learning environment focused on helping employees develop the competencies, skills, and learning relationships needed for individual and organisational success. The Commons uses social learning technology to support modern mentoring, collaboration, peer coaching, and more.

“We built The Commons on the framework of the 70:20:10 learning model because we wanted

to support the 70 and 20 [ratios for lessons learnt from being on the job and feedback versus 10 per cent coursework] as much as possible,” said Phil Antonelli, learning strategist and social learning manager at Xerox Global Learning Services. “Collaboration is really important for social learning and for business. If you’re going to innovate, but you’re not connected with people across the business, how do you find experts not in your business group? How do you stay nimble? How do you innovate? How do you share expertise? How do you spread best practices from one group to another or across silos?”

These questions and the desire to build a better learning experience for Xerox employees drove Antonelli and his team to add The Commons to XSU last September. While this area of the corporate university experienced good growth at first, with more than 1,000 people signing up in the first two weeks, the adoption and participation slowed down after a few months. “This was a vastly different way for people to learn and collaborate. Because it was a new way to do things, we found that they weren’t really sure quite what to do,” said Antonelli.



The benefits of having our learners be producers of learning as well, far outweigh the concerns we may initially feel about giving up control

Truth be told, we need to get out of the way and let our learners be the centre of learning, not us

The Xerox Global Learning Services team needed to teach employees how to use The Commons and the social learning technology it was built on. They needed to highlight what the programme could do for learners and how it could support learning in their daily work. To accomplish this, Antonelli created a Community Managers Programme to train employees to lead social learning groups and be able to engage more people. Participants can be employees from any area in the company who have expressed an interest in leading a social learning group or who have been recommended by someone as a good candidate for the programme. “We want to bring training to the company, communities, and professional areas where people are – bring it to them rather than have them come to us,” said Antonelli. The programme consists of three phases: Learn, Do, and Lead (see below).

Community Managers Programme

Learn. The first part of the programme is a six-week course in which participants learn how to use The Commons for social learning, including the software for learning engagements and features such as inviting others to join. If participants satisfy all of the requirements, they get a Level 1 certification as a community manager and a virtual badge that they can post on their profile in The Commons or on LinkedIn.

Do. During the second phase, people who have been certified as community managers are asked to ‘do’ or actively participate in social learning engagements in The Commons. “We want them to be a part of the conversation every day, so we ask that they spend 10 minutes a day on the site, engaging in some sort of activity,” Antonelli said. Participants receive a suggested list of fundamental activities to follow,

such as post something on Monday and invite someone on Tuesday. Once the managers have run a community successfully for three months, they receive a Level 2 certification.

Lead. The goal of the last phase is to build manager capability beyond the core team who runs and manages The Commons. To complete the ‘lead’ phase, participants search for others who would be good community leaders and start developing them to take on that role. This enables people to lead by teaching others what they know about engaging in social learning and leading a social learning group. “Our goal is to drive mass collaboration,” said Antonelli. Employees who complete this phase receive a Level 3 certification.

Xerox Global Learning Services is pleased with the results of the inaugural run of the programme and is on track for more positive results. From the first Community Managers Programme cohort of 15 participants who began this May, 12 have been certified as Level 1 community managers, five have achieved Level 2 certification, and two have reached Level 3. A second cohort of 40 participants started in July and a third cohort is planned to begin in September.

Get into gear with these four shifts

Xerox is on the leading edge of reshaping the learner mindsets with their Community Managers Programme, but there are too few other organisations ready to take this bold step. To help us move the needle forward, here are four shifts



we need to make in our mindsets and in the minds of our learners.

1. Move away from learning events and move to learning being a process.
2. Move people from being only consumers of learning to becoming producers of learning.
3. Move learning from being an isolated personal occurrence to a collaborative practice.
4. Move learning leaders from a role of encouraging learning to architecting it.

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

1. From learning events...to learning as a process

Learning and training often occur within the context of a singular event, such as a training class to bring people into compliance with a new policy. But what happens once that event is over? Does learning stop? Sometimes. Should it stop? Of course not.

Instead of the learning stopping, we have to stop conducting learning and training in isolation of daily work, as though the topics and time spent in pursuit of knowledge have no bearing on the jobs that people do every day. We have to start making learning an embedded part of the typical workday, something that occurs seamlessly as people complete daily tasks. Adults value context and personal experience when learning; we need to deliver learning that meets these expectations.

Learning is an ongoing process. In fact, I hope we can all say that learning is never finished. It is a constant pursuit, and one that we should help our



Table 1. Positive collaboration attributes

Conceptual	Decisive	Supportive	Knowledgeable
Pragmatic	Creative	Analytical	Empathetic
Loyal	Organised	Results-driven	Tactful
Objective	Direct	Friendly	Innovative

organisations embrace as we revamp how we help people pursue knowledge and insights.

