



Informal learning: Extending the impact of enterprise ideas and information

A conversation with Jay Cross, author of *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Innovation and Performance*

In a recently published report from IDC, Peter McStravick observed that as chief learning officers look for more ways to derive value from investments in workforce development, corporate training functions will continue to undergo significant change (McStravick 2007). While training continues to play an essential part of organizational life, most successful organizations know that corporate learning is no longer just about training. In today's hyperintensive workplace, forward-thinking organizations are turning to enterprise learning in their quest to be better informed, better skilled, supported at the point of need, and more competitive in their respective marketplaces. Enterprise learning makes learning part of the organizational DNA, where data from operations informs marketing efforts, which may, in turn, better supports sales and channel partners and make customer education easier to manage. Enterprise learning is seen as a way to improve organizational performance and to demonstrate that investments in people, learning resources, and IT really can have a direct positive impact on company success metrics, such as profitability, revenue, and employee retention (Rivera and Paradise 2006).

Two major trends are tremendously affecting how today's learning enterprises plan for their current and future implementations. One trend that has made it possible to extend consistent and reliable learning and performance support to the entire enterprise is the re-emergence of eLearning—not just eLearning that responds to the necessity of compliance and regulatory training, but also eLearning that responds to an enterprise's employee orientation and ramp-up needs, product roll-outs, sales training, point of sale, and customer success programs. As a set of strategies and practices for making use of a wide variety of content creation, distribution, and management tools, eLearning gives enterprises the ability to respond to many of the formal learning and performance support needs of a diverse, distributed, and increasingly mobile workforce.

And therein lies the rub: Even though eLearning offers the potential for anytime, anywhere access to resource and programs, eLearning, for the most part, continues to be an extension of that familiar educational environment: the classroom. By definition, eLearning courses and programs are based on classroom metaphors. They use the same instructional methods typically associated with formal learning experiences available in classroom settings. Formal learning programs, whether electronic or face-to-face, continue to be the preferred means of delivering corporate education because they provide consistent, reliable ways to ensure that new and experienced employees who need to develop new skills have the structure and support to systematically achieve demonstrable, repeatable, scalable results.

However, when learners need to figure out how to apply classroom concepts on the job, in their lives and in the world at large, they need a completely different kind of learning intervention.

Not coincidentally, this intervention is the second of the two influential trends shaping enterprise learning today. According to author Jay Cross, informal learning refers to the wide variety of spontaneous, unofficial, impromptu ways people learn to actually do their jobs. It offers a path to improved organizational capability, agility, and profits. It also respects and challenges them to be all they can be. The self-evident benefit of linking informal learning with the anytime, anywhere sensibilities of next-generation eLearning is that organizations combine informal alternatives such as social media, serious games, connections, and collaboration with online courses and on-demand tutorials.

Ellen Wagner, senior director of eLearning Solutions for Adobe Systems, spoke recently with Cross about his views on informal learning. Here is an excerpt from their conversation.

Wagner: Why the sudden training industry interest in informal learning? Why your sudden interest in informal learning?

Cross: Training professionals are paying attention to informal learning because formal learning has run out of steam. Things happen so rapidly in business today that new products roll out faster than traditional courses can keep up with. Workers don't have time for the inefficiencies of old-style training. For years, we've talked about giving people what they need, when they need it. The Internet makes it feasible to deliver on that promise. Formal learning did the trick for training factory workers how to follow procedures. Knowledge workers need to be co-participants in learning, not simply receivers.

Informal learning grabbed my attention when I realized that most learning is informal. But even as corporate leaders say that "learning is the only sustainable advantage," they leave informal learning to chance. This is crazy. It leaves money on the table. It also undervalues the contributions of workers.

Wagner: How does informal learning differ from formal learning? And how, if at all, is it the same?

Cross: Formal and informal learning are both learning. They both involve building new neural connections in the brain and adapting to new conditions. They are very much the same. They co-exist.

Imagine a spectrum of learning. One band along the continuum is formal. It frequently takes an industrial-age approach. It's regimented. Instructions come down from above. Inspectors check on productivity. Frequently, it's a production-line approach to learning. It's useful for indoctrinating groups of people with similar needs, for example, novices in a technical environment.

Another band on the continuum is informal. It's the way people have learned for eons: through observation, trial and error, listening to grandma's stories. In my view, the defining characteristic is that informal learning does not have a curriculum. Nor does it usually have grades or certification. Often it's impromptu rather than scheduled.

Just as formal learning is appropriate for novices, informal learning is frequently the best route for people who have already structured the way they see the world or an area of expertise. They aren't looking for courses or the big picture; they just want to learn what they need to plug a hole in their mental tapestry—just what it takes to get something accomplished.

These things are natural as can be, but we've become so inured to confusing schooling with learning that we miss what's really going on.

Wagner: Is informal learning the kind of thing a company can use as a component in a formal employee development program? Or is it more ethereal than that? I ask because it strikes me that enterprise adoption of informal learning programs is a bit of a contradiction in terms.

Cross: Companies already use informal learning in employee development. It's an inevitable aspect of human behavior. Companies just don't do as good a job of it as they might. Employees already learn more from one another than they do from formal programs. I don't think of informal learning as something that comes in programs. Generally, informal learning is more spontaneous than that. An enlightened enterprise can benefit substantially from improving its learning ecosystem.

