The Challenge of Creating a Continuous Learning Culture: 
Linking the Value Chain Between Higher Education and Corporate Learning

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All these innovations in learning and knowledge transfer can be found in companies across North America. Equivalent technology-enabled learning innovation is happening on college campuses everywhere. Job candidates and new hires tell employers about virtual class teams, connected classrooms, archived lectures and advancements in broadband and wireless access.

It sometimes seems as if we're living in parallel universes. But who's leading the way? My guess is that we both are. And there is a great opportunity for more collaboration between corporate training departments and universities and colleges. Indeed, it is vital. With the right collaboration, we could help one another determine what works and what doesn't from the wide choice of learning channels and approaches now available.

More companies are moving to a continuous learning environment, albeit slowly. We're talking about culture change, and this is a journey, not an event. By working together and communicating better, companies and universities could advance the development and acceptance of continuous learning. Together, they could strengthen the learning value chain. Students should be encouraged to be lifelong learners while they are in school. Companies should learn to routinely leverage the skills and preferences of digital-generation learners.

Our common objectives are to enhance learning and knowledge transfer and increase the productivity of individuals. Our common challenge is to figure out how we can better inform one another of our advances and successes.

Learning Innovation from the Top Down or Bottom Up?

Many business organizations today have worked hard to develop a learning strategy that starts with the idea that learning must be continuous because the pace of change in business is fast. This continuous learning strategy has given rise to the use of multiple-learning channels – “connected” classrooms, online learning, webcasting, on-demand archives and performance support tools.
The challenge now is to encourage employees to develop the digital competencies needed to take advantage of all the learning opportunities available. One of the best accelerators for many companies has been recent university graduates. They join companies with knowledge of computer fundamentals and a natural ease using technology that makes them eager to take advantage of different learning channels. Many have what I call “a personal killer app” – a personal interest that has caused them to embrace technology. It might be photography, music, sportscasts over the Internet, computer games, or a commitment to a social cause that uses web-based collaboration. Whereas corporate learning strategies guide organizations from the top down, newer employees entering the workplace from college and university campuses can have a powerful, positive impact from the bottom up.

The list of tools and technologies used by students to enhance their learning is long: web research, web conferencing, text messaging with professors on PDAs and cell phones, online courses, digital libraries and archived lectures.

One of the opportunities both corporations and universities have is to harness and leverage the competencies that the “digital generation” has acquired. Ghenno Senbetta, president of Powered Performance, started a company dedicated to helping people be more self-directed in using technology to enhance their job performance and learn more. In teaching “hands-on” workshops at Big Ten universities, Senbetta found students show differences in their digital competencies compared to the typical business person. (See sidebar.)

“There is a huge comfort level that students have,” Senbetta says. “They are not afraid to go in and try to navigate through any software or anything on the Internet. They believe they can play around, figure it out and learn it.” On the other hand, Senbetta observes that most experienced business people have an ‘I’m worried I’m going to break it’ mentality that students don’t show.

Students are more of a force than many may realize in changing how colleges and universities approach the learning process. Larry Ladd, Grant Thornton’s practice leader for higher education services, notes, “Across the country, from small to large higher education institutions, students are expecting, for example, the ability to text-message their professors at a moment’s notice. To stay competitive, all institutions of higher learning need to embrace the latest and best technological tools.”

Universities and colleges have long established the learning values and set the standards for how people learn. When students leave campus, they expect learning in the workplace to be the best of – or better than - what they have experienced in school. Every year, graduates likely expect more from companies when it comes to advanced learning methods and 24x7 access to learning resources. Yet, remember, most of the workforce has only been using the Internet for about eight years.

**Bridging the Gap through Distance and Online Learning**
Universities and colleges, by their very nature, have had to keep up to date on the latest technological advances in order to continue to attract quality candidates, and, to some extent, increase revenue. Distance and online learning programs are now available from dozens of universities, reaching students who previously would not be able to attend college and earn a degree. Online learning vendors have made in-roads through a variety of learning management systems and content licensing agreements.

