

Silly Putty Learning

BY DAVID PILTZ

Agility and flexibility are key to success in business. CLOs can design the learning function with the ability to stretch into whatever the circumstances dictate.



In designing learning and development initiatives, it is not enough just to listen to experts, rely on experience or use hands-on learning. Learning occurs at the intersection of listening, experiencing and applying. Chief learning officers and other learning leaders have a unique opportunity to create a culture in which those three components of learning are made equally important. Learning leaders have the influence and ultimately the responsibility to ensure the learning function is interactive and flexible. There are many models and theories that can be used to create such an environment. However, realizing the importance of balancing simplicity and complexity; novelty and tested activities; and fun and business goals are the essential components. Before examining these characteristics, let's compare creating an environment of interactive and flexible learning to Silly Putty.

Silly Putty is a cross-linked polymer in which two substances — glue and borax — combine to create a bigger polymer that is neither solid nor liquid. Solids occupy a fixed shape and volume and not flow. Liquids flow and occupy a fixed volume only. Polymers are neither solids nor liquids but are viscoelastic, which means they have characteristics of both solids and liquids — they can flow but maintain their shape.

If the right combination of ingredients is not achieved, the end result is not Silly Putty. It is too liquid, solid or brittle. One more thing about Silly Putty: It was invented by accident in the early 1940s.

Similarly, often the best kind of interactive and flexible learning environment is one that is discovered by accident, not forced or preprogrammed. Those leading learning initiatives most likely experience that no formula works all the time. An effective learning environment is a reaction of several components in the moment. Most times, learning and development professionals discover effectiveness by accident — not because they were trying to discover it, but because they were trying to be effective.

The best type of learning environment is one that can be both rigid but flexible at the same time. Learning environments are rarely effective if they are too rigid or too flexible — effective learning environments exist somewhere in between these two states. Like Silly Putty, they have both characteristics.

Many learning leaders tend to think of a learning culture in terms of what happens within training programs and with trainers. If the trainers are only somewhat interactive, the culture may be described as traditional and information heavy. If the trainers are entertaining and motivational, the culture may be described as fun but not application focused. The goal is to create a learning environment in which proven interactive methods are used that ensure learning is not only retained but achieved individually based on each participant's learning style. This may sound impossible, and learning leaders often have erred on the side of caution, ensuring initial satisfaction evaluation data is high instead of ensuring learning is transformed into action.

Balancing Simplicity With Complexity

Leading a learning function is complex and multifaceted. Ensuring programs, events, workshops and retreats are not only enjoyable and effective but also meet business goals is essential. But guaranteeing that trainers and presenters are not only skilled in the topic but able to relate to and adapt to a specific culture can take hours of time in meetings. A typical solution is to create design and delivery processes and guidelines, thus making more complexity. Learning and development professionals may not intend to create more complexity, but it is part of the typical problem-solving process to use structures and processes to solve complex human issues.

In his book *Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For*, Bruce Elkin describes simplicity in two ways:

- Getting rid of what we don't like and don't want. This is reactive, temporary and unfulfilling.
- Creating what we truly do want. This is real and lasting.

Simplicity is getting rid of something due to a personal reaction. However, viewing simplicity in a way that provides permission to create what's truly

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wanted and needed means having clarity around the learning function's vision and mission that drives goals, behaviors and actions. If a learning environment that is interactive, flexible and ensures learning transfer is desired, then creating programs that are evaluated on satisfaction alone will not work.

Balancing Novelty and Tested Activities

Learning is as old as the earth itself. All species learn and each has distinctive methods. Prior to 1950, the prevalent learning theories were derived from psychology and applied to any age or situation. In the '60s that paradigm was challenged, which sparked research into the difference between child and adult learning. Finally, in the late '70s, organizational learning emerged. Nearly half a century later, learning functions are still grappling with creating learning that is effective and happens naturally.

The training function exists in every organization on the notion that training provides specific informa-

tion or skills that can and should be applied immediately. Learning that happens and isn't immediately applied is called education.

