PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Configuring the structure and administration of learning management

Administration
of learning
management

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Richard Dealtry
The Intellectual Partnerships Company, Birmingham, UK.
E-mail: prof.dealtry@dial.pipex.com

Abstract

Purpose – Experience shows that there are problems arising from the implementation of learning management systems (LMS). Indications are that they are too e-learning technology driven, emphasising the virtual component and neglecting the precursory development of a vibrant and committed formal learning organisation culture and infrastructure. This article aims to investigate the benefits of applying a constructivist methodology in the implementation of new LMS.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is a reflective assessment on the benefits of applying a constructivist methodology when designing and implementing strategic new learning and knowledge-based organisation development investments.

Findings – The paper reveals a corporate strategic learning management solution (SLMS) approach which is synthesised out of a successful macro-educational intervention in the UK; that of the Foundation Degree Forward (fdf) initiative.

Originality/value – This process involves using a holistic stakeholder approach that connects with all the management, resourcing and underlying organisational activities which are essential for the creation of a well managed, cohesive and sustainable strategic learning intervention.

Keywords Learning processes, Management strategy, Learning organizations

Paper type General review

1. Problematic learning management systems

Whilst the processes and learning management systems (LMS) for managing the delivery of corporate learning have proliferated in recent years the management of these highly differentiated offerings has tended to be centred on traditional organisation functions such as training and development departments and human resource (HR) functions. E-learning technologies have also played a very important role in shaping the direction of virtual learning management solutions however, quite often they are introduced with little regard for the organisational infrastructure that is essential if the company is to realise a quality corporate learning environment.

This article considers the idea that it is time to take a more holistic and dynamic perspective when defining the learning management role if truly integrated systemic learning is to be achieved. It puts forward the proposition that the configuration of formal learning management infrastructures should be based on an ongoing

barometric assessment of all the stakeholders' dynamics if a satisfactory outcome is to be achieved.

Using previous learning intervention experience it uses as a generative point of reference a macro educational stakeholder configuration that has been developed around the UK Foundation Degree Forward (fdf) intervention. This comprehensive stakeholder connected framework is applied to translate and interpret structural, resourcing and administrative needs into a corporate strategic learning management solution (SLMS) model. This model when used flexibly has potential as a generalised framework for the innovation of more cohesive and effective organisational infrastructures and LMS in the corporate milieu.

The starting point for the journey is, therefore, to draw a picture the fdf development and positioning in its national stakeholder environment

2. A stakeholder perspective on a macro-educational intervention
In January 2003 the UK Government announced the establishment of a new organisation, fdf, which was launched in the summer of that year (www.fdf.ac.uk). This strand of strategic learning enterprise is providing an important strategic and catalysing role in the further development of vocational and business-led education and has the following mission:

> fdf Mission: Working in partnership, fdf will provide a national network of expertise to support the development and validation of high quality Foundation Degrees, driven by the needs of students, employers and other stakeholders in the interests of enhancing economic, educational and social opportunities.

The fdf organisation works in partnership with a wide range of public and private sector stakeholders in the UK, including Sector Skills Councils (SSC), Regional Development Agencies (RDA), The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Department for Employment and Skills (DfES), Employers and their network organisations, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Further Education Colleges (FEC).

The Foundation Degree qualification is defined in the following way:

> Made in the workplace for the workplace, a Foundation Degree is a vocational higher education qualification which combines academic study with work-based learning and experience (fdf, n.d.).

It offers employers a cost-effective way of training new or existing staff in the skills needed in their businesses.

Introduced in 2001 Foundation Degrees are now being studied by thousands of people on hundreds of different courses. They are designed by employers which are working closely with further and higher education colleges and universities. Sector Skills Councils and other professional bodies are also actively involved in their design and implementation and they are classified at level 5 in the QCA National Qualifications Framework (an honours degree is level 6). Foundation Degree graduates can progress to other professional qualifications, and to relevant honours degrees.

Approaching 2006 there will be 2,000 foundation degree programmes with a predicted 50,000 students on them and this expansion from zero has been achieved in four years. This growth illustrates the pent up demand for such an innovation in

business-led accredited programmes and also the management and organisational skills that have been applied to leverage this important social and economic intervention.

The success of the fdf organisation is very significant and can be a valuable point of reference when configuring corporate learning management architecture that will enhance the quality, disciplines and systems of learning management. There are lessons to be learned by companies from how it resonates with its stakeholder environment in both the private and public sectors and it also provides a major step forward in the resolution of the issues relating to the management of work based learning accreditation (Dealtry, 2003).

