

The “X” Factor

Putting content in context when designing and developing training programs.

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Last month, I was sitting in a leadership development program listening to two talented executives share personal stories about how they had learned to lead. As they shared their leadership lessons with the participants, I noticed that one word kept coming up over and over again. That word was “CONTEXT.”

“Before I tell you this story, let me set some context,” one said.

“To understand why I made the decision I did, it is important for me to give you some more context,” said the other.

“If you don’t fully appreciate the context you are operating in, you are setting yourself up for failure,” warned the first.

“You can look at all the studies and evidence in the world, but you have to put it all in context before making a key decision,” explained the second.

And so it went for 90 minutes. In listening to these two leaders share their stories, it was clear that context mattered profoundly to the experiences they went through in cultivating their capacity to lead.

OBSCURED BY THE LETTER N

Those of us who work in the learning profession spend a lot of time dealing with another word that has exactly the same configuration as the word “context” except for one letter. You know

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the word I am talking about, right? The word is “CONTENT.”

In the learning world, content is literally the currency we traffic in. We first conduct needs analysis to define what objectives need to be taught. We then interview subject matter experts because they know the content we need to extract related to these objectives. We then apply

instructional design principles to structure the content we have extracted to align it most effectively and efficiently with our learning objectives. Learning, it seems, is all about the content.

As I paused to ponder the juxtaposition of these two similarly structured yet vastly different words, it suddenly came to me that the “X” factor we have been seeking for so long to ensure that the programs we design deliver lasting business value has been obscured by the letter N!

In our haste to develop content in service of instructional objectives, we have been distracted from paying sufficient attention to the increasingly important and urgent role that context plays in learning. Context is where the work of leadership—or any work for that matter—is exercised each and every day. The more connected and complex our context, the more we need to develop our ability to learn in real time within that specific context.

As these leaders so viscerally demonstrated in sharing their leadership experiences, learning in context is an increasingly vital arena for us to consider as we ply our trade. The classroom model—with its focus on content that has been abstracted away from the context from which it emerged—is being challenged by a need for learning to be exercised in context and in real time.

As a result, the real X factor in designing learning that makes a difference lies in recognizing that in addition to being content creators, we must become context curators where we learn how to use the work context itself as a container within which experiences are turned into insights that transform behavior. By blending content and context in new and different ways, we can find new

methods to create teachable moments that have lasting impact.

So next time you whip out your laptop, tablet, or presentation application to create some learning content, remember to ask yourself if you have considered the X factor. Doing so just might unlock a new way of framing the learning opportunity in a whole new context for you. **T**