The Learning Ecosystem

Authors: James Gipple

ICS Learning Group
8221 Ritchie Highway Suite #303
Pasadena, MD 21122

410-975-9440
www.icslearninggroup.com

Disclaimer

ICS Learning Group makes no representations or warranties with respect to the contents or use of this document, and specifically disclaims any express or implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose. ICS Learning Group reserves the right to revise this publication and to make changes to its content at any time, without obligation to notify any person or entity of such revisions or changes.

Further, ICS Learning Group makes no representations or warranties with respect to any ICS Learning Group product, and specifically disclaims any express or implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose. ICS Learning Group reserves the right to make changes to any and all parts of ICS Learning Group products at any time, without obligation to notify any person or entity of such changes.

Trademarks

Inquisiq, Inquisiq EX, Inquisiq R3, and ICS Learning Group are registered trademarks of Interactive Communications Solutions Group, Inc.

Other brands and their products are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective holders.
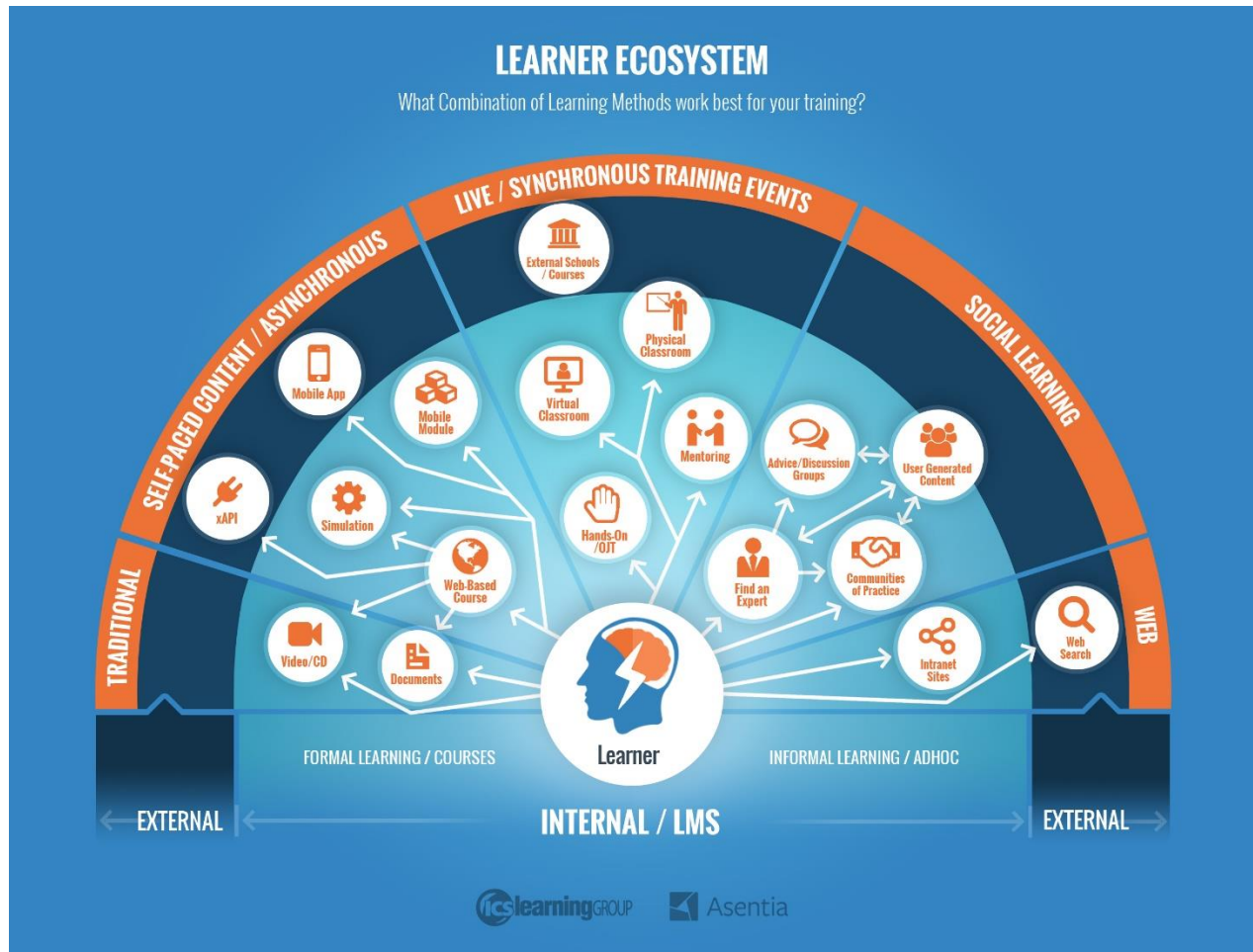
Intro

