



**ExecutiveCrashCourse**

✦ executive training, industry know-how



Crowducation:

Riding the Next Wave: User-Generated Learning

## Crowducation: Riding the Next Wave of User-Generated Learning

Enterprise education and training are once again on the rise in terms of their perceived importance in the typical corporation. And while the economy has retarded the departure of the retirement-primed Baby Boomers, they are still leaving their jobs and taking a significant amount of institutional knowledge and memory with them. And while the corporate exits are wide open, the intakes remain largely blocked for budget reasons – which means that those who remain are being asked to take on more expansive responsibilities until organizational budgets and a slowly-recovering economy give the nod to hiring. And while most employees are stepping up to the challenge and taking on new responsibilities, their enthusiasm to do so doesn't necessarily mean that they prepared for the task. Furthermore, because of reductions in headcount, the ability to send people off to extensive training programs to prepare them for their new responsibilities is severely limited because of the financial cost to do so, not to mention the logistic difficulties involved in being without them and their functional contributions for a protracted period of time. And if that weren't enough of a challenge, in today's shaky work environment, most employees are twitchy about being out of sight for more than a day because of the perceived danger of being declared surplus because "they're not at their desk and we're doing fine without them."

Of course, unless these employees are actively and deliberately prepared by the enterprise training department to perform their newfound responsibilities, the job runs the risk of being done poorly, the employee runs the risk of being blamed for doing a poor job (regardless of the fact that it was through no fault of their own), employee engagement declines, and everybody loses. There is no winner.

What is required is a new way of delivering education to learners through a technique that we call "Crowducation." Our commitment to learners is "Education on your terms. Just enough, just in time, every time." We firmly believe that this model is the key to unlocking organizational potential.

Three trends characterize the challenges faced by the enterprise learning community today. The first is a move toward learner-centered education and training, where the educational content is delivered on the learner's terms, not the educator's. The second is one of adaptation. Based on a profile of the learner that is centrally stored in what will be the "next-generation LMS," educational content will be selected and delivered based on the environment within which the learner lives and works. Finally, there is a movement toward crowducation. In the pages that follow I'll discuss each of these and their impact on learning.

## The Move Toward Learner-Centered Education and Training

In education, as in business, we are watching a shift of power take place from the point of service delivery to the point of consumption. No longer is the service provider in charge; today,

the customer is, and it is largely thanks to the extraordinary power of the Internet. In my new book, *Giving Up Control: Strategies for Success in the User-Generated Economy*, I present the case for this transformation and argue for companies to actively embrace and accelerate the move. Those that have done so are already reaping rewards of increased relevance, greater revenues and extended customer loyalty. There are plenty of examples: Apple and Google consciously gave up control of the applications marketplace to gain influence and control over the market itself. In shopping malls, people by the thousands use barcode reader applications on their mobile devices to determine the best price for a product and the best location to buy it. Online broadcasters like HULU, Veoh, SlingBox and YouTube now make it possible for viewers to watch content on their terms rather than on the network's terms. Whereas the major networks traditionally allow a customer to watch a TV show anytime and any way they like "as long as it's on a unidirectional TV on Tuesday night at 8 PM on channel 3," online broadcasters decouple the content, the device, the date, the time, and the user's geography, allowing the customer to customize the relationship they wish to have with the content supplier.

## Giving Up Control ... in Education

This same phenomenon is now taking place on a grand scale in the world of education. It is a fundamental and profound change, one in which educational content is now being demanded on the learner's terms, not those of the educator. No longer is room 215 in the learning center downtown on May 23<sup>rd</sup> through 26<sup>th</sup> from 8-5 an acceptable model for training and education. Neither is a Webcast at 2 PM on Thursday, or a conference call at 6 PM, or a mind-numbing four-hour, all-inclusive computer- or Web-based training program. A different delivery paradigm is emerging, and it is an element of Crowducation.

It's a well-known fact that adult learners absorb knowledge best when (1) it is highly contextual, (2) it is delivered at the moment of need, and (3) it is delivered in short, media-rich pieces.

## The Argument for Context

Context is everything in the world of adult learners. According to A. L. Wilson in *The Promise of Situated Cognition*<sup>1</sup>, "learning is an everyday event that is social in nature because it occurs with other people; it is 'tool dependent' because the setting provides mechanisms (computers, maps, measuring cups) that aid, and more important, structure the cognitive process; and finally, it is the interaction with the setting itself in relation to its social and tool dependent nature that determines the learning." (p. 73). Stated another way, adults learn when they engage with other people to do so, in a situation that is relevant to what they do, using tools and mechanisms that create high levels of cognitive relevance. It is therefore centrally important that learning activities and content be highly contextual if they are to be relevant, and more important, if their

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, A. L. "The Promise of Situated Cognition." In S. Merriam (ed.), *An Update on Adult Learning Theory*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no.57, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

teachings are to have impact and be absorbed. Presenting an important knowledge element is most effective when it is presented within a framework that is applicable to the learner's everyday environment so that the learner can mentally apply it to a situation they might encounter in their everyday job.

## Just-in-Time Knowledge Delivery

Our mantra of "Education on your terms. Just enough, just in time, every time" wasn't chosen because it's catchy. We chose it because for adult learners, just-in-time delivery of precisely the right learning content for a situation the learner faces, works. By delivering content just before it is needed by the learner, the delivery matches the precise moment of demand and is therefore most impactful. And because it arrives at the precise moment it is needed, the learner feels a compelling need to internalize the knowledge, thus increasing its educational effectiveness and "stickiness."

