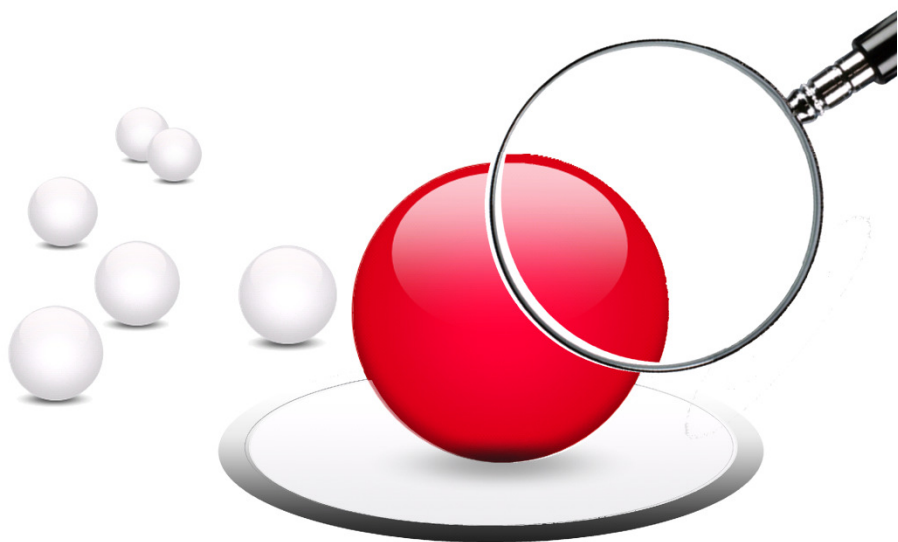


Perspectives on Learning Technologies



by Bob Little

Perspectives on Learning Technologies

*Observations on issues in learning technologies
principally for learning & development professionals.*

by Bob Little



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What the reviewers said

“Bob has been in the industry long enough to separate hype from reality and has put his experience to good use here. Perspectives on Learning Technologies provides information on, and insight into, a huge range of factors involved in for using learning technologies, making this a valuable reference.”

Donald H Taylor, Chairman, Learning and Skills Group

“Among the plethora of books on the subject of technology based learning, this e-book takes a different line to all the others. You can have the ‘how to do it’ and the corporate experiences of how others have done it. Then there’s the technical or the organisational development approach. There are also ones for learning and development professionals and even e-learning professionals but Bob Little has decided to go his own way.

“This vade mecum is an exhaustive collection of relatively short passages which cover every facet of learning, using technology. Although there are plenty of books on all the subjects addressed here, the style of writing and the easy, non-demanding scale of it all makes this not one to read from first page to last but to dip into when needed. It is, in short, a counterpart to technology based learning itself – just-in-time and just-in-need.

“Highly recommended.”

Vaughan Waller, an e-learning practitioner in the corporate world and a well-known writer and commentator on learning technologies

“In this e-book, Bob Little has shared his invaluable life-time experience. It provides learning and development professionals with ready-to-use step-by-step instructions applicable to their everyday challenges. The book is an excellent intersection of theory and current practice. From a personal point of view, I value highly the comprehensive sets of precisely formulated questions, which help me to deal with numerous methodological, technical and strategic issues in learning. This book is a ‘must’ for every learning and development professional! “

Dr Ladislava Kniňová, a prominent learning technologist, based in Prague in the Czech Republic.

“‘Perspectives of Learning Technologies’ distils Bob Little’s wealth of experience gained from over 20 years of involvement in corporate learning. The book covers a gamut of key concepts, from instructional design and motivation to communities of practice and mobile learning, with a ship-load in between.

“Little uses an easy-to-read language to explain major theories and models with an eye on practical application. The structure and e-format of the book allows the reader to dip in and out at their convenience, while catering to those who want to read it from cover to cover.

“Those new to the world of corporate learning will find Little’s work indispensable in getting up to speed on the big issues, while those who have been in the industry for years will find the book a handy refresher -- no doubt learning something new along the way. This e-book isn’t just about bits and bytes; it’s about learning in the modern era.”

Ryan Tracey, a practising e-Learning Manager, Sydney, Australia and a member of the Advisory Board of the USA’s eLearn magazine.

About the author

Bob Little has pursued a number of parallel careers but he is best known as a writer and business-to-business public relations practitioner. In particular, he's spent the last 20 years or so writing and commentating on learning technologies – especially corporate e-learning.

His work in this area is published around the world, including the UK, Continental Europe, the USA and Australia. Moreover, since 2010, he has published annual lists of the 'top ten movers and shakers' in the corporate e-learning world, covering 'the World', 'Europe', 'the UK' and 'Australia-Pacific'.

As with many things in life, it was by accident that Bob became involved with corporate e-learning.

In 1990, he was asked to edit a magazine called 'Training Technology' and had to get up-to-speed quickly on what was then known as computer-based training. He came across the Association for Computer Based Training (TACT) – which later became the eLN – and not only learned a lot about the issues involved in using learning technologies but also met and got to know many of the sector's key players.

