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Beyond the Cognitive Domain

Merging content with stories to make learning affective

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Abstract

The attempt in this paper is to look at how to build effective and affective learning content for the workplace learning. Most learning in the workplace occurs in the context of situations that people find themselves in and their responses to these situations. The paper explains the basics and provides a case for story and scenario based learning.

Two Methods

Imagine yourself in a class where the instructor is addressing the topic Entrepreneurial Strategy. The instructor can adopt either one of the two methods given below.

Method 1

The instructor says: "For an entrepreneurial venture to be successful and gain a permanent leadership position in the market, it should either come up with a unique product or a unique service."

Method 2

The instructor says: "I am sure that you all have heard of Tupperware---the name that has become synonymous with airtight plastic containers. Do you know how this product became world famous? Earl Silas Tupper was a chemist by profession. 50 years ago when plastic containers were rejected by most consumers due to the odour and brittleness of plastic, he invented the non-greasy, non-brittle, watertight plastic container. However, Tupper himself didn't quite leverage on the unique features of this product and the containers could not be sold through the retail stores.

That's when a lady named Brownie enters the scene. Brownie is given a set of Tupperware bowls by a friend. Soon afterwards, she contacts the Tupper Company and tells them that she wants to sell Tupperware products on the home party plan. Thus evolves the direct selling concept. To this day, this is how Tupperware brand products are sold.

The Tupperware story is one of the most successful entrepreneurial ventures in America, in the 1950s. The invention of Tupperware is considered a famous entrepreneurial product and its marketing strategy a unique service innovation."

What is the difference?

The two methods communicate the same thing but in different ways. In the first instance, the instructor presents the content as a statement of fact. In the second instance, the instructor merges the content within a story giving it a context.

Which of these has a greater impact? Why?

In the first instance, the content has matter that appeals only to the head, while in the second instance, it appeals to the heart as well. Or, to borrow from Benjamin Bloom, the first method addresses only the cognitive domain while the second addresses both the cognitive as well as the affective domain, which deals with the emotional aspects, such as attitudes and interests of people.

A Case for Stories

Can you think of a story that you read, saw or heard and from which you did not learn anything? A little difficult, isn't it? Stories communicate best practices and behaviors in a specific context. Stories make you think, reflect and introspect. Stories inspire you to shed old behaviors and adopt new ones. In short, a story contains elements that appeal both to your head and heart ---probably the reason for their popularity.

The art of teaching through stories transcends time and place. It is also probably one of the most effective methods of disseminating knowledge to any age group, be it children or adults. Stories engage both children and adults alike. In fact, regardless of our age group, stories attract us instantly and keep us hooked on till the end.

Interactive Story-based Learning – The Architecture

Using this typical workplace learning scenario, Knowledge Platform has created a two tiered learning model (Figure 1). The first tier shows the typical learning architecture in most training---the content addressing the Cognitive Domain. Typically, this tier includes the Content pages, quiz and summary. This forms the explicit knowledge, the tangible part that is commonly disseminated. The second tier shows the additional piece that makes the content engaging and interesting --- the storyline, interactive decision points and best practices that ties the content together. This forms the tacit content, which is not tangible and concrete, but is crucial in the learning process.