As one might imagine, the design, development, and implementation of an adult learning or professional learning initiative can be a complex task. To be successful, organizers are required to account for a multitude of considerations, from learning content to adult psychology to applicable technologies.

The point of this paper is not to outline the perfect training program for you. That would be impossible, and frankly a series of decisions you are more qualified to make. The perfect training depends on your audience, your content, your resources, and your culture. Instead,

we aim to provide you the means to successfully navigate the learner ecosystem in its entirety. Our intentions are simple, to bring the whole learning landscape into focus. To show you what's out there, what your options are, and what might you consider when choosing the best strategy for your learning goals.

We understand, it won't be easy. After all, it's still up to you to do the heavy lifting, however, understanding the learner ecosystem will undoubtedly lighten the load. You may be asking yourself, will making these detailed considerations pay off in the end? Does it really make a difference, and for that matter, is it worth the investment in quality training and education altogether? To that, we can confidently and emphatically answer yes, although we're guessing if you're reading this you've already arrived at the same conclusion. There is so much more to be gained in realizing the full potential of a successful learning platform. The proverbial treasure at the end of your learning destination is there for you to discover. This however, is your map. A tool designed to help navigate the trials and tribulations of adult learning and help you forge your own path forward towards learning success.

Adult Learning

To understand the full breadth of the learning ecosystem and to comprehend its relevance in effective educational strategy, we need to start with a fundamental component of adult learning. Adults are self-directed learners, drawing on a deep well of personal experiences and insights, driven by internal motivation that appreciates flexibility and application to the real world.

Why is this important? Because, if this is what we understand adult learning preferences to be, and the goal is to develop an educational platform that enables these preferences, then it is the obligation of educators to push past the realm of traditional learning and employ techniques that better cater to these preferences. The more learning options or educational tools available (and your subsequent awareness of them), allows you to customize your training to the unique needs and preferences of your audience. It begs the question, what new options are available and what educational doors do they open? What role does technology play? How do you choose the right options for a particular circumstance and when might you blend varying techniques to capture the strengths of a training style to

satisfy specific learner preferences? The answers to these question, of course, do not soly rely on audience preferences but are determined in combination with more tangible influences such as budget, proximity, content, and delivery. In the following section, we've broken down the learner ecosystem into a series of broad categories that represent different educational strategies. We'll explore what those categories are, educational techniques within each category, and how they relate to one another.

Learner Ecosystem

You can think of the learner ecosystem as a spectrum, ranging from established formal learning practices to more ad hoc informal learning, all centered around the learners themselves. In the interest of clarity let's establish a few definitions. Formal learning refers to an educational environment in which materials, courses, and curriculum are organized and delivered in a deliberately structured way, typically through a designated educator (teacher, instructor, instructional designer, etc.). On the other hand, informal learning indicates a more organic process, in which learning stems from naturally occurring impromptu events such as discussion, observation, or trial-and-error. It is again, important to emphasize the notion of a spectrum. Learning in the real world is not black and white, formal or informal, instead it often exists somewhere in between. That being said, as we'll explore in the following sections, particular learning strategies do encourage learning environments with varying degrees of formality and can have dramatic effects on overall learning.