Universities offering online courses and degrees range from The University of Illinois to Franklin University in Ohio to The University of Phoenix Online. MIT has launched OpenCourseWare, which it promotes as “a free and open educational resource for faculty, students, and self-learners around the world.” In Canada, Queen’s School of Business has started an accelerated 12-month MBA program. It starts with a two-week residential session in Kingston and then students return to their home cities for regular classes conducted via videoconferencing.

At the University of Illinois, students, faculty and administrative staff have access to NETg Learning, a library of commercially-developed interactive courses. For example, students enrolled in a course on Technology in Instructional Design might supplement their learning with online courses in subjects such as PowerPoint, Web Design and Dreamweaver. Faculty and staff draw from a range of courses that can enhance their professional skills development. Programs are promoted to students through the faculty and various orientation programs throughout the year.

To address faculty education and digital competence, Virginia Tech has created a Faculty Development Institute to guide faculty in their exploration of educational technology. Faculty who participate in the initiative are incorporating technology innovation into their instruction, including electronic blackboards and listserves.

**Leveraging Technology Infrastructure**

Maybe the most important force of change affecting learning in both universities and corporations is infrastructure. Without a sound and seamless technology infrastructure in place, a continuous learning environment is very difficult to cultivate.

Today, laptops are common in the classroom, where just a few years ago they were seen as a distraction. Students are emailing professors and setting up virtual study groups. They keep up to date on their assignments and grades via online systems. At some universities, such as the University of Virginia, students can actually check out laptops from the school library.

On campus, wireless access is becoming mainstream. In the January 2004 issue of *Syllabus* magazine, Joel Hartman, Chief Information Officer for the University of Central Florida, notes that a wireless infrastructure provides what he calls “nomadic access” to information. He explains, “It follows you wherever you go. The wireless overlay is intending to provide, literally, an anywhere, any time access to information. We do it in
such a way that the user can roam throughout the entire campus and have essentially continuous access to the wireless infrastructure.”

A *Syllabus* campus survey in 2003 reported that almost four-fifths of the campuses that responded have wireless LANs, up from two-thirds in 2002.

At many large companies, live and archived webcasts have become widely-accepted learning channels – and universities can learn from corporate best practices. Programs that have been traditionally held as classroom courses or conferences have been moved to interactive webcast platforms. Learning can now be delivered in a more timely way. Universities are eager to learn how companies are managing webcasting and virtual classrooms because they recognize that they will continue to grow.

At the same time, the classroom will never be supplanted. It is an important place for people to come together to learn. All the innovations in technology have helped both universities and businesses rethink when and how to use classroom learning. Ultimately, having more options improves the quality of face-to-face learning. In my role as an advisory board member of the University of Missouri’s School of Accountancy, I have recently been exposed to innovative classroom models being employed in the business college. Missouri recently designed and built Cornell Hall, a technology-rich environment that is redefining student expectations about learning. (See sidebar.)

These new technology-driven learning resources and channels are actually the result of two phases of what can be viewed as the evolution of the computer: the *connecting* phase and the *compelling* phase. In the 1990s, companies and universities invested in technology in significant ways to enhance work processes and communication. More recently, bandwidth has increased significantly in many organizations. We’re now moving into the *compelling* phase where content will be more engaging and visually memorable. We will start to leverage multimedia more. By creating compelling content, we can power up our learning resources and delivery channels to their full potential. In the future, the possibilities for continuous learning are endless.

**Strengthening the Learning Value Chain**

To understand how we can strengthen the learning value chain, we need to look closely at the expectations of students when they enter higher education. Schools that market themselves today stress the technology available on their campuses. Schools should be asking, do students feel their learning experiences are enhanced by the technology on campus? Why or why not? Do they see missed opportunities? More broadly, do students understand their school’s philosophy and learning strategies around technology? If universities are to be the hub of learning innovation, they need to be focused on a culture of continuous learning.

