

MANAGING MEMORY FOR DEEPER LEARNING

Patti Shank is a workplace learning expert and one of the most influential people in the e-Learning industry. She is the author of *Write and Organize for Deeper Learning*, *Practice and Feedback for Deeper Learning*, and *Manage Memory for Deeper Learning*.

Prior to her keynote on L&D Talks on 24/10/19, De Opleidingscoach had the opportunity to interview Patti on practical tactics to improving learning outcomes.

You are well-known for translating research findings into actionable advice. One of your expert tips that I personally swear by is: “When giving training or presentations, it is not about covering everything. It’s about processing. You shouldn’t try to cover it all.” How does that connect to research about memory?

That’s probably the number one key insight into understanding the use of memory for learning. Learning professionals are making so many mistakes and doing things that don’t actually make people learn. One of those mistakes is worrying whether or not they are covering everything they have prepared.

Too many people in our field just throw content. They don’t think about whether or not people can actually do something with it or reflect on it. Often, businesses don’t have the time or money to organize a three day training course so they try to fit it all in one day. By 1 p.m., nobody is able to listen anymore and therefore, nobody processes anymore. But unless we process, we cannot remember. And if we can’t remember something, we cannot use it. So memory is key to learning.

Everything we learn has to be processed by the working memory. The capacity of the working memory is super limited. This means that we

can’t process much at a time. When memory is overloaded, we simply do not learn. Instead, we feel confused and overwhelmed. So there’s no time to cover everything. We have to figure out the basic pieces that will allow the learners to ask good questions and that will make them look things up themselves. Then, we have to make time for practice and feedback so that people know whether or not they understand it right or not.

This implies that it is very important to decide what (not) to cover. In order to do this, we have to understand the learner’s needs and prior knowledge. You write that “In order to solve genuine learning needs, you have to know your learners’ jobs and projects”. What have you found to be valuable ways for learning professionals to understand the learner’s jobs?

The first step should always be to determine whether or not there’s actually a training need. What people often need is a job aid, clear expectations or a better recruitment process instead of training.

If they really do need training, it is absolutely crucial to understand their job. The first question should always be “who is this training for, what is their job and what are their tasks?”. One of the most effective ways to do that is to simply watch people work.

Imagine you are training people to sell new types of phones. We would typically train them on the product features. But it’s actually better to teach them what different customers want and how they should talk to those customers about what the product features actually mean. The answer to the question “Who is this phone best for?” is more important than its top 5 features. Someone who’s always on the road probably values high battery power over a good quality camera, for example.

It’s common sense but when I ask instructional designers to tell me about their learner’s jobs, the answer is usually “I don’t know.” The things they normally teach often do not make sense for the learners. It doesn’t meet their specific needs. So my advice is this: just take an hour and observe people. Then ask yourself how the training that you want to develop is related to what you’ve just seen.

I don’t see a lot of learning professionals doing this.

Me neither, their bosses and even the learning professionals themselves consider it a waste of time. That’s a shame.

LEARNER AGENCY AND GAMIFICATION

Learning professionals do however tend to make time for hypes and trends in our field. One of those trends is learner agency: putting learners in control. What’s your view on this?



Research is actually super clear on this. It says that the less people know, the more dangerous it is to give them control. It also shows that learners do not know what they need. The learners don't even know what they know. The experts do, they understand the tasks and challenges. We, as learning professionals, are the ones that have to figure out what people need and give it to them in such a way so they can benefit most from it.

What role do fun and gamification play in delivering training to the learners so they can benefit most from it?

Here's the thing: learning is hard. It *can* be fun but fun is not a specific need. Just because something is fun doesn't mean that people will persevere. We should always design learning in a way that helps people learn, remember and apply. We need to make it relevant. This goes back to your earlier question about understanding what learners need.

I recently participated in a debate about fun in learning*. I argued no to the statement "all learning should be fun". My opponent used the example of Olympic skater Apolo Ohno to support his statement that all learning should be fun. You can see that Apolo Ohno is having a blast while skating in the Olympics, he said. My response to that is that he was indeed having a blast **because he had been practicing for so long that now he wasn't thinking about it.** But he wasn't having a blast when he was training from 4 a.m. every morning for 15 years. That's the hard part. We help people gain skill over time so that they get better at their jobs and most of that isn't that much fun.

I'm not against fun or gamification, there's a time and a place for that. But they are not key factors. I'm in favor of making sure that the training is going to work and fulfill the need.

CONTINUOUS WORKPLACE LEARNING

It certainly takes time and practice to learn, remember and apply something. Luckily, L&D is slowly shifting from training as a one time event to learning that is ongoing. What's your advice on creating and stimulating continuous learning in the workplace?

I hope that we are starting to realize that we are not just teaching people a bunch of stuff and then another bunch of stuff. The most important thing that we can do is to help people gain critical job skills that make a real difference to business results. This requires a shift in mindset. We've gotten to a point where we think training equals content. It doesn't. It might be nice to make it pretty but the skills are most important. Training those skills is a huge challenge. I don't think any training department can do all of that by themselves. We need the help of managers, supervisors and subject matter experts. Lots of trainers say that we can't let the subject matter experts do it. But we *have* to let them do a whole bunch of what we do. We simply can't do it all by ourselves. We need to teach the subject matter experts how to train so they can train people on the job. And if we are dealing with subject matter experts that are not willing to learn, they are the wrong subject matter experts. Find the people who are natural teachers and who are willing to learn. Treat those subject matter experts as your clients. Work together with them and support them. Over time, they will be able to make the train-



ning themselves. It doesn't have to be perfect. We don't have time for perfect. We have time to meet the needs.

Do you consider this to be one of the important shifts that L&D has to make in order to stay relevant in the future?

Yes, I think it's one of the most important shifts we have to make because job skills are changing and will continue to change rapidly in the future. And training isn't going to fix everything. There's no way that a training team can meet all the needs for people's jobs. So we've got a lot of challenges. One of them is to help people find and use materials on their own so they can become curators of information. We need to know the jobs really well and enable the subject matter experts to support people on the job. We need to concentrate on the fundamental skills that people need so that they can keep growing.

L&D TALKS

You are coming to the L&D talks in October. Who should attend your session and what can they expect?

During my workshop, we will apply what we know about memory to the design of instruction. My main goal is to help people understand how and why we need to design content a certain way so that we are not wasting resources. We need to train along with how memory and the brain works.

My keynote will be about research and how it informs what we do. People don't need to read the research themselves but they do need to know what works and what doesn't. People do not learn differently, for example. What people prefer has absolutely no correlation with what works. We have to go with what works. That's what my keynote will be all about.

*You can watch the full debate on youtube: OEB 2018 - Debate ■



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