Within this spectrum, different educational strategies occupy wedges of the arc, delineating broad differences in general learning approach. From there, we can further focus in on the specific learning techniques and practices that enable those strategies. Different learning strategies and techniques may be employed to address particular conditions of your educational context. It is often the case that the best training programs utilize a blended approach in which they draw on the strengths of multiple learning approaches to best meet the needs of their unique circumstance, environment, and audience.

Traditional Learning

At the most formal end of the learner ecosystem spectrum we find traditional learning. Simply put, this the use of traditional educational tools such as documents, videos, and CDs, to teach predetermined curriculum. While learning content and courses delivered through these mechanisms are generally static and fairly rigid, they can provide a delivery method that is straight forward, efficient, low cost, and easily measurable. In addition, traditional learning is typically not very reliant on advance technologies and therefor may be useful in delivering content to an audience with significant technological barriers.

Self-Paced (Asynchronous)

A slightly less formal style of learning, although still geared towards a structured, organized, presentation of material, is the implementation of asynchronous learning content. Asynchronous refers to self-paced learning, allowing training to unhinge itself from the limitations of place and time.

Learners are supplied with interactive content distributed through non-traditional means with the intention of being consumed at the discretion of the learner. Self-paced learning presents a number of advantages that play directly off the learning preferences of adults, particularly its ability to enable self-directed learning. This can be accomplished through the distribution of multimedia, web-based courses, simulations, even mobile applications and modules designed for on-the-go learning.

To explore this notion further, we can highlight a few of these approaches in more detail:

1. **Web-Based Course** – Learning through web-based courses, also known as eLearning, is best for reaching large audiences. It is most effective when there are clear and measurable learning goals, and for tracking learners progress through a course. There is also plenty of room to customize the learning experience, leveraging different types of multimedia, interactive games, and allowing learners to participate on their own time.

2. **Simulation** – This approach provides realistic context to a learning environment, and is often used to engage learners and help them practice or prepare for real life events. Utilizing simulation for this allows the educator to have full control on the learning environment and can even facilitate training that would otherwise be impossible or too dangerous to implement in real life. It is a great way to accelerate learning though participant emotion and engagement.

3. **Mobile Application** – As the name suggests, distributing learning content through mobile devises allows learning to become mobile as well. This can be a great way to reach adult learners, who are often busy with other important responsibilities such as jobs and families. Providing the freedom to learn anywhere, on-the-go, and in short digestible lessons is the best way to reach this audience.

While self-paced learning allows participants the freedom to engage with content in new ways, this freedom often comes with more complicated technological challenges including device compatibility and connectivity. In addition, you should consider the demographics of your audience and the accessibility of the technology you plan to use. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of self-paced learning is the absence of a human connection. This needs to be considered not only from a motivational perspective but from a content stand point as well.

Live (Synchronous)

Live or Synchronous training, is perhaps the best strategy to present an opportunity for both formal and informal learning. It is understood that synchronous training is an event that occurs at a specific point in time with the expectation that learners will be available to participate. While it does present more logistical considerations around timing and location, it provides an opportunity for learners to develop relationships, which can be a powerful tool in motivation, explanation, and morale, while being directed by a formal educator.

Often, live training is thought of as lectures, discussions, presentations, mentorship, or hands-on training (OJT), occurring in the physical classroom. While this is true, advances in

technology enable us to employ these practices in a digital environment through virtual classrooms, live webinars and video/telephone conferencing.

Let's take a closer look at a few educational approaches to outline their effect on learning:

1. **Virtual Classroom** – The virtual classroom presents an interesting opportunity to blend the benefits of in-person and technology driven education. While learning still must adhere to time restraints it presents opportunity for additional freedom in the form of location and scale. In addition, you can maintain some degree of human connection through webinars or video conferencing, strengthening relationships and emotional connection to the learning content.

2. **Physical Classroom** – Perhaps the most common form of education is teaching in the physical classroom. This allows learners and educators to get in the same room, facilitating more organic dialogue and engaging participants through physical interaction and proximity. Some audiences may simply feel more comfortable with the familiarity of classroom learning.