This e-book is a repository of many of the key things that he's learned about learning technologies over the years.

While times and technologies change, people remain human – so, sooner or later, those involved in any way with learning technologies will face the same issues and challenges that others have faced. Hopefully, this book can act as a reference and guide to help readers to at least avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls.

Preface

Buy a book about learning technologies – especially ‘e-learning’ or ‘online learning’ – and it’ll be out of date almost before you get to chapter two. That’s because there’s a real temptation for authors (and, to be fair, for readers) to concentrate on the ‘technology’ and the ‘learning delivery’ rather than the ‘learning’ itself. With the possible exception of the ‘Systems’ section, this book hopes to redress the balance somewhat – while still being about learning technologies as well as learning. In the process, I hope that this learning technologies book doesn’t become out of date.

This book distils the wisdom – along with a touch of wit – gathered from some 20 years of discussion and discovery within the learning technologies industry, particularly as it relates to the corporate learning world.

In compiling this work, I’m grateful to all the people – too numerous to mention - whom I’ve met and with whom I’ve worked over the years in this sector. Their insights and inspiration were invaluable to me at the time - and now, through the filter of my memory and the medium of this book, they may be invaluable to you, too.

Of course, you’re not expected to agree with every view expressed and everything that’s in this book. I’m not sure that even I could do that.

If the structure of this book seems, at times, haphazard and fragmented – and you consider that some sections might equally fit into another chapter – you could well be right. This merely serves to illustrate the inter-connectedness of the learning and development world. Thankfully, this is an e-book and, as such, it’s easier to search, at the speed of technology, for topics and issues across the whole book and not be bound by the often arbitrary ‘chapter’ demarcations.

The aim of this book is to set out – as concisely as possible – a wealth of well-thought-out views, often corroborated by rigorous research. These can be taken at face value and used as shortcuts to help you in the planning, practice and politics of ‘learning and development’ (L&D) in your organisation. Or they can be used as seeds and short cuts for your own thoughts and theories – so you’ll be able to achieve more with less in a shorter time and all the other things that L&D professionals are supposed to do.

Bob Little
October 2012

Introduction

Times change. Technologies change. Learning technologies change. On the other hand, people remain human.

This means that those whose job involves identifying the need for; designing; developing; introducing, and popularising 'learning' within their organisations face the same issues that they've always faced – even if the advent of 'learning technologies' since the 1960s and continuing advances in technology now mean that there are more learning delivery mechanisms to choose from than there used to be.

Every generation needs to learn the lessons that previous generations had to learn. That applies not only to the 'learners' in a corporate learning sense but also to L&D professionals. This is especially true in terms of understanding the key issues relating to 'learning technologies'.

From everyone's perspective, the pace of life may change; the technology we use will change, but the basic people-related issues remain the same because, essentially, human beings haven't changed. We all continue to have the same basic needs, as Maslow outlined, regardless of the age in which we live or the technology we employ to meet those needs.

In particular, L&D professionals who're trying to meet their organisation's objectives by using various materials to develop the skills in these organisations' workforces, face the same challenges that L&D professionals have always faced. It's just that, these days, they have so many more options and (technology-based) tools in their armoury that these challenges can seem harder and the dangers of making a mistake appear to be greater than they used to be.

Fear not!

This book contains some insights into these challenges.

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Chapter one: A very short history of mass communication

Moveable type printing was invented in the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg, a goldsmith and businessman from the mining town of Mainz in southern Germany.

Until then, the skill of scholarship had centred around learning a text sequentially.

Indeed, the advent of moveable type – making it possible to print more books than ever before – encountered strong opposition from some scholars who argued that, in future, a text could just be read and not have to be learnt.

Chapter two: Best practice in learning

We all believe in – and would want to be seen to be adopting – ‘best practice’ but who decides – and who should decide - what is best practice? What does ‘best’ mean and how do you know when you’ve got there? How do you generate best practice and what do you do with it once you have it?

Within the field of the learning technology, is ‘best practice’ about how you present learning content? Or is it about how online learning meets the needs of a business? Is it about ‘savings’? Or is it rather about the quality of the learning experience for the learners?

Best practice may be impossible to define – but it should still be possible to identify the best practitioners. In thinking about best practice, it’s important to identify your (organisation’s) learning needs first. Then, in-house, you can identify and develop best practice which is designed to meet these needs.

Best practice criteria

In terms of the criteria for ‘best practice’, a learning programme that embodies or epitomises best practice should involve continuous improvement. For anyone who is going to do this learning programme more than once, continuous improvement should be their aim. Moreover, learning – especially any form of technology-delivered learning - must be short and specific.

It’s important to ensure that learning fits both the learning and the business requirements. Since learning technology is continually developing, it’s important that learning strategies and programmes shouldn’t be led by technology – although these technological advances are producing an increasing number of exciting opportunities for new approaches to learning provision and delivery.