Learning + Knowledge = ?

by Matt Moore

A few years ago, I was working in a division of a multinational that had decided to integrate its learning and development (L&D) group on the one hand with its knowledge management (KM) team on the other. I was on the KM side and I found myself in a meeting with my new colleagues from the learning & development bloc. One of them looked at me and said: "What is it you do? It's something about databases isn't it?" Inwardly I sighed - and then another thought went through my head: I wasn't crystal clear on what they did either. This was going to be a long session.

This article has it origins in those early conversations and the work we did afterwards. It examines why organisations may want to integrate L&D and KM, what some of the pitfalls might be, and future opportunities for the would-be learning organisation.

Some Background and Definitions

KM and L&D may have different origins but both suffer from misunderstandings as to their purpose and scope by outsiders. This first section reflects on these origins (and of course oversimplifies them in the process).

The function that many organisations now call "learning & development" started off life as just plain old "training". It borrowed its two primary techniques from the education sector. The first technique is classroom-based training - where a trainer stands in front of a class and plays the role of teacher. The trainer (or the topic) may favour a one-way, lecturing style or a more facilitative, interactive approach. The second technique is the textbook - the presentation of information and exercises in a structured way. In the last 15 years, first CDs and then web-based eLearning products have emerged to populate this space. Despite their nifty video and animation clothing, most are still textbooks underneath it all. If you ask would-be learners about "learning" then these two techniques are the ones that immediately come to mind - and are still where the bulk of learning dollars are spent in most organisations. Which leaves many learning professionals feeling uneasy. We know that most employee learning does not occur in classrooms - it occurs when and where people are doing their jobs. A wide range of work-based learning techniques have been developed over the years that build on this fact. Some go back centuries (apprenticeships) and some are more recent innovations (action learning).

Meanwhile, "knowledge management" is a newer kid on the block. Initially its ambitions were big, to capture and codify all the knowledge that staff needed to do their work inside huge database repositories. The late 90s saw the appointment of Chief Knowledge Officers in many organisations to manage all this collection process. This role is now pretty much extinct and the initial promises made for knowledge management were not kept. Why? Because many of the knowledge repositories that were built were never used by staff. People tend to rely on those nearest them for knowledge rather than a database. Where it flourished, knowledge management developed a less rigid approach that enabled staff to access the plethora of data, information and knowledge around them, rather than prescribing when and where to do so. Knowledge managers often do manage documents but are as likely to be facilitating and supporting a virtual community within an organisation or conducting a reflective learning session around a project as they are designing a taxonomy.

The logic of integration

Despite these differing histories, L&D and KM share something simple: an interest in improving the performance of an organisation through increased capability.

For individuals, some of that capability development will occur through information provision. That information may take the form of a classroom lecture session, an interactive video, a methods document, or a response by an expert to a question posed on an email list. Beyond information provision, building capability requires coaching and reflection. Some of those sound like classic L&D activities and some like they belong to KM - but the ultimate source of these services for the user is irrelevant. They just want to do their job better (and if they don't then your organisation probably doesn't want them). If we are talking about truly user-centred learning then a broader, knowledge-based perspective is required that inevitably means that knowledge managers and learning professionals must collaborate.

Beyond the individual, both KM and L&D should support the Learning Organisation. Popularised by Peter Senge and others, within a learning organisation, improvement is not seen as solely an individual responsibility but a collective one. Much has been written on this topic but there are few examples of organisations that consistently achieve this goal over years.

Moving from a philosophical to a pragmatic perspective, information technology often drives organisational change. The technologies that underlie L&D and KM work are becoming increasingly intertwined: enterprise content management (ECM) and virtual collaboration. Experience shows that technology is often the wrong place to start but that doesn't seem to stop organisations from doing so. Equally, organisations may be looking for cost benefits in merging L&D and KM. This "arranged marriage" approach may not be ideal but you may not have a choice.

So in theory, L&D and KM people have a lot to offer each other. Whether this union is voluntary or not, what are the issues that can prevent harmonious cooperation?

Sources of Potential Conflict

The first is a difference in language. Academics and practitioners associated with both groups have developed extensive literatures - often separately. The jargon that both sides use can be off-putting to outsiders: competencies, cognitive load, taxonomy, CoP. The solution to this issue is simple: avoid jargon where possible and keep an open mind (easier said than done)!

