



**Whitepaper**

# **Developing eLearning Communities to Enhance Your Online Training Program**

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May 2010

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# Contents

## 1.0 Executive Summary

## 2.0 Traditional vs. eLearning Communities

2.1 Organizational eLearning: The Critical Need for “Looping,”  
Integrating, Embedding, and Expanding the Knowledge Base

2.2 Is it Really Just the Platform? What are the Differences Between an  
eLearning Community and a Traditional Learning Community

## 3.0 Using eLearning Tools to Create Effective “Learning Pods”

3.1 Web 2.0: Social Media, Online Training Solutions, Virtual Worlds, and  
Podcasts: How can They Be Used to Spur Organizational Learning and  
Authentic Exchange of Ideas?

3.2 Embedding the Culture in the Medium: The eLearning Experience  
Must Parallel the Organizational Culture and Learning Style

## 4.0 Accelerating the eLearning Curve: What are the Eight Most Important Practices?

4.1 Creating the Cohort Effect

4.2 Is the Course Selection Immediately Relevant and Engaging to the End-  
User?

4.3 No More “Training Central”—Toward a Shared Responsibility of Learning  
and Contribution from all Members of the Community

4.4 Create Safe eLearning “Rooms”

4.5 Using eLearning as a Platform for Innovation

4.6 How can eLearning Increase the ROI of Human Capital in an Organizational  
Setting?

4.7 ELearning Technology as an Ally: Use it to Convert the Nay Sayers

4.8 Going Forward

## 5.0 About Cox eLearning Consultants

## 6.0 About Citrix Online

## 7.0 About GoToTraining

## Executive Summary

Training organizations need to adapt to the new method of training (eLearning) in order to advance their training program by cutting costs, expanding reach and fostering new forms of interactivity. This progression toward eLearning requires effective integration with traditional learning methodologies.

The most impactful way to integrate eLearning and traditional instructional modalities is three fold: (1) incorporate sound principles of organizational learning and change, (2) employ a systemic approach, and (3) work diligently to engage the learning community and the entire organization by utilizing the technologies of Web 2.0 (e.g., social networks, online training platforms, etc.).

If the new style of eLearning and the old style of traditional training are integrated in a purposeful manner, then entire organizations will reap the benefits of blended learning. The benefits include: increased productivity, a larger learning base, and a targeted allocation of learning and development costs that accelerate achievement of organizational objectives.



## Traditional vs. eLearning Communities

The concepts of learning communities, learning organizations, and practice communities have been developed and explored over the last 30+ years in both management literature and in practice in organizations of varying sizes and forms. Generally speaking, a learning community has come to be defined as an organic system in which there are inputs (e.g., information, new skills, etc.) that are processed and acquired by the participants (i.e., the learners) who then produce outputs that are created from or enhanced by the inputs. Simply put, we learn something new and apply it real time in the learning community or in the organization.



However, the explosion in eLearning lends itself to a new definition of a learning community because of the myriad of tools available to spur both individual and organizational learning and growth. Participants are no longer confined to learning within the temporal constraints of classroom or text book learning. Instead, new concepts can be introduced and applied real time during the work day, with the ability to test and embed the new information in a manner that can positively and immediately impact performance.

The other major differences between a traditional learning community and the e-version are the ability to collaborate across time zones, to incorporate ideas and personnel from different cultures to add to the richness of the learning experience, and to encourage real-time dialogue among learners who would otherwise be prohibited from coming together. The key is to make the eLearning platform engaging and easily accessible to encourage use and dialogue.

## Organizational eLearning: The Critical Need for “Looping,” Integrating, Embedding, and Expanding the Knowledge Base

How does an organization develop the ability to learn and grow through the effective use of eLearning technology? Chris Argyris developed the concept of double loop learning in 1977 (Argyris, p. 116). The phrase refers to the ability of an organization to process learning in a way that allows it to engage not only in self-correction, but in the ability to question its own underlying policies, goals, and systemic beliefs. Argyris posits that the best way to both uncover and loop this learning back into the organization is through open discussion.

ELearning provides a unique opportunity to create the tenor for open discourse and learning through the use of chat, immediate feedback, and real-time virtual classroom discussions and screen share. The online learning environment encourages those who might be fearful of speaking up in a group to share their opinions in a less-threatening environment. Additionally, the explosion in the use and comfort with Web 2.0 and social media makes for a level of comfort in many users with sharing their opinions or input in an online format.



## Is it Really Just the Platform?

### What are the Differences Between an eLearning Community (online training solution and outside Web communities) and a Traditional Learning Community

eLearning requires a different lens from the standpoint of the learning system architect. Three key areas must be addressed when designing an eLearning system that speak both to the flexibility of the technology and the challenges associated with it: scalability, access, and timeliness (Clarke and Hermes, pp. 257-258). These concepts are often discussed when considering traditional learning approaches (i.e., instructor led training and textbook based learning), but they have been given new vigor with the development of online learning and training technologies.