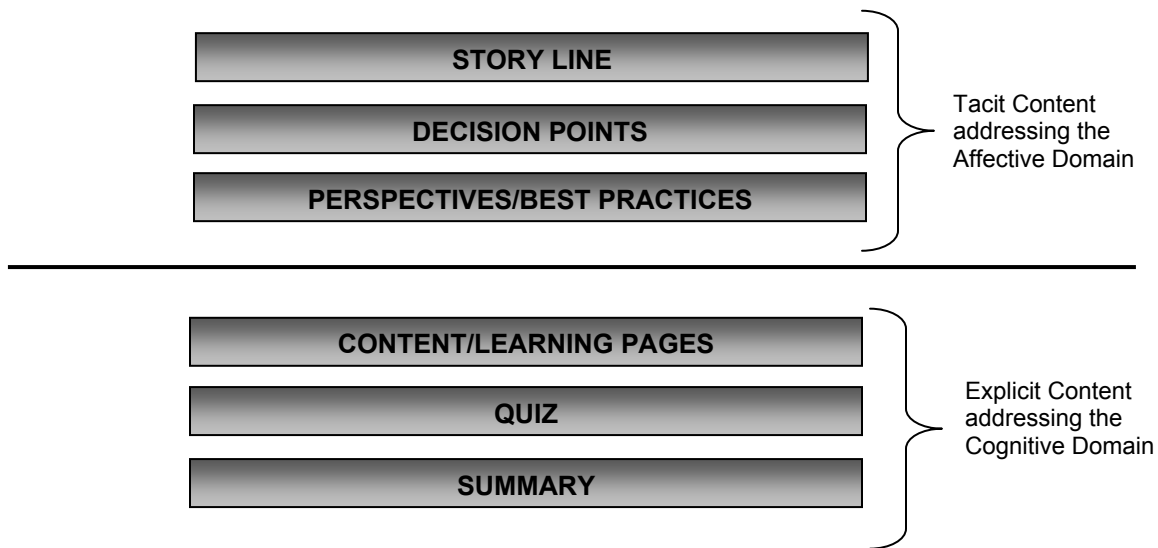


Figure 1: Interactive Story-based learning Architecture

Story-based Learning – An Example

Let us look at an example to understand how the Interactive Story-based learning model works.

The Learning Objective: Appreciate and implement desktop security practices.

Key Content Points:

- Selecting a strong password
- Managing the password
- Taking back up
- Handling a security incident

The Story/Context:

The storyline is usually a make-believe world that matches with the settings and surroundings of the organization. For this situation, let us use the backdrop of a fictional architectural firm.

“Creative Heights” is an architectural design firm, which has branches at several locations across the world. They have helped create some of the finest buildings and houses in South East Asia. Click on each figure to learn about the role each of them plays in the office.

The People/Characters:

People, by and large, can be categorized on the basis of their personality traits, their approach to work and how they react to specific situations. For instance, an employee could be very meticulous, careful and organized all the time, while another could be a fire-fighter whose abilities come to fore under pressure or in a crisis situation. Through such characters, the learning material becomes contextual and the learners are able to relate with it.

For this example, let us consider the following characters.

William is the Chief Architect and Senior Partner of Creative Heights. He is a brilliant architect and a very creative designer as well. He is a stickler for time and is very focused on meeting deadlines. Creative Heights has the distinction of completing its projects always on or before time! He is very computer savvy and does a lot of designing using AutoCAD. He is particular about information security.

Jenny has recently been transferred from the Washington branch of the organization and has joined as the administrative assistant. She is madly in love with mythology, especially Roman and Greek. She relates more to Athena and Phoebe than she does to Britney Spears and Jackie Chang! And when she’s on the internet there’s no stopping her! Her responsibilities include maintaining contract files and papers, and assisting William in making presentations for the clients. She, therefore, has access to many confidential files.

Refer to Figure 2 to see how this scenario is used to deliver the specific learning objectives.

