

# Rolling the DICE

Learning how to Design “In-Context” Experiences. BY TONY O’DRISCOLL

My two previous columns argued that, in addition to being content creators, learning professionals also must become context curators—leveraging the work environment itself as a vehicle where experiences are turned into insights that transform behavior. Now I want to explore how to design in-context experiences—or DICE, since us trainers are so fond of acronyms. In this column, I focus on five design principles aimed specifically at blending content and context in new and different ways that will have lasting impact on both individual competence and organizational performance:

**1. Recognize the importance of context to competency:** As we broaden our focus from developing individual competence to driving organizational performance, we must recognize the critical role that context plays in translating individual capability into value-added organizational activity. This principle requires that we move beyond the design of instruction to develop competence within a given role. To deliver business results, we also must ensure that our designs accommodate the application of that competence in a given business context in service of a specific performance outcome.

**2. Complement efficient skill-gap closure with effective performance improvement:** Most of our current instructional designs focus on developing competencies in role by transmitting what is known about a given set of topics in a classroom context. This principle requires that we move beyond this individually focused skill-forward approach to include a business-focused performance-back perspective in which the critical tasks that differentiate performance inform the appropriate blend of topical content and task context in the design of the learning experience.


**3. Expose participants to the knowledge and experience of an increased breadth of resources:** As the true source of business differentiation migrates from finding things out to figuring things out, our design emphasis must more effectively blend productive and generative learning. Productive learning focuses on teaching people how to do things we know how to do: It teaches answers. Generative learning focuses on having people develop the ability to collectively figure things out: It helps people learn how to deal with questions. This principle requires that we consider the appropriate blend of productive

learning that is focused on classroom-based individual skill building to improve operational efficiency and work-based generative learning that is focused on the collective development of innovative insights that serve to sustain the business over time.

**4. Design for knowledge creation in addition to knowledge transfer:** Our current instructional design model focuses primarily on programs of study in role-based cohorts where we focus on transferring what is known about a given set of topics. This principle requires that we evolve beyond the model in which learning is tightly controlled in content, delivery, and format to one in which we design curated learning experiences boasting freedom of action and experimentation that leads to new knowledge creation. As such, this principle moves beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, leading to the creation of playing fields in the work environment where competence is exercised in context and aimed toward a performance outcome.

**5. Complement competency-based assessment with performance-based feedback:** Our current assessment process monitors and regulates the closure of individual skill gaps. We assess an individual against a given competency model for the role he or she plays in the organization, and we recommend programs of study to shore up competence deficiencies we identify in that individual. This principle requires that we complement this skill-forward competency development feedback cycle with one that also accommodates the performance-back point of view. Performance feedback improves performance within an immediate business context, helping the performer adjust in real time to improve a specific business outcome. Just as the assessment process closes the gaps for individual competence building, the performance feedback process ensures that the application of competence in a given context is closing the gap on a desired performance outcome.

I hope these five contextual design principles can be used to chart a course to help effectively balance skill-forward and performance-back perspectives to optimally blend content and context in applying productive and generative learning approaches to ensure our instructional designs deliver lasting impact in service of developing individual competence and delivering organizational performance.

Are you ready to roll the DICE? 



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