2. From consumers...to producers

When it comes to corporate learning and development, employees typically play the role of consumer. They peruse the virtual shelves of your e-learning catalogue, or thumb through the list of upcoming training courses while getting a cup of coffee. In a word, they take. But what if we want them to give, too? What would that do to your learning framework and mindset?

If you look at learning as a cyclical process, people not only take, they also give. When people teach someone else or share what they know with colleagues, they further develop their own skills. Their knowledge is reinforced, their assumptions are tested by questions from the learners, and they build even deeper understanding of their areas of expertise. We lose untapped learning potential by not having our employees be producers of learning in addition to consumers.

This can be a scary concept – to let go of the reins and allow the control to be in the hands of learners. However, the benefits of having our learners be producers of learning as well, far outweigh the concerns we may initially feel about giving up control.

3. From isolation...to collaboration

Learning can be a lonely pursuit. Learning can also be a collaborative, engaging practice that pulls people together. It's up to us as learning and training professionals to change how we and others view learning, going from a mindset of learning as a singular pursuit accomplished by individuals, to a mindset that views learning as a collaborative endeavour tackled by peers throughout an organisation.

The virtual world of social learning flourishes when people work together, build community, and collaborate with one another. We can help our learners get to this point by providing them with a way to openly and willingly spread knowledge, skills, and know-how among colleagues. One way to accomplish this is by having people give positive feedback about each other's collaboration style. A common set of positive adjectives, such as

References

- 1 "Modernising Learning: Delivering Results," 2014-2015 Towards Maturity Benchmark Study by Towards Maturity, November 2014.
- 2 Handcock, T., and Harris, D. (2014). "Preparing Learning and Development for the Future," (CEB).



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inquisitive, pragmatic, innovative, or responsive, could be used so that people start to build their virtual reputations as social learning collaborators.

By focusing on positive feedback only, people can emphasise the strengths that a colleague brought to the social learning environment. The list of positive attributes can be used to help you get started (see Table 1). Simply ask your learners to choose three adjectives to describe a colleague's collaborative style. For example, "I think of [insert the person's name] as..." After they have chosen three descriptors, ask people to include personal comments for the individual. The goal is to give people a chance to share genuine feedback and appreciation for one another, which in turn will help create a positive collaborative environment.

4. From encouraging learning...to architecting it

We all do our best to encourage learning – from being a cheerleader for new learning initiatives to being an active participant in training courses relevant to our own development. But what if we move away from encouraging learning, and instead use that energy to actually architect a learning environment? What would that mean for you? What would change for you?

In a 2014 CEB report², authors Thomas Handcock and Duncan Harris encourage just that – move from encouraging learning to architecting it. But what does this really mean for you on a daily basis? Simply put, architecting learning means building a learning environment with the right structure already in place so that it can sustain itself without you having to be in the middle of it. Truth be told, we need to get out of the way and let our learners be the centre of learning, not us.

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Tips for success

Accomplishing any of these shifts can be challenging, but it can be done. To emulate the innovative Community Managers Programme at Xerox, and to start shifting the mindset of your participants in social learning, consider these tips.

1. Make it official. Xerox asks their Community Managers Programme participants to sign a contract to help make their commitment to the programme official. "We add this formality because it is part of a certificate programme. We are looking for a commitment from people who become our community managers – not just a promise to complete their training, but also a pledge to be a part of future social learning communities they will run," Antonelli said. Having a signed contract from your participants lets everyone know this is an important endeavour that is being taken seriously at all levels of the organisation.

2. Give guidelines. To make social learning a collaborative process that allows people to be producers as well as consumers of knowledge, you need to set some parameters that will help guide your participants. Maybe you want people to spend 20–30 minutes a day on social learning activities, or maybe you want them to post at least three times a week to help spur conversation. Perhaps you want learning groups to only last six weeks so that topics stay fresh and relevant, or perhaps you want people to follow specific agenda considerations. Whatever the factors are that suit your organisation, be sure to write them down and communicate them to your participants so that everyone knows what to expect and what is being asked of them.

3. Reward accomplishments. "People love their badges," said Antonelli. "In corporate learning, you don't normally get anything other than a completion. By giving them a badge, it gives them a sense of gratification and accomplishment that can be missing from other learning activities." When someone receives a Level 2 or Level 3 certification, Antonelli also takes the time to share the news via an email to several key players: the person's boss, their boss's boss, and programme sponsors (e.g. the VP of HR and the VP of Learning). Sharing this good news with influential colleagues helps make each person's commitment to the programme that much more worthwhile. **TJ**