Video in Learning: The New Rules

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Abstract—From humble beginnings, video has evolved to become a potent force in learning and development. Now that technology enables learners to access video content on their smartphones and tablets, the ‘rules’ for using video in learning have changed. This article highlights ten new rules for providing ‘anywhere, anytime’ learning solutions and it features three contrasting case examples that illustrate these rules in practice.

Index Terms—digital video, m-learning, new rules, video content.

Video has been an indispensable development tool since the early 1940s, when training films were first created by the armed forces in the United States, Britain and Germany. Designed to inform or instruct, these films were projected in auditoriums to large groups of personnel. The big attraction of using film was its impact and its ability to provide authoritative information quickly and consistently.

Technological developments in the decades since then have seen video evolve through various changes in format, including 16mm film, VHS video tapes, DVDs (using digital video) and now video-streaming. Each of these provided greater flexibility and resulted in new ways of using video in development.

However, the reason why video really became a popular training and development tool was not because of technology. Video stimulates, engages and entertains people, triggering them to think, feel and do things differently. It allows complex ideas, particularly ones around soft skills behavior, to be put across in a short space of time. Through storytelling and parable, video can provide context for a training message and it can be used very effectively as a catalyst for conversation. By showing a scenario that portrays someone else with the same issues, individuals can be encouraged to admit to themselves that they too need to change.

Video as a support tool

In the early days of training videos, a tutor would show the entire video and build their session around the content. However a 30-minute video was not always digestible for learners, so pioneering tutors began to use video content more judiciously, either as an ice-breaker to set the tone for the day, as an example to reinforce key points or to review the learning and re-cap the themes that were discussed. Video has been utilized at each stage of the learning cycle, to improve the retention of messages and to make training more effective. With the advent of DVDs, split into learning ‘chapters’, using video clips became much easier.

A major step forward was made when video stopped being solely a tool for the trainer. With the development of e-learning, individuals began to access video-based content outside of the classroom, for self-study, reflection and just-in-time learning.

Today, with the advent of digital video and streaming, video has become a viral tool, largely thanks to video-sharing sites such as YouTube and TED.com. Like clip art, digital video clips can be incorporated into PowerPoint presentations, Word documents and used on websites, intranets and in emails.

A key advantage of digital video is that it overcomes the need to move a physical resource around, which was always a limiting factor. For example, if you were using a DVD for training at one site, your colleague at a different site couldn’t use the same resource at the same time. With video streaming, anyone can view the content at any time, no matter where they are.

Ten new rules

These developments have changed the ‘rules’ for using video in training. The new rules for providing ‘anywhere, anytime’ solutions for learners are:

1. Recognize that the role of corporate learning has changed. The old-style approach of providing a structured pathway through learning material has given way to the new concept of anywhere, anytime learning, where the provider becomes more of a curator than a trainer or tutor. Instead of being the ‘sage on the stage’, trainers have become ‘the guide on the side’: a business partner, responsible for creating an environment in which people can learn. Because today’s employees want shorter courses, there’s a greater need for L&D to provide a more proactive role in sifting through and passing on information, articles and content that will be useful to people. In the same way that a museum curator selects and presents items to create a coherent experience for visitors, L&D teams select and present handouts, job aids, reading lists or details of other resources that might help their delegates. If you don’t like the word ‘curator’, maybe think of this role as being a ‘personal shopper’ - someone who brings recommended items, to save people the aggravation of rummaging around themselves. The upshot here is that the role of a corporate learning & development department has become less about providing learning at specific times and more about pushing out content to people and enabling them to access and use it on-demand. Despite these changes, there is still a need to appropriately present and adequately resource learning, so there is always likely to be some kind of role for L&D.

2. Mobile devices are the keys to future delivery. Today, nearly every employee owns a handheld device, such as a smartphone or a tablet. Not only does this mean your organization saves money on hardware, desktop support and device training, it also means that you can deliver convenient, media-rich mobile learning. Smartphones and tablets, with full color touch screens, have the potential to revolutionize the delivery of soft-skills training, particularly for employees who aren’t
always at a desk or who are difficult to bring together for classroom training. These devices offer a dynamic way for individuals to consume learning content and to access just-in-time performance support on-the-move. M-learning, as this is termed, is gaining ground, particularly as a way of reinforcing and embedding learning that has been delivered through other means. Organizational learning strategies are evolving to link m-learning with instructor-led courses, coaching, performance support tools and other self-study tools to ensure a holistic approach.

3. ‘Just in time’ has become ‘just for me’. In development circles, the notion of providing short chunks of learning just-in-time is long established. However, with mobile devices, individuals can now genuinely access the specific on-the-job performance support or refresher training they need, when they need it, wherever they are. Like e-learning, people can go through a mobile learning course at their own pace and they can choose to learn the specific, salient points they need. However, because mobile learning can reach staff on-the-move, it has even more potential for just-in-time skills development. For example, if someone is dreading a difficult appraisal session; having problems with a difficult colleague; is nervous about a presentation or is about to conduct an interview, they can instantly refresh their learning, in a bite-sized format, at the point of need.