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Conversation is the most powerful instructional technology on the planet. Business people learn better and deeper when they converse with the right people. Yet most firms don't have a directory of who knows what to make it easy for people to find the right people to talk with. This is Knowledge Management 101, for heaven's sake. Who do most knowledge workers turn to when they need an answer to a question? Whoever is physically closest to them. What are the odds that your neighbor has the answer? That's why most questions go unanswered or, worse, receive the wrong answer. This is not ethereal; it's common practice.

The senior training staff of a large Silicon Valley high-tech firm told me they didn't know how to foster productive conversations within the workforce. I pointed out that their meeting rooms were always booked solid, everyone worked out of small cubicles, and there simply wasn't a decent place for conversations to take place. I suggested they rip out a quarter of the cubicles and replace them with leather sofas, portable white boards, and espresso machines. I'm convinced it would have helped them prosper, but I'll never know. They didn't invite me back.

You asked if informal learning has a place in a formal development program. Take as dry a piece of formal instruction as you can find, say, a packaged course on sexual harassment. Put two people in front of the monitor instead of one. They will learn more. They will remember it longer. Perhaps you want to go a step further. Offer an informal discussion over free coffee two days later. Simply interacting with others makes learning take hold.

Wagner: We know about the role that technology plays in the delivery of eLearning programs. What technology trends are being used to support informal learning?

Cross: Often the simplest technologies have the most punch. Want to speed up a corporation's metabolism? Install Instant Messenger. It's faster and more efficient than e-mail. As for e-mail, cut it in half by posting messages on wikis and electronic bulletin boards instead of copying everyone in the company. This can buy you some time to go forward with other initiatives.

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Network technology is helping peel away a lot of the excess baggage from prior means of learning. When I learned assembly language, we studied books. The common wisdom at the time was that it was better to learn about something than simply to learn it for what it was. This keeps technical writers employed but it doesn't do the rest of us much good. In the Unworkshops we're conducting to demonstrate informal learning on the web, when I want to explain a new application or widget, I fire up Adobe Captivate™ and record a quick screencast. It takes no more effort than walking one person through an example. Bingo! I've taught people how to set up a blog in less than three minutes using Adobe Captivate! I've walked others through some truly arcane web mashups that I would never be able to describe with just words.

I see two monster trends at work. First, networks breed like caffeinated rabbits. Interoperability is the attraction. Exponential payback is the motivation. The more dense its interconnections, the faster the network. We're on a rocket ride to knowledge and understanding.

Second, there's Moore's Law. More and more things are tracking the ever-upward curves of compounding growth. Memory chips grow ever faster, but so do bandwidth, reduction of business cycle times, and the rate of invention. Some say that the sum total of human progress is following Moore's Law.

Wagner: Who in an organization is most likely to benefit from knowing about informal learning, and what do they need to know about it? Where's the WIIFM (what's in it for me)?

Cross: The WIIFM is profitability for the organization and fulfillment for the individual. Anyone in an organization can benefit if they don't fear drawing outside the lines. In my book, I describe companies that have earned hundreds of millions of dollars from informal learning. It amazes me that such a powerful mechanism is right in front of corporate leaders, yet they fail to see it.

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Well, permit me to back off a little. Informal learning is a strategy for organizations with long-term values and vision. It’s not a good way to manufacture quarter-to-quarter earnings. The payback is enormous, but it’s impossible to pin down exactly how much comes from any given interaction. That’s because informal learning is holistic. It jumps boundaries. It inspires workers to be all they can be. And that’s immeasurable.

Wagner: *But it is correlatable. And for so many organizations, that’s enough evidence. It’s not that they are looking for the answer, so much as they are looking for ways to make a more informed decision. They want evidence to help make the case for learning in all its various forms, formal and informal, with and without the “e”, as a strategic imperative. But now let me ask you another question. In your view, is informal learning just another way to talk about personal learning?*

Cross: All learning is personal. You can lead a kid to college, but you can’t make him think.

All learning is also shared. It’s co-creation. Knowledge is born in the interplay of what’s in our heads and belief systems with everything else that’s out there. Everything is connected to everything else. Learning is what humans do. I wouldn’t want to limit it with any qualifiers.

Less than a hundred years ago, workers were told, “You’re not paid to think.” Now workers are paid to think. As they do so, they are assuming responsibility for decisions, for working with customers, for improvising solutions, and for making their time productive. Each of us can profit from informal learning as individuals as well as organizations. Setting up one’s personal learning environment doesn’t take long, but it’s a gift that keeps on giving. Just being mindful of how one learns and where to improve the process pays immense dividends.

Conclusion

Cross is not alone in his view that informal learning may be the conceptual glue that holds a high-performing enterprise together. IDC’s McStravick notes that one of the key findings from research on the training industry was that chief learning officers want to see more attention given to informal learning, measurement, and alignment in 2007 (McStravick 2007). Forrester Research’s Claire Schooley has observed that eLearning is extending beyond the virtual classroom model by making better use of consumer technologies for information sharing, and by better connecting this more flexible approach to eLearning to work activities. She notes that moving away from a complete dependence on classroom instruction and integrating standard informal learning tools, such as blogging and podcasting, help situate learning and make it more contextual. She also notes that eLearning content will become more engaging with greater use of informal learning tools such as simulations and games, virtual labs, Flash applications, and rich interactive graphics (Schooley 2006).

Forward-thinking organizations are turning to enterprise learning in their quest to be better informed, better skilled, better supported at the point of need, and more competitive in their respective marketplaces. It is clear that as enterprise learning becomes a central part of strategic business alignment, the anytime, anywhere promises of eLearning are more likely to be met by extending the metaphor of the classroom and taking better advantage of today’s informal learning tools, resources, and techniques.

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