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## March 2007 Editorial

*Part Three in a Three-Part Series on  
The State of E-Learning*

### The Pedagogy of E-Learning as an Organizational Learning System

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This editorial is the last in a three-part series on the state of e-learning. In January, a discussion about the strong relationship between e-learning and organizational culture and structure was presented in an editorial entitled “The Significance of E-Learning and Organizational Transformation.” Last month, a description of the impact of e-learning on diversity/globalization issues was presented in a piece entitled “E-Learning, Organizational Diversity and Globalization.” For this month, a third editorial on the pedagogical connection between e-learning and organizational learning is presented. It is believed that these three discussions on the state of e-learning are important as organizations in all sectors address workforce issues related to effective knowledge management for the adult learner and increasingly rely on e-learning venues for organizational development.

The pedagogy of e-learning in the workplace has changed over time and is currently emerging as most effective when focused on the idea of self-directed individuals engaging in organizational learning. McElroy (2003) explains this process, “. . . individual learning is an important element of mutual, collective, or organizational learning (OL). But it takes more than individual learning for OL to

succeed. It takes *independent* individual learning.”<sup>1</sup> This pedagogical issue of self-directed individual learning blending into organizational learning comes from the premise that adult learning is a socially-based, self-organizing, organic lifelong process, rather than an event, and, therefore, requires the integration of individual and group outcomes in terms of content acquisition, soft skill development and behavior changes (Grabove, 1997; Daley, 2000 & Piper, 2004).<sup>2-4</sup> McElroy (ibid) describes this process as “independent individual learning; followed by group or community learning; followed by organizational adoption; followed, finally by the integration of new knowledge into practice.”<sup>5</sup> McElroy believes that this learning process of developing from self-directed learning into organizationally-based communities of practice is self-organizing. Interestingly, this pedagogical view does not match more traditional training and development approaches where employees are placed in learning situations based on supervisors’ decisions.

When an organic dynamic of work and learning occurs for the adult, this adds greatly to the organization’s performance capacity. Ziegler (2002) states, “The most effective performance environments are those with an integrated view of work, worker and workplace.”<sup>6</sup> Organizations are boldly turning to e-learning solutions not only to educate, train or certify individuals, but also as a means to carry out more values-based organizational change initiatives. Pollard describes how Regions Financial Corporation merged with Union Planters in 2004, using a blended e-learning approach, “. . . learners [employees] can navigate through the right progression of content: from learning that provides an introduction to the merger and cultural values, to product knowledge, to learning related to specific systems and applications.”<sup>7</sup> Ziegler (ibid) emphasizes the values in this type of model that promotes the integration of individual and organizational learning and states, “They’re [organizations] technology-enabled environments that enhance workforce performance by minimizing the distinction between working and learning, KM [knowledge management] and collaboration, and communication and performance.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, the value in e-learning is that it facilitates an organization’s ability to conceptualize and deliver learning for individuals and for organizations from the same pedagogical lens, one that is in the organizational and learner’s context and is supported by organizational processes and values, as well as those of the learner.

The pedagogical shift to the integration of individual and organizational learning and performing, facilitated by e-learning capacity, as an embedded organizational development practices is very different from the view that workers “go” to training and “return” to work. Bielski (2005) states that at times it is useful to “go” to training to get away from the work setting, but she also describes how well e-learning matches the pedagogy of individual and organizational learning as merging approaches,

. . . the method [e-learning] has settled into a niche in an increasingly complex organizational learning environment—one that often includes use of learning management systems (LMS), an infrastructure for online courses that includes registering and performance monitoring capabilities. Also included are systems for idea and knowledge management that serve as a kind of virtual corporate library.<sup>9</sup>

Kirschner (2004) describes this change in approach to learning that business has taken by merging individual and corporate learning and urges higher education to pay attention to this pedagogical development,

Higher education suffers from its stress on the individual acquisition of knowledge and skills in an academic setting, while society and industry cry out for learning outcomes that can often be achieved in authentic collaborative contexts (Kirschner, Van Vliessen, Hummel & Wigman, 1997). Examples of such learning outcomes are negotiation of meaning in discourse and argumentation, solving ill-structured or wicked problems in interdisciplinary teams, and continuous or lifelong learning throughout a series of employment cycles.<sup>10</sup>