4. A greater choice of content is available. Learning Management Systems have evolved to become complete online, one-stop-shop libraries of learning content. Some contain video training clips, e-learning and m-learning courses, workshop resources and digital books, enabling trainers to pick and choose from the available content to create a tailored learning solution for their learners.

5. Ensure your content is engaging. You may be able to present content in a way that is easy to access but people will only learn if they’re motivated. All content has to relate to the learning needs of the participants and, for corporate teams, the challenges and issues that matter in the organization. If it doesn’t, people will find all sorts of excuses and arguments not to use it. Remember, learners have always cried out for humor and personality in training and teaching. The essential principle here is that people learn nothing when they’re asleep and very little when they’re bored. To learn, we have to be engaged. When learning is fun and interesting, we become emotionally involved. By stimulating and engaging people, humor can make learning much more memorable.

6. Content may be king but context is the kingdom. Today, it is easier than ever to create your own video content but it is not so easy to create context-specific learning. More and more private sector and educational organizations are now taking content from publishers and mashing it up with their own expertise and insights, or adding their own branding, to make their content more engaging and memorable.

7. Don’t ignore the rise of informal learning. In the future, it’s likely that formal/planned learning will still occur - in a physical or virtual classroom or via online and self-paced e-learning. However 90 percent of organizational learning will probably be informal: the response to that trend is already apparent in the growth of social learning via Twitter, Facebook and other online networks of communities.

8. Learning still needs to be tracked and monitored. As learning moves outside a formal environment so must the technology that tracks and measures it. Organizations can already schedule, manage, track and report on formal learning activity. With the new learning technology specification, Tin Can, the same can now be done for informal learning, enabling organizations to gain a more accurate picture of all learning activity.

9. If you’re incorporating video, frame it. Like paintings, video clips need a ‘frame’. Always set your video in context, so learners or students know what they are watching and why - and what they’re meant to do as a result.

10. Technology is just an enabler. If past experience has taught us anything, it is that technology is merely an enabler in the learning process. It can improve access and increase efficiency, speed and productivity in terms of the way information and opportunities for learning are delivered to individuals. But the real questions that organizations should be asking are: what skills do people need to learn?: what are their preferences for learning?: why should they be willing to acquire the necessary skills and how can technology assist in that process?

**Three case examples**

To illustrate the ‘new rules’ in practice, I’d like to briefly highlight three contrasting case study examples. These cover dealership staff training at Volvo Cars, global graduate development at professional services firm Ernst & Young and an innovative approach for preparing business students with soft skills at Lancaster University Management School.

Firstly, Volvo Cars is using digital video to improve the speed and effectiveness of its customer service, communications and management skills training for 5,500 dealership staff in the UK and Ireland.

Rather than sending people away from the workplace for face-to-face training, the company has invested in providing unlimited access to 25 digital training films. The digital video content is used to meet the individual learning needs of employees, as revealed by Volvo’s competence program.

“Digital video is versatile and easy to use,” said John Merrell, Leadership & E-learning Manager at Volvo Cars UK. “We have 123 dealerships and all of our staff can access any of the video training films from their computers at any time. They can either watch them all the way through or view specific clips for a refresher on whatever subject they need, such as running an appraisal or dealing with a difficult customer. On top of this, we can incorporate high quality video clips from the films into our existing classroom and e-learning courses and we can create our own tailor-made e-learning programs around the video content. This gives us the flexibility to quickly provide each individual with the learning they need.”

This approach has enabled the training team at Volvo Cars to create a dialogue with individual learners. “We can now provide each person with effective content that meets their needs and we can follow this up by drip-feeding further content, so they can build their knowledge base,” said John Merrell. “Rather than simply providing a course, we’re now providing an ongoing process of continuous improvement. We can check each learner’s understanding through one-to-one coaching sessions,
either face-to-face or by telephone. This is a completely new departure for Volvo.”

By enhancing its existing e-learning courses - and creating its own ‘rapid content’ e-learning resources - Volvo Cars has saved a “huge amount” of development time. “It’s easy to put together your own effective and engaging programs,” said John Merrell. “Adding in high quality digital video clips helps to enhance the engagement of learners and it has improved the effectiveness of our courses.”

John Merrell says the digital video content will help Volvo Cars to foster a coaching culture within the organization. “It will support us in helping managers to coach their staff,” he said. “We’re using the content to establish a forum for coaching interventions and over time we want our managers to use digital video clips to help facilitate sessions for their teams.”

