



# BRAND LEARNING

## The Future of Learning is Fluid



Just as marketers are confronting the reality of multiple channels, new technologies and ever-increasing expectations from their customers, so too is the nature of workplace learning undergoing radical change. In this article Samantha Ellis, Learning Director at BRAND LEARNING, considers the future of learning and the new mindset that capability building professionals will require to deliver effective learning experiences which enrich performance.

Every story needs a powerful opener! So my nine year old son tells me. He should know, he is the future of learning. If he wants to know anything, he'll ask an expert, i.e. me, and then partially disregard what he's heard. He'll then go looking for his own answer using search engines and get fabulously engaged by movies, pictures and words that may or may not be useful. After that, he'll ask a friend or two, and, if very desperate, refer to a book!

This familiar story is one we can also translate and project into the professional world of learning. In this article, we will:

1. Consider the Marketing Capability challenge
2. Look at the way learners' needs and expectations are changing
3. Introduce the concept of 'Fluid Learning'
4. Review the implications for supporting future learning and performance

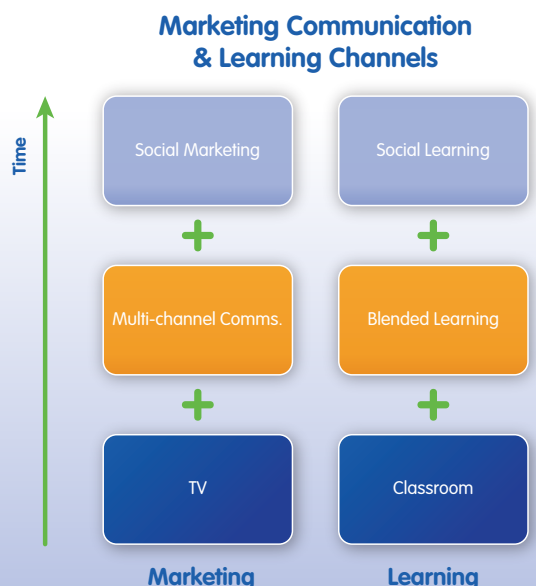
### 1. The Marketing Capability Challenge



If you had to describe everything that came into your head when you think about the future of learning, it might look something like this word-cloud. However, despite this apparent complexity, the fundamentals remain the same when

it comes to developing capabilities and reflect the key concepts of Marketing itself.

As regards selecting appropriate channels, we have seen the rise in the breadth and sophistication of new marketing channels and this is mirrored in our approach to capability development. The key point here is that the 'traditional' channels have not been totally replaced; rather, they have been enriched by the plethora of opportunities for making the brand/learning experience more effective. The figure on the right illustrates these parallel developments.

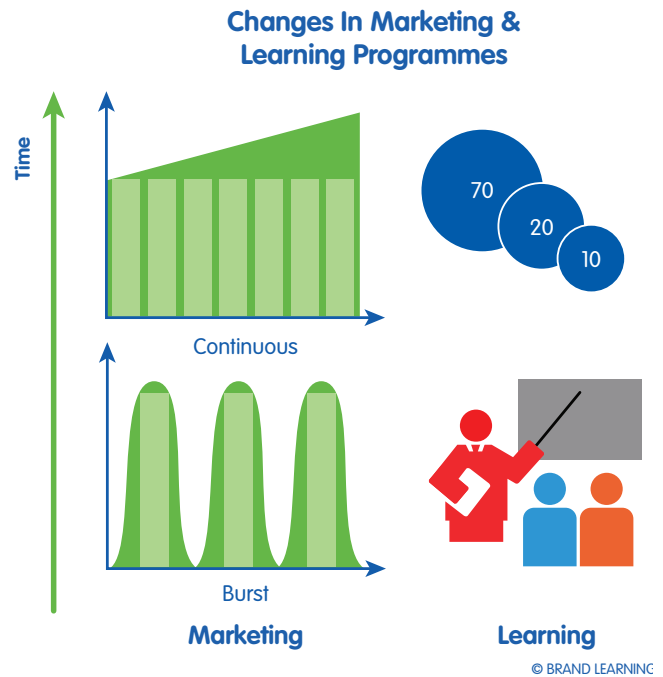


The similarities continue if we delve a little deeper into the construction of capability and communication programmes. The old burst style of the 30" TV advert and the classroom event are being replaced by a move to a continuous presence to support how performance and brand engagement work in practice.

This move will continue into the future given that technology has now given wings to the 'Lombardo and Eichinger' concept of 70:20:10. This has proven that skill development and learning happens: 70% 'on the job' through activity, learning intentions and experience; 20% through contact and interaction with others; 10% through formal classroom-based training. That's 90% informal learning!

Interestingly, we find many capability professionals are unsure of their role in the future informal learning arena. For them, it represents chaos: no structure, no systems on how to manage it or how to validate the skills or knowledge acquired.

However, the key to understanding the future of learning is to mirror the loop of how people are moving technology on and how technology is moving people on. We must always consider the audience, i.e. who will be doing the learning and how they want to be learning/performing.



## 2. Learners Are Changing



Let's briefly touch on this audience. Much has been written about Gen Y, the optimistic, passionate, confident, empowered, idealistic 20 year olds who have grown up with laptops.

Their need is to prioritise friends and connectedness, to let go of restrictive and inefficient hierarchies, become more responsive and, where possible, to build something new together.