3. An innovation in two dimensions – programmes and infrastructure management

Foundation degrees are in themselves an innovation in the continuously expanding portfolio of qualification-based provision. However, the creation of a new organisational entity such as fdf that can accelerate the "accessibility" to accredited vocational-oriented or business-led based learning provides a dynamic statement about the need for organisational adjustment, if not substantial transformation, that companies need to seriously consider if they aim to achieve the speed, process innovation and content relevance in the development of both their strategic and tactical new learning programmes.

In the organisational development context fdf is now an integral part of the total macro and regional educational development infrastructure with links into all the strands that make up education policy, educational resourcing, industry sector development, regional development and the providers of learning programmes. To demonstrate how this infrastructure may influence the shape of key organisational processes in companies we have converted this relationship scenario into a corporate organisational context in two phases.

The following illustrations describe these events in a sequence of translation and interpretation from fdf the organisation, to the functional components of an intervention platform, and finally into the possible coordinating role activities of a corporate learning organisation management entity.

Figure 1 illustrates the scale and nature of these relationships, Figure 2 defines in very broad terms the nature of the stakeholder functions and activities that are extant
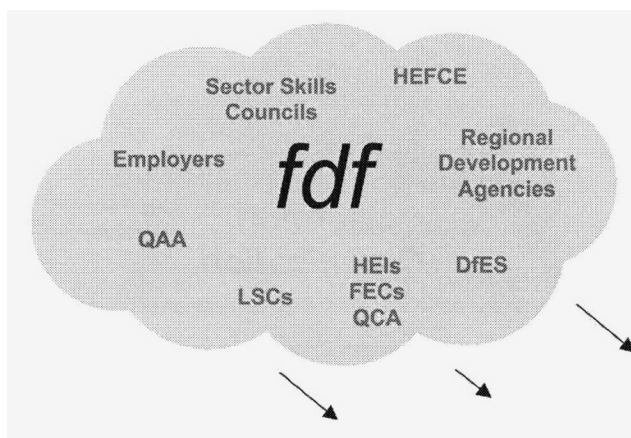

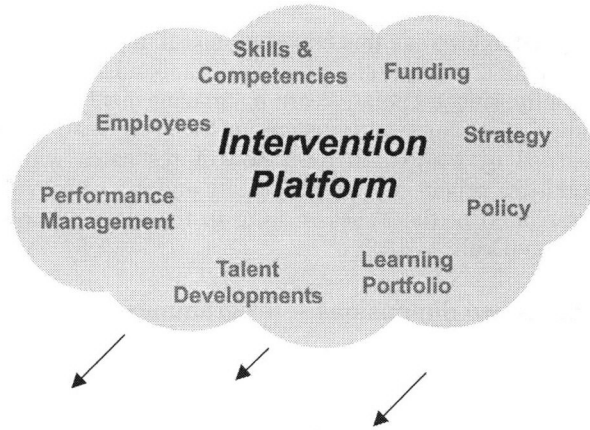**Figure 1.**
fdf stakeholder
environment

Figure 2.
Activity translation into
organisational terms

in the fdf strategic learning environment and Figure 3 interprets these functions and
activities in corporate organisation terms.

4. Translation into an organisational learning environment
The functions and activities that emerge from this process of translation (see Figure 3)
suggest that not only should a broad swathe of diverse functions in corporate
organisation be involved in delivering the learning management intervention role, but
also they should be engaged much more strategically. The implications of this
coterminous change on corporate functions are briefly commented on below.

Taking the individual elements in turn:

(1) *The intervention platform*. In the age of knowledge innovation it is clear that the
organisation has to think outside the constraints of functions and departments
and find a new organisational agency that can strategically manage the
persistent organic changes that are generated by a learning-on-demand work
based environment. Current concepts include the learning organisation,
corporate academy, enterprise academy and other derivatives.

Figure 3.
Learning organisation
environment

(2) *Funding – corporate finance*. This perspective moves the financing of the intervention out of the annual budgeting stereotype event and translates it into a major strand of investment at the heart of business development. It involves rigorous formulation of the business case for human capital investments, the scheduling of its resourcing and monitoring and a clear understanding of the relationship between the company's intellectual equity and its market capitalisation.

(3) *Strategy – business strategy*. The formulation of business strategy must now involve business education as a major developmental strand in the analysis of strengths and weaknesses when addressing the issues and potential around organisational capability. Interpreting the businesses strategic development objectives in terms of learning needs across all major functions is essential and provides the foundations for detailed planning and funding of training and development and learning skills.