On the business side, there are opportunities to extend the learning value chain to retired employees, valued suppliers and business partners by giving them access to online learning courses. Another way the learning value chain could be tightened is through
recruiters who visit campuses. They have the chance to see firsthand the learning innovation that’s happening. They have the opportunity to identify, through the selection and recruiting process, those students who are already continuous learners. They are in one of the best positions to keep their fingers on the pulse of learning at colleges and universities and make the links to corporate training groups.

Leaders involved in corporate learning should visit universities more often and talk to the right people about what’s really happening.

My most recent personal experience has been at the University of Virginia where my son started as a first year last fall. During our summer orientation visit, I took an hour to stop by the McIntire School of Commerce. I was astounded by the learning environment that I experienced. The school houses the BRIDGE Center for Financial Markets and includes a simulated Wall Street trading room featuring real-time market data, analytical tools, charting capabilities and up-to-the-minute news. The McIntire School has technology and learning infrastructure that would be envied by most corporate training groups.

Continuous learning is the wave of the future. Corporate training departments must do a better job building relationships with universities and colleges to strengthen the learning value chain. Students leave campuses enabled and enthusiastic. We must unleash the power of these same people as employees to speed the progress of continuous learning and productivity in business today.

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Sidebar #1—The University of Missouri and Dr. Donald Deis

Redefining Student Expectations about Learning at the University of Missouri

“The students have a work ethic that’s unbelievable,” says Dr. Donald Deis, Director of the School of Accountancy at the University of Missouri. “And I think it’s partly due to them being intellectually rewarded by the technology-rich resources available to them here at the school.”
Opened in 2002, Missouri’s Cornell Hall is no ordinary business school facility. Designed to emphasize collaborative education, Cornell Hall is a wireless-enabled learning environment where students may use technology in every aspect of school work. The school was built to emulate the sophistication of business environments. Ironically, students are learning and doing research with technology that is way ahead of most companies today.

Dr. Deis joined the faculty during the summer of 2003. From the start, he has been impressed by the students’ technology savvy. According to Dr. Deis, employers tell him that Missouri students are as much as 12 months ahead of other recruits they hire. Over forty percent of business graduates have some sort of technology concentration as part of their degrees.

The classroom experience has changed dramatically for students and professors. Communication happens through discussion boards and instant messaging. Students take exams online. “Students bring laptops to class in the same way they used to bring textbooks,” Dr. Deis explains. If a student doesn’t have a laptop and needs one on a particular day, they borrow one from the laptop cart in the classroom.

Dr. Deis notes that the technology available to students drives their productivity and quality of work – just as it does in business. “The high quality of their presentations is mind-boggling,” he explains. “Case work is energized by technology-enhanced competition. The amount of lab work students do has more than doubled. Their ability to do online research is remarkable.”

One by-product of the new Cornell Hall environment has been that students help each other, acting as coaches and mentors, on how to use the technology. “Collaborative learning happens spontaneously and naturally,” Dr. Deis explains. Early in their academic careers, all students take a comprehensive course in business technology tools which sets the tone for how learning happens through their time at Missouri.

In the classroom, most Missouri faculty use technology to supplement, but not replace, the classroom experience. “They look for creative ways to use it,” explains Dr. Deis.

In his own classes, Dr. Deis encourages students to send him instant text messages throughout his lecture. He stops at regular intervals to address the questions. It’s made the class more interactive and he hears from students who may not normally participate. For example, international students who feel they have a language barrier welcome the chance to ask questions through text messaging. “From an instructor’s standpoint, it’s the coolest thing you can imagine,” Dr. Deis says, “especially in bigger classes where it’s sometimes hard to get interaction going.”