The system must be built so that it can be easily scaled up or down, depending upon both the organizational climate and the needs of the learner. This goes far beyond modular learning. Rather, the concept is about being able to deploy training to just the right people, in just the right geography, at just the right time. The latter points all speak to both access and timeliness as well. It is far easier to deploy online training that addresses critical business issues or needs and to customize the delivery of the content than it is to rewrite, re-print, ship, and organize classes and instructors to deploy traditional instructor led training.

Another key aspect of eLearning communities is the notion of viewing the community as an ecosystem (Pirie, p. 42). The components of the ecosystem are the learners in the community, the enterprise, and the learning management system—of which online training technology would generally be a key component. Sound ecological principles dictate careful and planned utilization of all of the resources or components in the ecosystem. The enterprises' resources can be maximized through designing eLearning communities that maximize the targeted use of available learning technologies by selecting the right content, the right frequency of training, and appropriate “touch” with the learners.

The concept of spaced repetition has been gaining momentum recently. The theory is that learning becomes embedded more deeply and quickly when there are manageable “touches” to the learner after the initial delivery of information. Post-session skills quizzes, recordings, podcasts, and email push technologies can enhance both individual and subsequently organizational learning. The key is to build an eLearning ecosystem that incorporates all the elements required for maximum acceptance, retention, and utilization of the new skills and information.

## Using eLearning Tools to Create Effective “Learning Pods”

### ***Web 2.0 –Social Media, Online Training Solutions, Virtual Worlds, and Podcasts: How can They Be Used to Spur Organizational Learning and Authentic Exchange of Ideas?***

Instructional and learning system design is no less an art form in the eLearning space than in the traditional world of textbook and classroom learning. However, the seductiveness and allure of the array of technologies available can lead an eLearning ecosystem designer astray if one doesn't work toward an integrated system. The Frankenstein approach or syndrome can easily take over in which disparate elements are bolted together, thereby creating a dysfunctional monster (Kilkelly, p. 12).

The key for creation of functioning eLearning ecosystems is to use an approach that taps into the world of Web 2.0, which has become an integrated part of the current social network. Participants are now accustomed to integrating multiple forms of “media touch” into the work and personal lives. Leading edge organizations have incorporated games, virtual worlds, and podcasts into their training alchemy to engage learners and to accelerate organizational growth. All of these methodologies can be incorporated into online training platforms.

Learning pods are microcosms of the larger learning communities that can be encouraged through the use of eLearning technologies. This is not about creating departmental silos, but rather about encouraging like-minded individuals to “study” together on line (e.g., chats, IM's, virtual classrooms, etc.) to form ad hoc teams that inspire new thinking and innovation in the organization. ELearning technologies can be used to encourage creative innovation real-time, even during training, through open discussion and skilled online or mobile facilitation. Learning pods can become a means of encouraging development of great unofficial teams. The technology, when used properly, can further encourage the output of great teams and help organize the genius that often lies latent in organizations— simply waiting for the right spark (Bennis). Technology can help ignite the spark of organizational genius.





## Embedding the Culture in the Medium: The eLearning Experience Must Parallel the Organizational Culture and Learning Style

ELearning ecosystem designers must consider the organizations learning style. Additionally, they must consider the immediate links between the organizational strategy and the information that the participants are being asked to integrate; the connections must be immediate. Organizational change, which is an outgrowth of organizational learning, can best occur when those two elements are addressed (Beer and Eisenstat).

Questions to consider when designing an eLearning ecosystem include:

Use of chat rooms and online dialogue: What is the culture in the organization around frank and open discussion? Is conflict viewed negatively or embraced as a necessary and healthy step on the road toward innovation and increased competitiveness?

Are participants allowed to stop work to refer to online training materials/references? Can they interrupt their work day to handle push emails, podcasts, or e-training implementations such as pre- and post- session quizzes?

Are participants realistically able to pull themselves away from their work to complete eLearning components or is it better to have dedicated segments of time for both group and individual learning?

Is the organization dedicated to double-loop learning in which open and honest feedback is welcomed and then used to reconstruct systems, policies, and approaches?

Is open questioning and testing of thinking encouraged or is the culture one that is more dependent upon formal feedback mechanisms?

## Accelerating the eLearning Curve: What are the Eight Most Important Practices?

### ***Creating the Cohort Effect***

The “cohort effect” refers to a group of learners that journey through curriculum as an intact group. One of the features of highly functioning cohorts is that natural synergies develop among different learners in the group, producing teams that learn together and accelerate each other’s integration of the material. Shared experience creates the opportunity for both conflict and learning integration. Both are necessary for inspiring growth. Pre-, during, and post-session testing and surveys in which the group participates together at the same time create opportunities for shared experience by virtue of study groups that often form for the latter two phases. Additionally, creating social media groups can add to the unity of the cohort because they can interact in a different medium and it cultivates continued conversation.

### ***Is the Course Selection Immediately Relevant and Engaging to the End-User?***

Participants must immediately understand the relevance of the course selection to: (1) how they do their job; and (2) the overarching goals of the organization. If either of these elements is missing, then the likelihood of integration of the new knowledge and skills is very low.