(4) *Policy – operations management*. The provision of quality learning-on-demand is an essential feature of organic development. Line management need to be able to identify new learning needs from current doing-business-today realities and to participate in learning policy development relating to every aspect of the learning management process from its design through to the identification of relevant knowledge resources. They have to have the skills to plan performance development in relation to the vision and strategy of the business as it affects their activities. People learning management takes on a much more intensive role in the direct reporting relationship.

(5) *Learning portfolio – HR management*. This activity defines the internal and external formal and informal training and development provision for technical, supervisory and managerial development strands. Programme curriculum development, timing, on-call infrastructure support and the provision of a distributed e-learning solution that has the flexibility to meet changing needs with quality content that is not stuck in the past is essential.

(6) *Talent development – career management*. Companies need to make much more visible and open-up the career pathways for all managers and employees. Constructive dialogues between superiors and subordinates are much rarer than we are led to believe and direct conversations with corporate personnel who manage the career development process are even rarer. In a learner centric culture the meaningful joint exploration of mutual needs, working objectives and expectations are fundamental to the recognition and planning of individual learning needs and the nurturing of talent; people who quickly become alienated if they are not allowed to achieve. This new learning approach is forward looking and well beyond the retrospective performance appraisal system.

(7) *Performance management*. Learning performance management has many different strands, involving both monitoring and measurement at the level of the individual, the organisation and the business. Top management have to reach out well beyond learning tokenism and show full commitment and understanding that global competition is a rapidly moving target. It means more competitors, a wider range of customer choice in products and services, low cost production economies and many more and diverse market places.

Learning about these dynamics and ensuring that managers and staff at the front line have the decisional power and related capability to sustain a competitive performance is the strategic learning imperative for survival if not success that top management should seek to bring into being.

(8) *Employees*. The alignment between an employee's desire to learn and the organisation's learning needs requirements is a relationship that needs to be carefully balanced. For many employees the overt introduction of the learning component into their work role introduces a completely different work perspective. Changing the individual's psychological contract with work in a positive way cannot be achieved simply by injecting an e-learning system. *Putting the Pleasure Back into Work* (Reeves, 2001), captures many of the dynamics to be managed around the changing nature of work and employment.

(9) *Skills and competencies*. Sector Skills Councils as a stakeholder have a potential input directly into the definition and thinking about the acquisition of these attributes. However, most companies have their own specific technical, personal and organisational skill-sets and capabilities that they demand at various levels and across different entities. The learning of learning-to-learn skills is however the primary route to the acquisition and development of transferable skills for the knowledge worker. Knowledge is one of the most expensive of all an organisation's resources and ensuring that its owner has both the capabilities and the maximum number of opportunities to release its potential is a key objective of a SLMS.

5. Implications for the design of learning infrastructure and management
This articulation of the range and enhancements to current capabilities with greater emphasis on the conversion of learning into applied business knowledge adds a new dimension to a range of corporate functions in terms of awareness and participation in learning management and raises the following questions:

- Who has the overarching organisational responsibility for these transforming activities?
- How should they be integrated for success?

Figure 4 illustrates the level and areas of organisation infrastructure engagement that is implied using the cascade of the transition model. (Note: engaged departments in bold.)
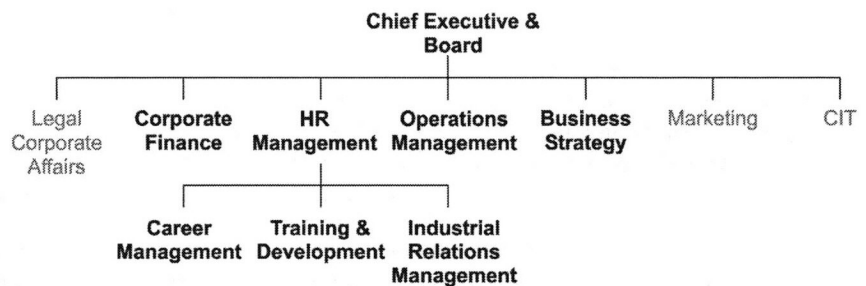
Figure 4.
Strategic learning management solution organisation intervention – distribution of enhanced learning responsibilities

Figure 4 is the first indication of the level of engagement with key organisational processes that will be involved in an efficient and effective SLMS intervention. But this is not the complete picture. Taking the fdf model once again as a prompter to envisioning its total functionality we can add further insights into this need for organisational multi-disciplinary involvement by examining the fdf supporting activities and services which are:

(1) A validation and quality assurance service, free of charge, to establish partnerships between HEIs and FECs (or other organisations without degree awarding powers) to support validation of high quality Foundation Degrees.

(2) A consultancy, research and information service, free of charge, to institutions and other stakeholders committed to design and delivery of Foundation Degrees.

(3) Training workshops, conferences and seminars to provide practical advice and support for practitioners and other stakeholders.