With students armed with instant text messaging in class, they can engage in what Dr. Deis calls “high-tech note passing.” But he sees it as another stimulus to improve the quality of learning. “We need to make the class interesting enough so students don’t bail out.”
Dr. Deis says students realized that the business college was serious about the use of technology in the classroom when it started administering tests online. “We test their knowledge and skills with the same technology resources that they use to do their class projects,” he explains.

Finally, Dr. Deis observes, “When students enter the workplace, they expect to experience nothing less than what they’ve had in college.” Missouri’s Cornell Hall is redefining student expectations.

Sidebar #2—Powered Performance and Ghenno Senbetta

THE STUDENT EDGE

“Technology is like the human brain,” says Ghenno Senbetta, president of Powered Performance. “We only use a fraction of our brain capacity. By the same token, people only use a small percentage of the functions and features of whatever technology they use regularly.”

Senbetta’s company is dedicated to helping people be more self-directed in using technology to enhance their job performance and learn more. “What we do is expose people to the richness of the tools and resources available on their computers and online,” Senbetta explains. “The goal is to help people learn to learn on their own.” Both Senbetta and Bob Dean of Grant Thornton LLP share a view that digital competencies will become an increasingly important factor in lifelong learning.

Senbetta tells the story of teaching an e-commerce course at Loyola University in Chicago before he started his company. “I had graduate students who were eager to learn about e-commerce, but the challenge was that they had all kinds of specific interests. Some wanted to learn about e-commerce servers, some wanted to learn about Internet marketing, some customer relationship management, others about retailing online. How could I accommodate everybody?”

That’s when Senbetta started to think about redefining how people approach learning. They needed to use technology to self-direct their learning, rather than expect an instructor to tell them exactly what they should know.
Comfortable and Fast, But Not Always Efficient

While providing his services mostly to business people, Senbetta has had the chance to deliver workshops to university graduate students from Big Ten universities. He found students show differences in their digital competencies compared to the typical business person. He says, “There is a huge comfort level that students have. They are not afraid to go in and try to navigate through any software or anything on the Internet. They believe they can play around, figure it out and learn it.” On the other hand, Senbetta observes that most experienced business people have an ‘I’m worried I’m going to break it’ mentality that students don’t show.

Students have also developed habits in using technology that make them fast, but not always efficient. “One of the big surprises I had when I conducted the university workshops was that the students needed and wanted to spend more time on productivity tips.”

One of the key services his company offers is a diagnostic survey. It is used to determine what’s important to individuals and helps Powered Performance customize its workshops and tools to meet specific needs. The survey identifies technology areas where individuals need to be more proficient to do their work and learn more effectively. There are sixteen areas, including items such as finding electronic information quickly, selecting appropriate search engines and customizing your computer desktop to accelerate productivity.

In general, people rate organizing electronic information as their highest need. They want to be better at labeling things they find, so they can reuse them. “That’s something that is common across any age group,” Senbetta says. “We’re all inundated with information. Our ability to reuse information is as important as our ability to find new information.”

Students also understand the visual and multimedia potential of the Internet. “Most people look upon the Internet today as a text-based medium,” Senbetta explains. “But students are more likely to know where to find images and streamed media.” At most universities, bandwidth is not an issue.

Moving from Student Life to the Working World

Even though students today have enhanced digital competencies, they face challenges in adapting to business life. Senbetta says students do not really have an understanding of what is meant by continuous learning, a concept that has become a guiding principle in good corporate learning strategies. “When you really come down to it, the reason students enroll in higher education is to get a degree,” Senbetta says. “Students will proudly tell you that they will do whatever it takes to get a degree. Unfortunately, their ‘whatever it takes’ may not include their ability to learn continuously. It includes their ability to finish a specific number of credit hours in a subject.”
“Academic institutions should be thinking about self-directed, continuous learning the way companies do now,” Senbeta says. “Information and knowledge changes all the time. It’s critical that students coming out of a university today have a solid foundation to learn on their own.”

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