The second difference goes deeper behind the surface issue of language: varying educational backgrounds and skills sets. L&D practitioners tend to have skills in curriculum development, instructional design and training delivery. KM people tend to come from a background of information science and process improvement. If these groups are going to work together then both sides need to appreciate that each other's skills are valuable. Actively seeking out or structuring projects that use both L&D and KM personnel and their skills early on is essential. Training each group in the skills of the other can also bear fruit.

The third source of difference is down to a characteristic that both share. The two groups are often "marginal" in organisations in that the Head of Learning or KM will rarely own a core revenue stream - i.e. the business does not exist to deliver L&D or KM. It seems to be often the case that those with little organisational power will attempt to get it by stepping on others - the insecure are always trying to boost their own place in the pecking order. The temptation for L&D and KM groups is to play the other off against those in the business. This temptation should be avoided - by mutual respect gained by delivering projects and by managers not playing favourites with one group. Colocating a combined L&D / KM team should also reduce the risk of a "them vs us" culture developing.

Talk of status leads to talk of money. The investment made in one group may be much greater than the other. Typically, classroom training and quality eLearning development is very expensive and may be multiples of the amount spent on KM. Managers tend to focus on where the money is being spent

rather than where the value is being added (or risk engendered). Conversely if the KM budget includes collaboration software such as the email and ECM software, it may outweigh the training budget. Either of these situations mean that one group gets more managerial focus than the other (leading to lost morale, staff turnover, etc). A sensible integration of L&D and KM will look at opportunities to leverage the skills of both groups where possible.

Finally the ability of technology to hinder as much as it helps should be remembered. If the systems that manage your learning content cannot work with the systems that manage your documentation which in turn won't speak to your collaboration software, you are in trouble. Trouble that can be circumvented with some patience and some imagination or a big pile of money but a short term headache none the less. There is no guaranteed way of future proofing your IT platform, but choosing software based on open standards (hopefully the same standard) rather than proprietary formats is recommended. N.B. Open source software has reached the point where it can no longer be automatically ruled out as immature or substandard.

The Future

The future for L&D and KM is bright. People will always need to learn - as will organisations. The challenge is to achieve this in a cost-constrained, dynamic environment. I believe that practitioners from both backgrounds stand more chance of success (or survival) if they do work together on delivering truly user-centred learning. These emerging areas offer a genuine fusion of the two disciplines:
   • The rediscovery of storytelling and narrative by businesses as means of transferring knowledge. Trainers have always used stories, anecdotes and examples as teaching aides. In contrast, knowledge management has borrowed or developed techniques to elicit and make sense of employee stories. "Storytelling" and "storylistening" are complementary to each other and provide an important supplement to analytic/mechanistic approaches to organisational development.
   • The rise of communities and networks (technology-aided or not) as a peer-to-peer learning alternative to traditional organisational structures. These communities can be catalysed and strengthened through events that look suspiciously like traditional training courses but they can also involve less structured meetings such as knowledge fairs, Open Space and unconferences (e.g. BarCamp and its many variants).
   • And most ambitiously, genuine examples of multi-level organisational learning that deal with the individual, the group, the organisation and its broader ecosystem. May be we can bring true Organisational Learning into being.

If we can find new ways of working then we can achieve things that historically neither group has had the capabilities to do individually. This will not always be easy but it will be worth it. It's an exciting time to be doing our jobs, whatever they become.

Case Study: UK Law Firm

"Our L&D function was extracted from HR and combined with a newly-created KM function and IS (moved from Facilities) just less than three years ago. Our experience has been that the three groups started off being wary of each other, but rapidly found points of common interest. It helped that we could co-locate some of the key people. We were able to find some projects where people could work together as well (such as IS helping L&D locate reading materials and KM and L&D working together to help HR develop new career grades elsewhere in the firm).One of the things that we did was to focus on the new grouping and work out collaboratively how we looked to the rest of the business (and how we were distinct from other support departments). One of the outcomes of that work was an elevator script which highlights the fact that we all consider work for individuals or groups to be our primary function, with the consequence that the firm benefits. Other support departments (IT, HR,

Finance, Facilities) tend to focus on the firm's needs first, and manage the impact on individuals later."
- Head of Knowledge Management, UK Law Firm

References

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For more information please contact:
Matt Moore
http://innotecture.wordpress.com/
matt@innotecture.com.au
+61 (0)423 784 504
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