Engagement is encouraged through both the content of the training material in terms of sound instructional design (i.e., meeting the learners where they are; understanding the corporate culture; understanding the principles of adult learning, etc.) and through use of online technology that is both accessible, user-friendly, and reflects the intuitive nature of the technological modalities now a part of Web. 2.0 (i.e., use of color, graphics, ease of navigation, embedded links, etc.).

### ***No More “Training Central”—Toward a Shared Responsibility of Learning and Contribution from all Members of the Community***

Organizational learning, growth, and change don't just happen because of an edict from “on high” or from the training and development division in an organization. Every single participant in the organization has a responsibility to contribute to organizational learning. ELearning technology can greatly accelerate enhanced participation through the use of interactive features such as presenter controls, polls, quizzes, chat, hand raising, etc. There are a myriad of opportunities to inspire and to encourage interaction and contribution when eLearning ecosystem designers incorporate these technological features into their training design.

### ***Create Safe eLearning “Rooms”***

“Safe rooms” are generally thought of as rooms in expansive homes where individuals can retreat in case of an invasion (e.g., robbery, attack, etc.). However the concept has merit in the eLearning space because the technology creates a natural space for thoughtful consideration and personal and group reflection without the pressure of sitting in a classroom (Falconer, p. 147). The ability to “raise one’s hand” online, for example, is considerably less intimidating for some learners than doing so in a live classroom.

### ***Using eLearning as a Platform for Innovation***

The importance of the interdependence of learning and social context cannot be lost in the eLearning environment (Servage p. 313). The technology does not build superior working relationships and teams. The interaction between people is a key element in developing outstanding teams and outputs. But technology can have a critical role in increasing and encouraging innovation through the use of online collaboration, even while in a virtual classroom.

ELearning platforms can also play a significant role in leveraging the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit organizational knowledge. Tacit knowledge is information that is held by individuals and it is often unexpressed. For example, an employee may intuitively know a means to complete a task more efficiently than is currently codified in company procedures, but hasn't been called upon to use or to explore that knowledge. When that individual is working in a group, often someone will say or do something or raise an issue that causes the individual to recall the latent knowledge and share it in some form with the group through recounting a particular experience with the subject matter being discussed. This tacit knowledge then becomes explicit organizational learning through the sharing/experiential process (Falconer, p. 143). ELearning technologies can encourage the transference of tacit to explicit knowledge by increased collaboration and interaction across geographic and departmental strata.

### ***How can eLearning Increase the ROI (Return on Investment) of Human Capital in an Organizational Setting?***

The last ten years has seen a tremendous increase in the desire to quantify ROI in terms of human capital. One element of the human capital equation is the ROI in training. Often, eLearning is touted as the "silver bullet" that will reduce training budgets. There are of course economies of scale associated with reduction in travel, licensing of work books, and classroom use. These are hard costs.

However, an element of the ROI from eLearning implementation that is often left out of the equation is the increased innovation and positive impact on corporate culture and overall organizational performance that can come from a well designed eLearning ecosystem. One or two great teams or great ideas can exponentially increase an organization's competitiveness. Along the way, the ability to encourage cross-collaboration and to measure retention and utilization of the learning—creates metrics that may seem "soft" measures at first glance, but they constitute the foundation for organizational learning, growth, and change.

### ***E*Learning Technology as an Ally:**

#### ***Use it to Convert the Nay Sayers***

Many years ago, Jerry Sternin worked for Save the Children and went to South East Asia to help combat a huge malnutrition issue (Dorsey). Instead of entering the region with a pre-determined heavy handed approach to how he was going to “solve” the problem, he looked for the positive deviants in country that were working with the exact same resources as everyone else, but whose families weren’t malnourished. He then encouraged these families to teach the other families in the villages about how to thrive in the current environment. He found those that were successful and used them to teach others. It worked because the new “teachers” could relate to the other villagers by virtue of a shared and credible experience.

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Learning technology can be intimidating at times because of prior bad experiences or because of a reluctance to be open to a new experience. Resistance to change is simply a part of the human character and all organization development specialists and executives know that their job is to make organizational transitions easier and clear.

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Learning architects can immediately look for the successful early adopters—those individuals and teams who are utilizing the technology in innovative ways. These positive deviants can then be asked to lead portions of online training sessions, chats, or to lead podcasts or to blog about how they are using the system to help them train better and to become more innovative. People tend to believe their colleagues who have been in the trenches and who can add color and credibility to how they are succeeding. These positive deviants can become tremendous levers in the successful implementation of eLearning technology.

### ***Going Forward***

The myriad of eLearning tools and technologies can be daunting. With the increasing pressure for executives and learning and development specialists to produce results from eLearning platforms, focus must remain on engaging the learners in such a manner that encourages collaboration and innovation. It is the combination of collaboration, innovation, and successful incorporation of the social context and elements of Web 2.0 that will lead to a high return from eLearning technologies, no matter how the ROI is measured.

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Tracey Webb is an expert in organizational development and management performance, helping organizations grow their bottom line revenue through authentic dialogue and innovation

## About Cox eLearning Consultants, LLC

Cox eLearning Consultants, LLC, is a leading marketing consulting firm in the industries of corporate training, elearning and HR technologies. Its industry advisory, consulting and marketing services transform organization educational performance.



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## About Citrix Online



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