Why the Evolution of Technology Hasn’t Truly Improved Digital Learning

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The use of computers for instruction isn’t new. Some of the earliest explorations in digital education for instruction were focused on making student experiences superior to the classroom as early as the late 1960s. Professor Patrick Suppes of Stanford University explored in detail the challenges of teaching a classroom of 25 students and concluded that computer technology available at the time could provide the individual instruction, lessons and support necessary to identify individual weaknesses and provide instruction tailored to those needs.

So why, in 2022, do we use broadcast technology like web meetings, boring PowerPoint lectures and ineffective eLearning videos and quizzes, which deliver the same instruction to every student? From K-12 education to corporate learning and development departments, the story is pretty much the same, everyone can access better learning tools and strategies, but they don’t.

Related: Workplace Learning Is Broken. These 5 Steps Tell You How to Fix It.

Problems with the innovation in learning technology today

It’s safe to assume that you have had both good and bad

learning experiences in your lifetime. What made the worst experience for you so bad? Was it boring, emotionally uncomfortable, the wrong subject or too difficult? Too often, designers of digital learning are pressured to create content quickly, by themselves, and for a budget so small that PowerPoint becomes the defacto solution.

But even when budgets do open up, our minds and imaginations in the corporate world are constrained by our past experiences and expectations. We all think we know what good learning looks like – so do the designers and creators of today's eLearning authoring tools. As an industry, eLearning suffers more from not looking into past mistakes than most others. Current innovation in learning technology tends to be focused on:

1. **Making things convenient for learning content creators** but not necessarily more effective for the end users – the students. As noted above, the job is under the pressures of time, budget and people to do things creatively to manage under those constraints. With tools aimed at making content uniform and development quick and easy, most eLearning is predictably boring and monotone.

2. **Bells and whistles for the sake of making the old seem new again:** Hate flipping through a slide deck on your computer? Well, you're going to love flipping through a slide deck in augmented reality!

3. **Removing complexity so students reach completion faster:** Nevermind that it takes real effort to reach mastery, more tools are coming online every day to simplify design choices down to sharing a pdf, showing a video or asking a multiple-choice question. With these offerings, students can breeze through a one-hour course in just seven minutes or a 20-minute module while multi-tasking during a company meeting.

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What does great instruction look like?

Since the 1960s, digital learning professionals have gotten everything they wished for from early access to AI, plasma touchscreens in 1972 with PLATO IV, sound, animations, augmented reality and virtual reality, but the real question is: Why haven't students gotten what they really need?

Learning is an individualized experience. The learner has to learn for themselves; no one else can do it for them. As the durability of skills in the workforce becomes shorter and shorter, a core competency of tomorrow's workforce will be learning. Maybe more importantly, workers will need to be able to choose experiences that will actually help them learn. Hint: It's not a lecture with a quiz at the end.

Technology isn't the answer, it's a medium to provide scalable individualized instruction, just as early edtech pioneers envisioned. The core impediment is our lack of experience and skill in designing individualized instruction. Today, yesterday and a long time ago, sufficient tools existed to create effective digital instruction, but as students, most of us haven't experienced what great instruction looks like. Our limited experience with greatness impedes our ability to demand excellence from the training we take. Digital or not, learning experiences must treat us and our needs as individuals.

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How organizations benefit from providing great learning experiences

Organizations that can make the leap from bad to great learning will gain a superior competitive advantage, especially under today’s conditions of labor shortages, increasing skills gaps and reduced tenure. Great learning allows organizations to:

- Pivot quickly and do things differently
- Keep quiet quitters engaged, with the skills and abilities that translate to personal fulfillment
- Retain top talent by giving employees the tools to grow, gain agency and step into leadership roles

The path to excellence in digital learning

The fastest path to learning excellence starts with recognizing our expectations and constraints in training are largely arbitrary and conditioned by legacy practices. Learning doesn’t have to look like classrooms of the past or bullet-point slides. If your eLearning is solving real organizational challenges like increasing revenue, improving client satisfaction scores or eliminating waste, its design probably includes:

- A primary focus on supporting performance practice over disseminating facts
- Spacing practice over multiple events, not just content delivered once

- Showing real-world consequences to actions and decisions
- Individualizing the level of challenges to each student based on each performance
- Supporting and driving the motivation for each student to perform with increased proficiency back on the job

Is your organization providing the best learning experiences for your employees? Again, technology is just a tool – it's not the answer. Reevaluate your practices, and take advantage of the greater learning tools and strategies that are out there. Make the leap from conventional to great, and watch your business – and employees – thrive.

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