Learnscape architecture

By Jay Cross / August 2008

Industrial age workers used machinery to manufacture objects in factories. Now, knowledge workers create value, not on the factory floor, but in what I call a learnscape. A learnscape is the platform where knowledge workers collaborate, solve problems, converse, share ideas, brainstorm, learn, relate to others, talk, explain, communicate, conceptualize, tell stories, help one another, teach, serve customers, keep up to date, meet one another, forge partnerships, build communities, and distribute information. Learnscapes are where and how modern work is performed—including workplace learning.

Natural Pathways

Corporate learning is a continuous, never-ending process. People learn to do their work in small chunks: a tip from a pal, an “ah-ha moment” after trying something new, a factoid from Wikipedia or Google, a glimpse of someone doing something well, or a story told over lunch. But training departments rely on offering workshops and courses, and CLOs fixate on “learning management systems.” These event-driven things are necessary, but they are a small part of improving organizational learning and performance. Rather than investing in new content and control systems, learning leaders will get a higher return from nurturing the natural pathways to learning that already exist in their organizations.

Training events are less important than ever. Today, greater leverage comes from building on-going, largely self-sustaining learning processes such as subscriptions to keep up-to-date technically, persistent online meeting rooms for collaboration, and knowledge bases that support self-service learning. This process orientation focuses on an organization’s architecture for learning, a platform that is a level above its training programs and regulated events. Learning architecture is the foundation for learning that is spontaneous, serendipitous, drip-fed, and mentored—as well as for the formal training that will always be with us.

Learning Is the Work

Corporate learning used to be based on the proposition that knowing how people did things in the past was adequate preparation for doing well in the present. This worked when there was generally one way to do a task, and it remained the same for decades. Today, incessant change is baked into everything. About all we can say is that the future won’t be like the past. The focus of learning must shift from what used to work to what works now.

High-quality learning is that which enables a worker to turn in an exemplary performance. This is a moving target. Pragmatic learning involves continually acquiring knowledge, figuring out how to do things, unlearning concepts that have become obsolete, and keeping abreast of change. The product of learning is not something a person receives a certificate for; the true outcome of learning is successful adaptation to the ever-changing environment.

Knowledge Work

In the industrial era, workers operated machinery to produce goods. You could see what they were doing and touch the goods they produced. Time-and-motion studies identified the one best way to do a job; training taught workers how to do it. Successful workers followed instructions. “You’re not paid to think.” Outcomes were predictable. Work was mechanical.

Today, workers apply knowledge to deliver services. You can’t see most of what they’re doing, and their output is largely intangible. There’s always a
better way to do a job; learning stretches minds to cope with new situations. Successful knowledge workers are rewarded for innovation and ingenuity. These workers are paid to think. Change is rampant and unpredictable.

Not so long ago, knowledge itself was thought to reside in people’s heads. The new view is that knowledge is collective intelligence, a shared consensual reality that lives among us rather than inside us. We aren’t mere consumers of knowledge; we’re contributors as well. Knowledge work is social. More than just a repository for content, learnscape is necessary platforms for sharing, relationship-building, and making meaning.

**Role of the Architect**

Gardeners don’t control plants; managers don’t control people. You can’t make a plant fit into a landscape or a person fit into an organization; you can only prepare an environment to make this a more likely outcome. Our role as learning professionals is to shape that environment, provide nutrients for growth, and let nature take its course.

Learnscape architects nurture organizations to get things done as simply and naturally as possible. Diverse elements, held in equilibrium, make for robust, thriving, vibrant organizations. Learnscape share many characteristics of the Web: simplicity, clarity, user-centricity, restraint, and attention to detail.

Self-service workers connect to one another, to ongoing flows of information and work, to their teams and organizations, to their customers and markets, not to mention their families and friends because they can easily navigate networks of “small pieces, loosely joined,” the conventions they know from the Internet.

**The Business Argument**

The landscape architect’s goal is to conceptualize a harmonious, unified, pleasing garden that makes the most of the site at hand. The learnscape architect strives to create a learning environment that increases the organization’s longevity and health and the individual learner’s happiness and well-being.

That’s not enough to win the learnscape architect a commission. Harmony is a tough sell in a topsy-turvy business climate.

Business leaders will only support investing in learnscape architecture when they consider its tangible outcomes, among them:

- building productive two-way relationships with customers
- fostering a culture of continuous improvement
- facilitating teamwork, collaboration, and joint problem-solving
- increasing corporate responsiveness to change
- cutting superfluous email and bureaucratic bloat
- strengthening bonds with all stakeholders
- attracting inquisitive, self-motivated talent
- keeping abreast of new developments in industry and markets
- fostering self-service learning without boundaries
- replacing antiquated control systems with enlightened self-regulation

A few organizations have adopted the approach of learnscape architecture although it goes by different names. I am developing a pattern language of learning archetypes to make it easier for organizations to assemble optimal learnscape. This work is not yet finished nor do I expect it ever will be. In my next article, I’ll explore some of the specifics of putting this approach to work.

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