## Short and Media-Rich

According to Joan Middendorf and Alan Kalish of the Teaching Resources Center at Indiana University, Adult learners have a significantly reduced attention span compared to younger students. They observed in studies that adult learners can maintain attention during a lecture for about 15 minutes at a time, and this at the beginning of the class<sup>2</sup>. In a separate study conducted in 1976, A. H. Johnstone and F. Percival<sup>3</sup> observed a repeating pattern in which student lapses in attention occurred after 10 – 18 minutes of lecture following a three-to-five minute settling down period. They also found that attention span became increasingly shorter as the lecture wore on, and often fell to three or four minutes by the end of the hour.

The point of this research is that adult learners can maintain attention for about 15 minutes before their minds start to wander on to other things – it's simply the nature of thinking humans. And to maximize the degree to which knowledge transfer takes place during those short intervals, the material benefits greatly from being visual.

During a video interview I conducted with Curt Carlson, the chairman of the Sarnoff Institute (where video was invented), Carlson observed that more than half of the human brain is devoted to vision, our most important sense. Educational content with a strong visual component will therefore have more impact than a traditional lecture . Furthermore, audio programs that are well-produced and carefully written, create powerful mental images that are every bit as powerful as a visual. This is not to say that lectures are unimportant or irrelevant: not at all. But for maximum impact among adult learners, visual media are more impactful, and educational content with a strong visual element is increasingly popular and effective.

---

<sup>2</sup> Middendorf, Joan and Allen Kalish. "The Change-Up in Lectures." January 1996; *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, <http://www.ntlf.com/html/pi/9601/article1.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Johnstone, F. Percival. Attention Breaks in Lectures; *Education in Chemistry*, 13, 1976, 49

## Getting the Most from Web Technology

We expect to see growth in reliance on Web-based multimedia content that is delivered to the learner on their terms. What this means is that educational content will be delivered, just in time, to whatever device the learner wants to use. This, in essence, is the Web 2.0 concept applied to education, where the point of control is shifted from the supplier of the service (in this case, education) to the consumer. It includes elements of the Apple and Google Apps Stores, the Wikipedia concept of media development and enrichment, and the evolving domain of crowdsourcing.

What is it that makes the Apple iPhone or the Google Android device so popular? Simple: It they are powerful, self-contained “content delivery systems” that adapt to the user rather than the other way around. Every user can customize their device so that it meets their specific needs, interests, desires, and expectations. If this concept is applied to the delivery of education, an exciting model emerges within which content is customized to the needs of each learner, and the learner plays an active role in the structure of that educational content based on their own perceived needs and wants. And just as the Apple Genius service makes recommendations to customers about applications or music that the user may like, the “Learning 2.0” model could easily do the same. Of course, that would require an increasingly intimate awareness of the user’s preferences, which brings us to our next major trend: Adaptation.

## Adaptation

This is where the pedagogical magic happens in this newly emerging model of education and training. Based on a constantly updated profile of the learner that is centrally stored in what will be the “next-generation LMS,” educational content will be selected and delivered based on the environment within which the learner lives and works. The user’s profile will be constantly analyzed for demand trends and learning content will be actively pushed to each user, based on the changing environment within which they operate. Imagine the Amazon concept of predictive selling applied to learning, where instead of books being suggested to a customer, a constantly evolving range of educational content is offered.

## The Crown Jewel: Crowducation

All of these trends boil down to what we call “crowducation.” The combination of highly contextual, media-rich learner-centered education that is delivered on an as-needed basis, in concert with Web-based delivery and analysis tools and a reliance on the shared experiences and knowledge of everyone within the learning environment, Results in an acceleration of knowledge sharing and an increase in the effectiveness of the information that is being shared with and between learners. By harnessing the combined knowledge of the crowd – peers, bosses, outside knowledge experts, etc. – and putting into place a system and an accompanying philosophy that mandates knowledge-sharing across the organization such that it becomes

everyday behavior, a learning organization based on a culture of knowledge results. As Arie de Geus observed, "The ability to learn faster than our competitors may be our only sustainable competitive weapon." This is the hallmark of the modern corporation, an organization that understands the value of shared knowledge. Locked in the minds of employees in all corporations is a vast store of skills, capabilities and knowledge; crowdution, because of its "mandate" to share knowledge within the enterprise, results in the ability to expose those unrealized knowledge assets and make the most of them, by creating transparency within the group.

In concert with the need to share knowledge is the manner in which the sharing is conducted. Myriad tools are available to facilitate the process, and when they are properly incorporated into a learning strategy, they can contribute greatly to the overall effectiveness of the curriculum. In our programs we deliver a comprehensive curriculum of short, visually-rich multimedia modules, but to catalyze the creation of a learning "community" we also have a full-featured Learning Management System (LMS); Avaya's Web.Alive virtual environment for meetings, classroom simulation and one-on-one coaching; a dynamic and much-visited Facebook page that we use as an outreach tool; and a broad array of blogs, Podcasts, white papers and other forms of information delivery. We will soon release the Executive Crash Course iPad app, designed to give its users the ability to "take their education with them." The point? Education works best when it is delivered on the learner's terms, not those of the educator. And it is most effective when it is available in a variety of delivery modalities that can be consumed on a variety of delivery devices, according to the needs of the learner. We chose the tag line, *Education on your terms: Just enough, just in time, every time* for a reason: It captures the essence of an ideal adult learning environment.

---

*The Executive Crash Course Company creates and delivers Web-based multimedia curricula for 21<sup>st</sup>-century industry. Specializing in Media, Telecom and IT Technology, the company has more than 300 multimedia modules in its diverse curriculum as well as instructor-led programs. Please visit [www.ExecutiveCrashCourse.com](http://www.ExecutiveCrashCourse.com) for more information or call Bruce Degn, 202-486-8822.*