



TO EMPOWER LEARNERS FOCUS ON EXPERIENCES NOT ENGAGEMENT

BY NATALIE RICHARDSON



An organisation I worked with recently was perplexed by the data from their learning management system. All the indicators that learning was taking place were there. Online courses were utilised, completed and passed by a high percentage of their team. The organisation had provided dedicated time for team members to complete courses and tied completion of learning to performance reviews in order to create a learning culture. Managers had been trained in coaching and one-to-one conversations had been scheduled with their people.

They were, in their eyes, doing everything right. Yet this wasn't translating into the behavioural change required to impact business results. Productivity, customer satisfaction and sales were all in decline at a time when the team should have been the most skilled it had ever been. What was going on?

ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCE ARE NOT THE SAME THING

After some investigation, it became apparent that the organisation had great learner engagement, but poor learner experience. Often

engagement with a learning program is mistaken for learner experience, but there is a world of difference if you want empowered learners who will take their new knowledge and apply it to benefit themselves, their colleagues and their workplace.

Have you ever completed an online course by simply 'clicking through' with the occasional pause to answer some multiple-choice questions you already know the answers to through common sense? This is a perfect example of what can happen when we focus purely on measuring learner engagement. Engagement is fundamentally a top down philosophy, where the leadership (or even human resource) team state what the gaps are at an organisational level and create learning to fill those gaps. When employees attend the generic company-wide course or use the learning created, they are said to have engaged with it, whether or not they've taken anything useful away from it.

TAKING A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

Learner experience, however, is a bottom-up approach. It is personalised, contextualised and co-created with the learner to suit their preferences. This is what creates connection and a desire to change, grow and apply new learnings. This holistic experience doesn't just



Often engagement with a learning program is mistaken for learner experience, but there is a world of difference if you want empowered learners

address the instructional side of learning, but also the emotional side. Learner experience takes into account who the learner is at a deeper level – what are their values, beliefs and purpose? Learner experience borrows



concepts from human-centered design, with empathy mapping being key. This is where the designer puts themselves into their customers' shoes – what are they thinking, feeling, saying and doing? What does the learner's typical day look like? Are they time poor, in back-to-back meetings and in need of some space to just reflect? Or are they working remotely and in need of some social connection? Can we design an experience for them to do this, rather than foisting another multiple-choice questionnaire on them?

Learner experience is not a new field, in fact it's a shift we are seeing in the broader human resources community. Focusing on experience requires us to shift the focus slightly, to a more holistic viewpoint, moving away from instruction to the co-creation of meaning.

EXPERIENCE DESIGN

So where do you start if you want to create experiences, rather than design courses? Firstly, **stop the one-size-fits-all approach**. Often organisations think that designing one course that everyone completes creates economies of scale, when in reality it's not delivering the value we expect. We are merely creating 'click-through' content or 'hostages' in workshops.

Secondly, **truly understand your learner**, rather than just the gap between what the organisation wants them to do and their current capability. If they travel for 20 minutes on the bus in the morning, make it mobile, make it 15 minutes long and make it something other than text for those who get motion sickness!

Third, **find flow**. Design novel experiences with enough challenge and context that they're interesting and applicable to your learner's goals (not just the organisation's goals). Your experiences should fit with your learner's context and be

need to know?, ask *'How do I want them to feel?'*

Finally, **use narrative**. Storytelling has been a method for passing on knowledge for thousands of years. There are examples of Australian Aboriginal stories that have been passed down through generations from over 7,000 years ago. Imagine if we could get that kind of knowledge transfer between those who are planning to retire soon and the next generation of organisational leaders. Our organisations would be unstoppable!



Learner experience is not a new field, in fact it's a shift we are seeing in the broader human resources community.

easily accessible at times when their brain is most receptive to learning.

Fourth, **change your questions**. Learner experience asks the question, *'How can we enable you to be your best self?'* instead of *'How do we make you more competent at your job?'* Rather than *'What do they*

LEARNING WITH ACTUAL RESULTS

For the perplexed organisation I was working with, shifting their measures of success from engagement (how many people had clicked through or attended an event) to experience helped change the dialogue

around what good learning looks like. As leaders in our field, helping our organisations shift towards learner experience is something we need to influence because if we don't, we may find ourselves explaining why our learning looks good on paper, but isn't producing the results our organisations expect to see.



NATALIE RICHARDSON

When not connecting people with their purpose as a senior associate at Performance Frontiers, Natalie Richardson can be found volunteering at the Gallery of Modern of Art, Brisbane or visiting aged care homes with her therapy greyhound, Ray. Contact via LinkedIn.