He adds that feedback from users has been very positive. “Learning used to be seen as a chore but now people really enjoy it,” he said. “We can also check people’s understanding of the learning and monitor the impact back in the business. This initiative is part of integrating total quality in all that Volvo does. For us, it’s a way of setting ourselves apart from the competition.”

Global graduate development

Ernst & Young, one of the world’s leading professional services firms, streams consistent video-based learning as part of its global development program for all graduates in its Transaction Advisory Services (TAS) team.

To enhance the business capabilities and technical competence of its junior advisors, Ernst & Young’s TAS team has developed a 10-day, classroom-based program that covers its six different service lines.

“We provide corporate finance advice and we help clients to evaluate, structure and complete important deals,” said Andreas Billand, Executive Director of the TAS team. “This program helps us to create a new generation of more rounded professionals who can work across our different services lines.”

Delivered in stages over the first three years of their career with Ernst & Young, the program features case studies, expert presentations, simulations and role plays.

“We wanted to give the program an edge that would appeal to today’s Generation Y graduates and make it different to other Ernst & Young training programs,” said Andreas Billand. “We liked the idea of using video because it’s an engaging medium and something that our target audience are used to consuming all the time. We chose to use a film called FISH! which offers a fresh perspective. It gives our program a new dimension, as it’s something very different to the rest of the content.”

FISH! is the world’s best selling training film. It shows how the fishmongers at Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle bring energy, commitment and fun to their work. The film has been translated into 17 languages and is an established resource for motivation and engagement training.

“FISH! offers simple principles that are applicable to all staff, such as ‘choose your attitude’ and ‘make their day’,” said Andreas Billand. “It inspires you to feel excited by your work. Our facilitators put the film in context and explain how the FISH! philosophy can engender trust, accountability and innovation.”

The TAS program is delivered for cohorts of 30 junior advisors at a time, through Ernst & Young’s regional training hubs in the Americas, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.

Andreas Billand said: “This program helps us to develop more flexible advisors who will be able to add value wherever the demand is within the business, whether that’s mergers & acquisitions in a growth economy or restructuring and divestments in more difficult times.”

Video for soft skills development

Employers throughout Europe claim that, although young people frequently have the necessary ‘hard’ skills, or technical qualifications and knowledge that’s needed in the workplace, they often lack the ‘soft skills’ that are required. So-called soft skills, which relate to a person’s ability to interact effectively with others, can actually be the hardest skills to master.

Soft skills are typically associated with personality, attitude and behavior. They commonly show up in the workplace when we need to communicate face-to-face with each other: negotiate, solve problems as a team, present our ideas and manage conflict to reach effective decisions with clients or colleagues.

Employers are increasingly searching for a blend of both soft and hard skills in their employees. As well as technical or academic ability, they’re looking for candidates who will be a good fit in their organization. Usually this translates as: will they get along with other people? Can they cope with life in the workplace? This, sadly, is where many young people fall down.

The problem is that soft skills are rarely taught at universities or business schools, partly because education institutes have found it difficult to access and provide soft skills learning for large numbers of students.

Now, though, Lancaster University Management School, in the UK, has become the first higher education provider in Europe to offer soft skills learning content, via streaming video, to students on its business, management and marketing programs.

The Management School has online access to 10 video-based programs, covering issues such as working in teams, coaching, giving and receiving feedback, running meetings and understanding financial documents. Lecturers reinforce learning points, and illustrate the practical application of theory, by showing clips from these programs in their live delivery. Students can also access the full programs in their own time.

“Our goal is to get our students as prepped and ready for the world of work as we possibly can,” said Dr Peter Lenney, Senior Fellow of the Foundation for Management Education at LUMS. “The reality is it’s not easy to be a good manager. We pride ourselves on our teaching in this area, however we’re always happy to supplement our capabilities with an alternative approach if it will enhance the learning experience. Streaming video content online makes it very easy to deliver specific learning to groups of students. The skills that students will learn from these programs are not only essential for corporate life, they’ll also help them now to work more effectively together in teams and on projects.”
The digital learning content is embedded into the University’s virtual learning environment, enabling all usage of the video programs to be tracked and monitored.

“We’re now looking to extend the use of the video programs, initially to other accounting, finance and economics courses in the Management School,” said Dr Lenney. “We’re also looking to add more video programs and to further extend usage to our alumni and to other departments within the University, such as engineering and medicine, that have a curriculum need for soft skills learning.”

Conclusion

It is incredible to see the changes that have occurred in learning and development since our company Video Arts was formed over 40 years ago. Then, training films were delivered on 16mm film reels and training sessions involved going into a darkened room with a projector.

Now learners can access video content on their mobile phones. ‘Anywhere, anytime’ learning is a reality. You may be able to resist the giant leaps forward that we’ve seen in technology but can you really resist the pull of learner expectations? Quite simply, the ability to learn at any time and any place is what people want. By following the ten rules listed above, you’ll be able to provide this.

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