Interpreting these activities in corporate terms:

• Activity (1) would be a quality learning assurance service aimed at educating all the internal stakeholders in the objective standards of learning to be achieved and also establishes the processes for managing external strategic learning alliances of quality.

• Activity (b) would be an internal consultancy and training and development function that embeds the culture and expectations for a highly committed learning organisation environment.

• Activity (c) defines a promotional and shop window activity using workshops, conferences and seminars to provide advice and support for managing professional learning and learning relationship management.

All activities would be delivered through an appropriate learning organisation styled intervention platform.

These observations clearly identify with a learning customer and learning provider corporate marketing role – educating both the providers and consumers of corporate learning on how to achieve best value from its services and products in order to bring both the organisation and its external partners up to speed on the learning strategy, priorities, practice needs and QA standards of the organisation.

Additionally, the IT function provides the networked e-learning learning management envelope that encapsulates the linking and delivery functions for the whole of the organisation's strategic learning activities. This includes the linking of internal and external communication and knowledge networks that should be specified and managed by the corporate affairs department; a factor that is unfortunately overlooked in many highly competitive company environments.

Figure 5 illustrates the all-inclusive nature of a strategic learning management solution which is the fundamental role to be managed by the intervention platform, be it a corporate university, corporate academy, enterprise academy, corporate school of management or company college of business learning.

This somewhat robust process of translation of the macro educational model of fdf into a corporately based organisational infrastructure results in what good managers

instinctively know – that for success everyone in an organisation should be engaged in this all embracing development. However, achieving this dynamic state of interaction with all the key organisation processes, effectively and efficiently, is the learning management challenge especially where companies have multi-national and multi-entity structures. Getting the right balance of disciplines into the intervention platform is problematic due to the shortcomings of contemporary organisational theory and thinking. Such thinking tends to push the locus of responsibility for this organisational intervention in a particular functional direction without the necessary holistic stakeholder configuration assessments having being made.

Summarising these points, establishing a sustainable corporate strategic learning management infrastructure is an organisational intervention which should be led by the importance of strategic decisions and the recognition that managing learning itself is only half of the developmental model. Ensuring that the learning is relevant and there is the opportunity for the application of the derived knowledge is the key to achieving a satisfactory outcome for both the employee and the organisation. Certainly positioning the keystone strategic intervention responsibility in the corporate organisation based upon the volume of provision spend or base-line e-technological activity is no longer a viable option in most organisations.

On the positive side, there is potential for underpinning these learning organisation infrastructures with an extended portfolio of corporate skill-sets. These evolutions are well defined in organisational theory literature. In addition where national infrastructures such as RDA and SSC resources are in-place the support and professional advice directly available simply adds to the fund of knowledge in shaping the final SLMS role.

Beyond key business process infrastructure considerations there are however still many issues concerning programme curriculum design and delivery that have very significant influences on the whole strategic learning management system.

6. Programme process management

In addition to a comprehensive organisational infrastructure the fdf intervention defines a very well prepared process for the introduction of accredited programmes and this innovation has contributed some very important pieces for completion of the total corporate learning management jigsaw. Achieving effective alignment of strategic and tactical new learning with internal and external training and development investments does, however, still pose many additional and unique
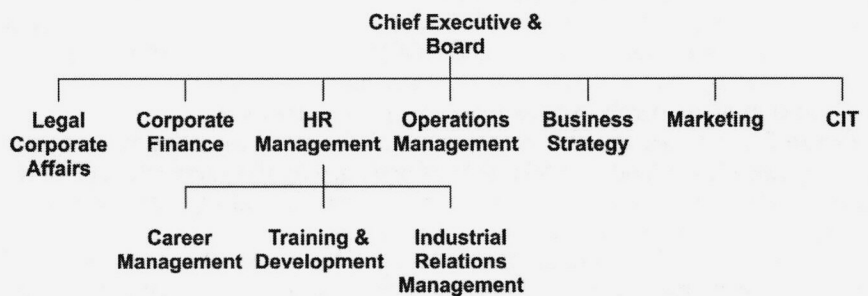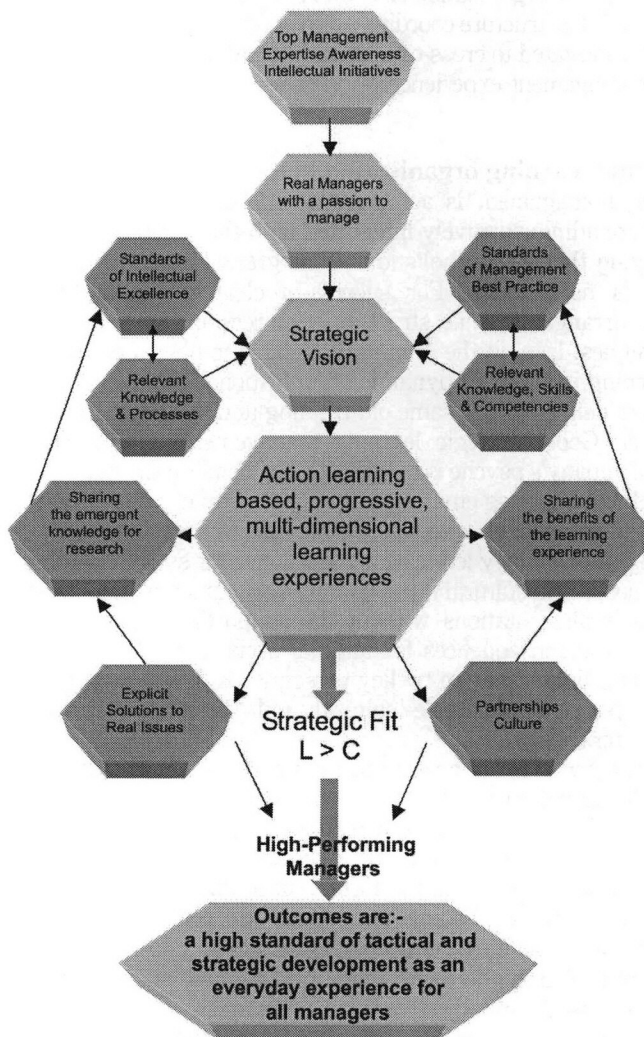

