

## talking point

### Achieving Learning Outcomes:

#### Diffused and Focused Learning

by David Croom



#### Online learning and learning outcomes

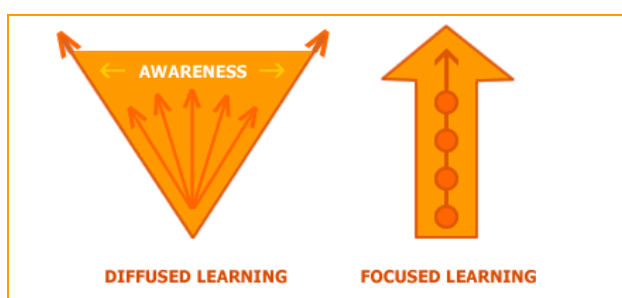
Online learning is either a sinister threat to high quality training or the elixir of eternal knowledge. Nothing seems to divide the professional training community with such passion as the arguments over online learning and yet much of this debate is misconceived because it argues about the wrong issues.

The real challenge is not the standoff between classroom training and online learning but rather the need to focus on the outcome that the learning/training is intended to achieve. The learning outcome should define the appropriate method of learning delivery.

The flexibility of online learning in terms of time, place and cost is well established. Less understood is the range of learning outcomes in the workplace that it can support. Much of the public discussion dwells on the way online learning can enable individuals and organisations to acquire new skills, as in the Ufl initiative and the wider brief of the Learning and Skills Council. However it can also be used as a powerful tool in driving overall development, especially within the SME sector. The important point is to recognise that different types of learning outcome require different types of online learning.

#### Achieving learning outcomes

We have developed two types of online learning to cope with two different learning outcomes: *focused learning* to enhance business skills and technical knowledge and *diffused learning* to encourage personal and/or business development.



#### Focused learning

Focused online learning is rooted in the traditional techniques of classroom instruction. It is usually curriculum based and tightly structured, leading the learner through each module with regular tests and self assessment to reinforce the learning. Focused learning is well suited to introducing a new process, as in quality or financial control, or wherever the learning outcome requires an

understanding of a new method, procedure or rule. It is widely used within the software industry to support professional accreditation such as the Microsoft Certified Professional programmes.

One of our current projects illustrates this approach. A financial services company wants a focused learning resource to help train a sales force in the theory of option pricing. As this is a complex subject, the online resource complements a half day of classroom instruction. It reinforces the classroom learning and builds confidence in the application so that the sales force can use the knowledge in discussing portfolio management with clients. The online resource is also then available on the sales person's laptop as a permanent reference and refresher.

Focused learning is therefore intended to bring about a large change in few. New skills are learnt by tackling each module in a traditional and schematic way. By delivering the learning online the modules or chunks of learning can be broken down into small units or linked together into larger programs depending on the learning outcome required and they can be accessed by dispersed groups of learners that cannot be brought together in a classroom.

## Diffused learning

Diffused learning is appropriate when the learning outcome is to change perceptions and open learners' minds to new ways of tackling problems. It relies on the learners' own experience to motivate them to explore and evaluate the learning resource. The information and learning activities within the diffused learning resource have to be highly relevant otherwise learners soon lose interest. In many respects diffused learning is as much about communicating best practice as formal learning. Much of the work we have done for various SME industry groups, demonstrates the power of diffused learning in whetting their appetite for new ways of doing business.

Targeting the learning to your audience is key. Recently we created a learning resource for the road haulage industry in Kent, explaining the commercial potential of e-commerce. John Faulkner, managing director of Intercity Trucks, was heavily involved in the project as an industry advisor. He knew that road hauliers would be reluctant to spend time in a formal learning program on e-commerce but as he said, "most hauliers use electronic communications, mobile phones and text messages without realising that they have joined the electronic age". It only needed a diffused learning resource, packed with highly relevant industry information and specific road haulage web links, to get them inspired and excited.

## The learning resource

We believe a successful online learning resource should comprise two complementary websites, a learning centre and an information centre, tailored to the specific demands of the learners. The flexibility of the whole programme encourages learners to

navigate the material at their own pace and in their own way, using their own commercial savvy to investigate information relevant to their particular organisation. Learner access is deliberately kept unstructured and free. The learning takes place through the interplay of the learning resource and the information resource as the learner explores the material both within the programme and outside on the web, through the rich network of links.



Certainly the road haulage programme illustrated how diffused learning can stimulate business development initiatives among SME executives unwilling or unable to spend much time in formal class training.

Susan Filby, Continuous Business and Development Manager at Business Link Kent commented, "*Road hauliers are not used to an environment where they should explore... I think online learning is a useful tool to raise awareness that there are different ways of learning*".

## Communicating the message

There is also great scope for using diffused learning to communicate important new information to a large and dispersed organisation as in launching a new corporate branding or explaining a new strategy.

The learning outcome is to convince people within the organisation and its clients outside of the power of the

new branding or strategy and illustrate how it will affect them personally. As individuals access the learning resource they will explore the material most relevant to their own department or function and their confidence and buy-in will increase as they understand the impact of the new initiative in their own work. Diffused learning programmes do not replace other forms of communication but they provide a new way of driving the message deep into the organisation, reaching the parts often impervious to glitzy presentations and glossy brochures.

## Lessons to be learnt

There is a clear lesson from our experience. Choose the type of learning resource that delivers the desired learning outcome: *focused learning* to teach business skills and technical knowledge and *diffused learning* to open peoples' minds to new ways of developing themselves and/or the business.

Online learning succeeds when the desired learning outcomes are clearly defined. It is not a threat to traditional training nor the elixir of knowledge but a powerful tool for learning and communication.

David Croom is co-founder of Nelson Croom. Prior to that, David created the well-known publishers Routledge, by merging four print publishers and then continued for several years as a Thomson general manager. He developed the core idea behind Nelson Croom whilst studying medieval history at Bristol University.

## Versions of this article have appeared in the following publications:

*Business Advisor*  
*'t magazine*