In defining a learning function, a distinction needs to be made between training and education. The delineation may be clear or blurred, especially when evaluating learning objectives. Learning functions tend to have some elements of both training and education, which creates challenges in designing application-based programs. Creating clarity of the learning function on the purpose of programs and critically evaluating learning objectives are ways to produce an interactive culture that is flexible and application-based. Until that clarity can be fully achieved, balance novel activities and approaches with tried and true activities. For example, use an instructional design process that, when followed, creates that balance.

The following are elements of an instructional design process:

- Traditional introduction activities.
- Lectures that take no more than 10 minutes.
- Activities for participants to process the information in the moment.
- Small group activities for participants to practice the information.
- Experiential activities that challenge participants to step outside their individual comfort zone.
- Traditional closing activities.

Another approach to designing learning functions is to introduce an element of novelty.

Taking a novel approach does not mean creating something new — it means applying something in a different way. For instance, in working with top management on creating a strategic vision, use the following activity to generate a common vision of learning and development in the company. Ask each member to:

- Think of what they feel the vision should be from their frame of reference or experience.
- Write down that vision.
- Write a list of characteristics that describe the current organization.
- Write a list of characteristics that would describe the organization if the vision they wrote were fully achieved.
- Compare the lists of characteristics and identify what is different. If the lists are the same, ask them to consider that they feel the current organization already meets their vision and they need to stretch their thinking for a future vision.
- Identify why the differences exist — for example, what is missing, what needs to be stopped and what needs to start.

- Take a moment and think of or draw a picture that illustrates their description of the current organization and what needs to be transformed to achieve their vision of the organization.
- Share pictures.
- Identify what is common and create a shared vision.
- Identify what is different and revise the shared vision to include a few differences.

This activity uses the tested theory of visual learning but applies it in a novel, game-like way for participants to use personal creativity to achieve a desired outcome.

Balancing Fun and Meeting Business Goals

Fun at work means many things and much is written on the positive benefits of it — and the learning function, with so much opportunity for activity, is particularly adaptable to a fun approach. But why is creating an environment in which business goals are achieved in a fun and meaningful manner so elusive? Perhaps it's because achieving business goals isn't fun. The question must also take into account individual values, personalities and life expectations. Since learning is directly connected to a person's motivation to learn, it's hard to create an effective model of learning that's fun and meets business goals.

As learning leaders, it's essential to identify and determine within a company's culture what this looks like. Does the learning function's vision or mission meet and exceed business goals while at the same time creating an environment that is enjoyable? Does it ensure the learning function collaborates with human resources to create a culture of interactive and flexible learning? Doing so creates happy and satisfied employees who are more productive and healthier.

How would you describe your learning function? Is it an egg — not so fragile that it can't take a few hits, but fragile enough that when squeezed too hard it breaks? Is it a house in which each room is designated for a specific purpose? Or could it be Silly Putty, where the learning function is solid enough to consistently help the organization achieve business goals, but flexible enough to mold itself to the ever-changing landscape of people and business?

It's up to learning leaders to set the tone for learning in their organizations. Typically, leadership chooses to create an environment that is traditional and rigid or one that is nontraditional and fluid. Now there is a third choice: an environment that has characteristics of both the traditional and the nontraditional. This choice ultimately creates an environment of interactive and flexible learning. **CLO**

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IN PRACTICE

MEASURING YOUR LEARNING FUNCTION'S VISCOELASTICITY

Take stock of your learning function by answering the following questions. Answer each with rarely, sometimes or always.

- How often is satisfaction evaluation data used as the sole source of program effectiveness?
- How often do complex problems get solved by creating new processes or procedures — in essence creating more complexity?
- How often are members of the learning function engaged in discussions of values, vision, mission and goal clarity?
- How often are programs cut out of reaction to feedback?
- How often are programs cut due to a realignment of values, vision, mission or goals and more appropriate programs implemented?
- How often are instructional designers considering how their design is both interactive and flexible?
- How often are those who deliver programs considering how their presentation is interactive and flexible?

Review your answers. For those questions that you answered with rarely, is that accurate, or should the answer be always, or vice versa? Balancing simplicity and complexity can be the difference between a learning function that ensures learning is transformed into action and one that doesn't.

— David Piltz