Figure 5.
Strategic learning management solution organisation intervention – total stakeholder integration

challenges that can only be resolved in the specific corporate environment. Figure 6 is a comprehensive map of all the activities and relationships that have to be managed to evolve, refine, harvest and apply emergent learning as the feedstock for strategic achievement.

By means of this strategic learning process of diagnosis, formulation and implementation it is possible to identify those specific process elements that will benefit from a foundation degree work-based curriculum process. It also helps to highlight the needs for corporate ownership of many other elements if the final outcome is to be satisfactorily achieved.

Source: Dealtry (1999)

Figure 6.
An integrated strategic learning process perspective

This is a very powerful curriculum design and management process that links with many different elements of the key organisational processes at different times and places different demands on them that require innovative responses if all the benefits are to be captured. Managing, utilising and disseminating emergent knowledge as well as managing a quality learning experience is a core dynamic of the process.

The importance of having an autonomous corporate intervention agency or entity that can ensure that all formal and informal programme activities and relationships are in-flow cannot be understated. Facilitating learning-to-learn around the choice of real-time assignments that stretch the imagination and stimulate the emotional desire to explore self and the organisation environment requires a well connected overarching multi-functional infrastructure coordinated by a pivotal cadre of people drawn from all levels who are motivated to cross-over departmental thinking boundaries and share in the learning management experience.

7. Empowering learning organisation behaviours

Good learning management is achieved by enhanced organisation capability and systems that are administratively integrated with the organisations key processes.

Simply saying that a total holistic and integrative approach to strategic learning management is not enough. For success a clear understanding of the formal organisational arrangements, i.e. structure, resources and systems required, must take place at the highest level in the organisation. This implies a cultural acceptance that corporate learning is all about dynamic organisational change and not simple project step changes or delivering the same old training and development packages in a new e-tech wrapper. Good strategic learning management is a function of how well prepared the company's psyche is in pro-actively blending the massive changes taking place in the global business environment with the rapidly changing relationship that employees at all levels have with the role of work in their lives.

Introducing a technology-led learning management system without the necessary organisation, social and cultural intervention management is therefore the wrong place to start. LMS implementations without the supporting organisational change and appreciation of the consequences for internal social systems will result in confused relationships and limited buy-in by key personnel at different operational levels. The outcome can pose irreconcilable cultural and learning behaviour blockages to individual learners.

New learning *per se* is not a panacea for a successful corporate future. To emerge with value adding properties it has to combine synergistically with a raft of other people and organisational energies. It is, therefore, a mistake to enter into this style of learning intervention without a full diagnostic appreciation of the fact that all organisations already have many formal and informal learning processes and practices in being; ways of doing things that are central to people's performance and ambitions and business efficiency. Raising the formality of organisational learning to that of a higher and more professional status level equal to other corporate functions is an objective that only materialises through demonstrable connected benefits the resourcing, space and opportunities for which can only be fully enabled by top management taking formal responsibility for state of the company's brain power.

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