

The Power of Collaborative Learning for Associations

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The traditional image of learning is of a single teacher sharing his or her wisdom with a group. But today's education experts are turning that image inside out and unlocking the learning potential of collaborative communities. (Plus: A breakdown of 10 collaborative learning methods with tips and techniques for each.)

Collaborative learning occurs when we stop relying on experts and teachers to transfer their knowledge to us and instead engage together in making sense and creating meaning for ourselves.

We do this through exploration and experimentation, strategic conversations, reflection, and evaluation—the natural way we learn every day in our workplaces and communities. Associations can be natural champions of the power of collaborative learning if we can break out of our pedagogical habits to harness its power for our members.

Collaborative learning does not eliminate the need for experts learning at the edge of a field or codifying that field's body of knowledge. There would be nothing efficient about reinventing the wheels that keep your association or our society turning. Rather, collaborative learning taps into the power of an inclusive and active group of learners to turn those wheels as fast as the speed of change and increasing complexity now require.

When associations survey members, the results show that members place a high value on meaningful networking and a sense of community. This is why many associations have made member engagement a top strategy and desired outcome in 2010. And the engagement strategy for education and professional development programs is collaborative learning.

Associations have always had the capacity to engage people in collaborative learning in face-to-face experiences. Yet most major conferences and meetings are designed for and dominated by didactic instruction. Many education professionals want to promote good adult-learning theory and practices, but they struggle to change entrenched models that people understand from their school days. Existing systems for selecting and offering education experiences often lock in standard session formats.

Today, we have greater capacity than ever to engage learners using online collaboration technologies and social media. It would be a shame to carry old, bad habits over into this promising new learning environment, yet this is exactly what seems to be happening; consider the most prevalent form of online learning, webinars.

Associations can claim their natural potential to be the 21st-century leaders in collaborative learning. We have members and customers who want to learn and the programs and technologies to make this transition. We just have to stop looking back at schools and universities as we remember them and look more closely at how our members learn and work together in community for better models for great learning.

Building on Examples of Success

Associations have already begun experimenting with collaborative learning with varying degrees of success. Where an association's learning culture is oriented around a scholarly need to present and publish and traditional peer-review processes, it is harder to make this shift. Where meeting the changing

needs of the learner and evolving the profession or industry's knowledge base are priorities, a collaborative learning culture can take hold.

Education and professional development directors have many options for promoting collaborative learning (see chart on page 43 for an overview of common practices). Members of different associations will have different preferences, so it is wise to build on your past successes. Some members of technical and scientific societies may prefer problem-based learning experiences, while trade-association members may prefer working together on business case studies. Role playing and simulations are becoming more popular with the rise of a gaming culture, and these can be equally compelling in either a face-to-face or virtual environment. Association executives can experiment and mash up any of the practices in live, virtual, and blended learning experiences until they discover how their members prefer to collaborate.

Online communities of practice are one of the most promising options. Many early adopters jumped in with high hopes that these communities would prove to be an alternative and more efficient way to organize and serve special-interest groups. The results often have been disappointing, because we mistakenly believed these communities could be self-organizing and thrive without adequate structure and purpose. However, associations have too many thriving list server communities to give up on learning from each other in a virtual environment. The technological tools we have available are simply ahead of the adoption curve; eventually, people will become more proficient using these platforms.

Likewise, early adopters of social media platforms are starting to discover their promise as powerful tools for collaborative learning. We finally may be able to create the anytime, anywhere learning capability associations have been seeking for at least a decade. As good as our information-archiving and search capabilities are becoming, they still lack immediate access to practitioners' tacit knowledge and the wisdom they can use to select answers and solutions appropriate for specific situations. When we can turn to our social networks for answers and network participants are backed up by a wealth of resources just a click away, we will have the mobile learning resource of our dreams.

Some forms of collaborative learning are less obvious because they are hard to monetize in education programs and services. If a large number of people or companies are experiencing a major change or adopting new capabilities, they can be organized into action learning teams or user groups. Innovation processes can be powerful learning experiences, especially when the innovators are encouraged to pay attention to how their teams are learning to innovate. And no association should underestimate the potential for volunteers to learn through project teams, task forces, and commissions. Such groups may seem to be about doing and decisions, but they also can be profound group learning experiences if leaders make time for strategic conversation, reflection, and evaluation.

Accelerating a Culture Shift

We could wait for a generational change to complete this shift to collaborative learning. Today many K-12 school leaders embrace a future vision of schools as learning communities where students can succeed in academics, critical thinking, creativity, and social and emotional intelligence. They are experimenting with collaborative learning approaches to help get this job done.

They expect their schools to be dynamically connected to learners in other institutions and companies around the globe. While they don't know for sure what careers these students may someday have, they are confident they need to prepare them to think and act as global citizens.

Or we could simply wait for the millennials to be the predominant creators and consumers of association learning. They are more likely to see learning as a team sport and use web technologies to support each other.

Or we could start today to help members leave the safe and familiar forms of passive learning. Associations are not and have never truly been knowledge-dispensing machines: “Give us your money, and we'll give you the answers.” Instead, we have to sell the understanding that real learning requires effort on everyone's part and all members have a mutual responsibility to be creators and consumers.

Cultures change when new expectations are made clear. Today it is common practice for associations to ask presenters and content leaders to define learning objectives and outcomes. Learning how to learn together and creating new knowledge for the field need to become stated, expected outcomes for our education experiences. Why are conference themes typically no more than marketing gimmicks, when they could become statements of our intention to learn together how to meet a critical new challenge or opportunity facing our association?

Cultures also change when a critical mass begins to act in a different way. Associations will have to do more than provide collaboration platforms and restructure education experiences; they will have to train content leaders and thought leaders to use these new capabilities. Content leaders must become learning facilitators. They should seek that perfect balance between seeding an experience with their expertise and growing the group's ability to adapt that expertise to their own situations or help create new knowledge and applications for the field.

We can bring communities of practice to life in a face-to-face setting. Give people opportunities to become acquainted offline and they are more likely to act like old friends online. Organize communities of practice within major meetings. Use social media to help people self-identify what they want to learn and meet up with those who have common interests. Go one step further and encourage these groups to move through the conference as a cohort of people with similar job positions or other common characteristics and interests. They can work together to gather knowledge and share their learning through wikis, blogs, or Twitter streams.

We can encourage people with diverse experiences and expertise to collaborate in our learning experiences. Much of the great learning in this century will emerge from multidisciplinary and culturally diverse experiences. It is often easier to see new possibilities when new people are opening our eyes. Let's acknowledge the role of learning in our governance and operations. Collaborative learning can be infused into all the formal and informal learning we do within our boards, committees, task forces, and staff teams. After initial orientation and training, we may need nothing more formal than regularly stopping the action and asking the group to really examine what is happening and why and how to do these jobs better.

Associations have the capacity to make these transitions and become the innovators and leaders of collaborative learning. The first step is to begin sharing what we know, exchanging ideas about learning practices and creating new ones, and evaluating what works best for different kinds of learners and organizations. The way to have a culture of collaborative learning in all associations is through collaborative learning among associations.

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