Gen Y fully expect their learning experience to be **technology-enabled**. They demand a **faster** route to competency and a more **customised** design. If this is

not the classroom, they find their own way around it in pursuit of the key goal – enriched performance.

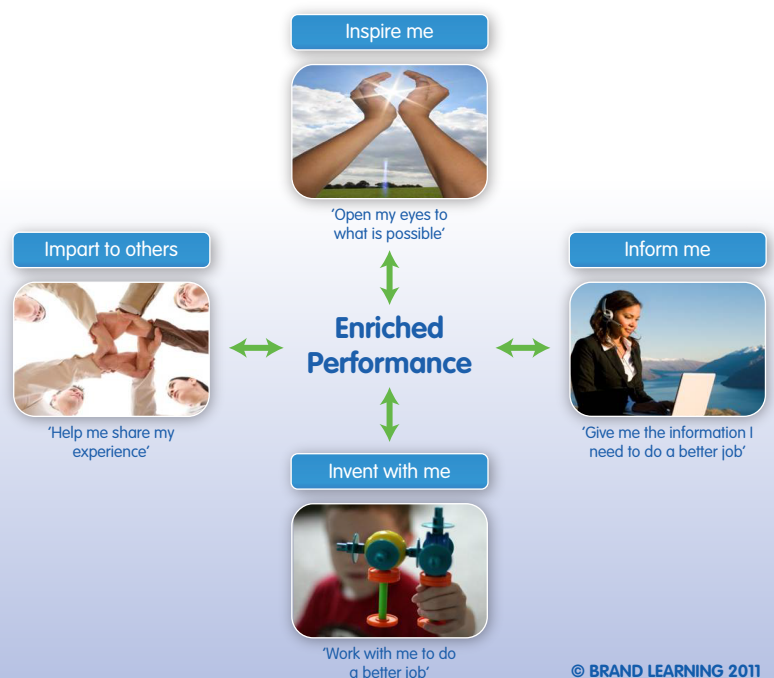
In order to help Gen Y-ers\*, Gen X-ers\* and even Gen Z-ers\* do their jobs better in the future networked world, we have to understand how these audiences will develop and their evolving needs.

\* Gen X birth dates: **1965 – 1979** | Gen Y birth dates: **1980 – 1995** | Gen Z birth dates: **1991 – 2010+**  
(Source: Pew Research Center, Jan 2010)

## 3. Introducing Fluid Learning

We have made sense of the future of learning through our model of **Fluid Learning**, illustrated on the right. As individuals switch seamlessly in the workplace between learning and doing, the 4I's Fluid Learning model represent the needs they encounter.

### 4I's Fluid Learning Model



Our role as capability building professionals is to meet the 'bottom up' needs of these individuals while, at the same time, ensuring that the organisation is meeting its 'top down' capability building objectives and business goals. By considering each 'I' of the model below, we can construct a performance support system which meets these mutual needs.

- **Inspire me:** Technology and collaborative social norms mean we are, and will remain, a click away from connecting with the world's experts presented through multi-media, personally-interactive channels. The world is out there 24/7 and we must support the human desire for inspiration to support learning and growth.
- **Inform me:** Whilst individuals have fingertip access to the world, making sense of and managing the mass of potentially useful information, at the time of application, is a must. We will continue to outsource the storage function of our brains, no longer needing to keep information in our heads, but only if we know how to find and reference what we need at the point of need. A Personal Learning Environment containing easily accessible and engaging support materials will be key.
- **Invent with me:** Collaborating with a like-minded community to harness 'crowd wisdom' will be the common approach to 'doing' in the future. Co-creation will require two features to be present for this need to thrive. Firstly a supportive culture – one which encourages questioning, feedback and passion. Secondly, and obviously, technology that supports worldwide connectivity and creativity.
- **Impart to others:** In the spirit of generosity which will grow and abound, we must seek to support public opportunities for reflection, providing a sense of fulfilment, giving back to the community and supporting the virtuous learning cycle as we share our experiences with others.

#### 4. The Implications of Supporting Learning and Performance in the Future

We know this approach to learning can seem daunting. Our clients often ask how to evidence the significant value they add in their organisations if the role of learning support is to become an invisible resource that supports the real work.

So, we recommend a mind-set change. The metaphor of comparing the capability development role to that of an architect is not new; Clive Shepherd in his book, *The New Learning Architect (2011)*, explored the changing face of capability development. However, our 'Fluid' reality helps us understand that we must move from providing the 'Yellow Brick Road' of linear learning programmes to being the visualiser and builder of engaging structures for people and learning programmes to sit within.

To be clear, just because the focus will no longer be simply a time-line of learning events does not mean we need to abandon objectives and sequential successes. It just means that the learning architectures we are designing for our clients allow for individual and group creativity in how they fluidly leverage their corporately supported resources.

As learning architects, every client comes to us with a different mix of social, technical and cultural constraints which influence their desired performance objectives. Once these are understood, the appropriate programme architecture can be recommended. This will, of course, contain the best that new technology has to offer, current examples of which include LinkedIn Groups, collaboration platforms such as Stixy.com, Twitter chats, video logs, and iPad driven face-to-face events.

And so, we come back to the beginning of this story: the world of learning is exploding with new expectations, technologies and needs. But people will still require people within this mix to learn effectively. Whether my son likes it or not, I'm going to be a key player in his fluid world.

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