3. **Mentoring** – At the foundation of mentoring is learning through personal growth and relationship building. Swaying more towards the informal side of the learning spectrum, mentoring can provide a useful technique to teach delicate topics or reinforce soft skills. It is an intimate form of learning that requires a closer level of attention from both mentor and mentee, however, it has the potential to provide lasting, life-long learning to participants.

4. **Hands-On/OJT** – Typically implemented to teach processes or specific job tasks, OJT allows learners to get hands-on practice and emphasizes experiential learning. This can be a useful technique to engage participants across a wider range of learning styles and offer opportunity for kinesthetic learning. Typically taught by experts in the filed, this style often appeals to professional adult learners who tend to value practical learning with tangible benefits for career growth and investment.

As discussed, live (synchronous) learning emphasizes the relationship between learning and human connection. As we know this can have a profound affect, particularly with certain audiences and content areas. Live training, however, also introduces a number of logistical

limitations, tethering education to a fixed time and location. This can even alienate some participants and prop up barriers to education and learning. As is a common theme throughout this paper, it is beneficial to consider the context of your training program. What is it that you are teaching? Who is your audience, where are they located, and what are their preferences? Taking an honest look at these factors will help you understand when live training is beneficial or harmful to your learning objectives and how to realize its full potential.

Social Learning

Approaching the informal side of the learner ecosystem spectrum is social learning. This strategy is developed around the idea of facilitating organic learning through social interaction. The application of this approach is more about providing the space for learners to communicate, than it is about specifically dictating the learning content itself. For example, social learning occurs in communities of practice, discussion groups, and user generated content, where learners can discuss, share information, and build relationships in a non-formal setting.

At the backbone of social learning is the notion of educational ownership. Participants are encouraged to interact with their peers, collaboratively work through challenges, and define their own solutions, through sharing ideas, strategies, and innovations. These social processes can, and often do, lead to incidental learning. It is important to note that the learning outcome of this, in many cases, is intangible and unregulated. As such, social learning is best geared towards high-level thinking and broader topics of discussion. The organic nature of interaction that enables the benefits of social learning, subsequently results in learning that is much harder to evaluate.

Web

Finally, at the far end of the informal learning side of the spectrum, is learning through the web. Occurring for most of us on a daily basis, simply by surfing the open web or accessing intranet sites, it is a method that has become ubiquitous in today's digital age where "googling" something is an actual verb. We learn by tapping into the vast amount of

collective information floating through the ether, from YouTube to Wikipedia, a seemingly infinite array of tutorials, guides, opinions, and advice, weaving together to form the fabric of our internet. Of course, for the most part, this information can be unsubstantiated, non-the-less, it represents a powerful tool for informal elearning and information sharing.

LMS

The strategies listed here provide you a varying degree of educational tools to draw on depending on your audience and program needs. However, picking and choosing targeted approaches is just one part of the larger picture. In application, you must think about how these approaches fit together. It requires considering delivery, administration, progress tracking, and reporting. To this end, we can refer to the final layer of the ecosystem, the learning management system (LMS).

An LMS is a tool used for structural organization, designed to provide an environment in which your content and learners may interact. As you customize your training program with varying educational strategies, you will need to consider what content should exist within the LMS and what will be delivered outside of it. Along with the rapid development new educational technologies, LMS's are becoming increasingly capable at managing a larger breadth of the learning ecosystem. It is now possible to execute both formal and informal learning strategies that can include anything from sharing simple traditional documents to delivering complex simulations and mobile modules. You can even host live learning events and courses such as virtual classrooms and mentoring programs, or build social learning communities and discussion groups, all delivered though the LMS. Admittedly, not all LMS's are created equal. There exists a range of products with varying capabilities at equally varying prices. The LMS that is right for you may very well depend on the strategies and learning approaches you intend to implement, however, the possibilities available can allow you to create a custom learning environment that is tailored to your organizational needs.