The pedagogy of e-learning in the context of an individual learning as a beginning point of organizational development can be more easily realized when two organizational practices are used, taking a systems approach and developing useful metrics prior to e-learning implementation. The

view of e-learning presented here is one that advocates for these two organizational practices. Without them, e-learning does have questionable merits. In a study conducted in southeast Michigan (Automation Alley & American Society of Training & Development, 2004) of various businesses using e-learning, it was found that more than half of the respondents indicated e-learning was used in their organizations in ways that were not strategic and did not align with organizational goals, and, in turn, left them wondering what its value was.<sup>11</sup> This study highlights how organizations neglected to use systems thinking and the development of metrics in e-learning initiatives. Phillips, Employment Development Specialist for a 12,000-employee hospital, commented in a panel presentation debriefing from this Michigan study stating,

My point of concern [regarding e-learning meeting organizational training objectives] is just how much training is actually taking place. In the healthcare industry, we run large numbers of people through our e-learning programs. Not many of them are learning. I would even say the majority are simply meeting accreditation requirements. So, is e-learning 'learning'—or really more of a tracking system?" (2004, p. 16)<sup>12</sup>

Organizations have learned that the implementation of effective e-learning requires a systemic view, whereby several inter-related and simultaneous elements can be considered at once. Sivakumar (2006) states, "An integrated approach to e-learning is important because it can be effectively used to analyze employee performance and also to gather information for online and real-time learning of organizational goals. . . ." <sup>13</sup> When characterized as an ontology<sup>14</sup> or even placed in a taxonomy, it is possible to develop valid and reliable metrics for organizational e-learning. The taxonomy becomes both a tool to understand or represent transformative organizational e-learning processes and to evaluate or assess the state of e-learning.

Firestone and McElroy (2003), knowledge management experts, explain this on a scale beyond e-learning. Nonetheless, they make the point that it makes no sense to develop metrics for anything without a clear understanding of what needs to be measured and why it needs to be measured. They

present examples of “fuzzy measurements,” rubrics and matrices aligning with various knowledge management systems, enforcing the point that implementing a knowledge management system with strategic clarity and desired outcomes makes sense. They push for the optimal knowledge management system as an integrated organizational approach to learning whereby strategy is developed. In other words, strategy is developed *from* the organization’s knowledge management initiatives, not the other way around.<sup>15</sup> This author sees no limitations in specifically applying their logic to e-learning in organizations while recognizing that the field of knowledge management includes e-learning as a subset. Cao and Zhang (2006) describe several knowledge management tools that are used in e-learning systems, so relating knowledge management principles to e-learning systems has precedence.<sup>16</sup> Included in this view is the work of Le, Moghrabi, Tivendell, Hachey, and Roy (2006) who analyze the commonalities between e-learning and knowledge management in the type of tools that are used in knowledge transfer issues.<sup>17</sup>

Sivakumar (ibid) specifically proposes a varied approach to e-learning metrics. That is, using different metrics based on employee-centric outcomes and based on organizational learning outcomes.<sup>18</sup> These outcomes may be training related, as described by Sorine, Walls and Trinkleback (2001) for safety education. They include items such as the delivery of current, consistent, quality and frequent learning materials that can be monitored and are cost-effective.<sup>19</sup> The outcomes may be organizational-centric as Hornsby (2004) offers the suggestion that a heuristic evaluation is most useful, one that examines the phenomenology of e-learning implementation and its usefulness in the organization. Hornsby advocates for a three-tiered evaluation, including the students’, the users’, and the organizations’ perspectives.<sup>20</sup> Bielski (ibid) provides a good example of Texas bank using e-learning to promote employee inclusion at remote sites and a second example of a national bank using e-learning to describe and promote cultural changes.<sup>21</sup>

The evolution of e-learning is occurring now at the same time that the pedagogy of organizational learning is developing as well. Thankfully, no point of conflict appears in these concurrent developments. Sorine, Walls, and Trinkleback (ibid) describe the evolution of e-learning, “The

Internet revolution not only has changed the way the world views electronic commerce, or e-commerce, but also e-learning at all levels.”<sup>22</sup> Further, Collin, Dorbolo and Vandresse (2002) describe the concurrent pedagogical shifts in organizational learning in citing the example of a global telecommunications firm, “Belgacom’s learning philosophy is that training and continuing education are responsibilities shared by a company, its employees and their supervisors.”<sup>23</sup> Using systems thinking and developing aligning metrics will benefit organizations trying to conceptualize and/or measure effective e-learning initiatives and organizational development. In promoting systems thinking in e-learning development and implementation, common understandings can be cultivated through the use of mental models of complex organizational elements. In developing metrics, either qualitative or quantitative, against which organizational e-learning practice can be measured, its value-added capacity can be understood as both employee and organizational development. When these two practices, systems thinking and the use of metrics, occur upon e-learning implementation, framed within the pedagogy of self-directed individual learning and organizational learning as a valued dynamic, then e-learning’s potential will be better realized in organizations.

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