Story Line with Key Decision Points

Content Displayed as Feedback

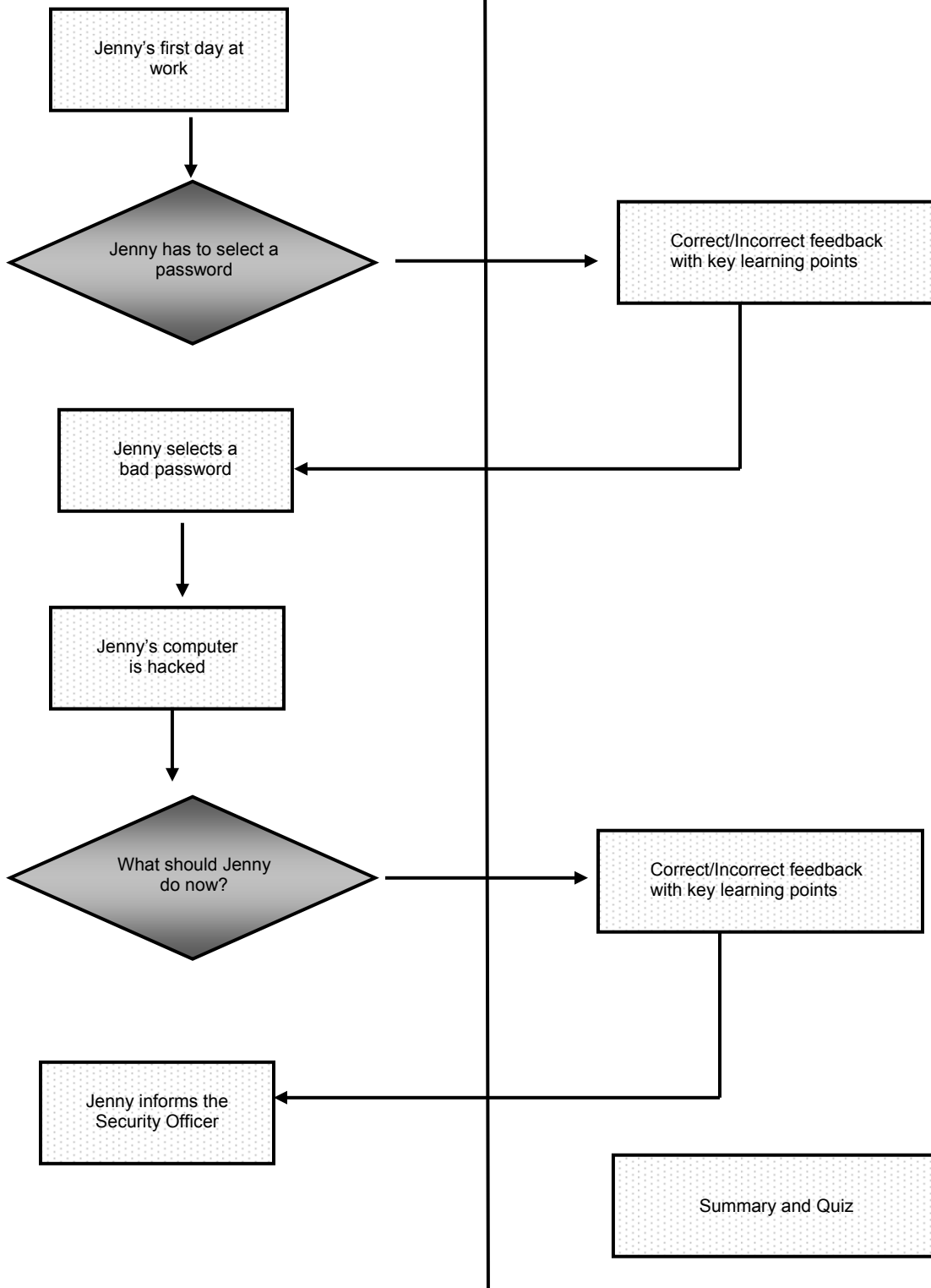


Figure 2: Interactive Story-based learning – An Example

Conclusion

Workplace learning is mostly about stories. Think of the times when a colleague has shared an experience with you; or, the times when you shared an experience with your colleagues. These instances are classic examples of learning transfer in a very (a)effective way. Most learning in the workplace occurs in the context of its people and the situation that they find themselves in at different points in time. It is the response to these situations and the impact of those responses (correct or incorrect), that result in generalizations and learning.

To conclude, use stories to make learning effective and affective in the following situations:

- When you need to address roles that require decision-making.
- When you need to address higher-order thinking skills, such as Analysis and Synthesis.
- When you need to address behaviors and attitudes.
- When you need to disseminate tacit knowledge.

About the Author

Purnima has been working as the Head of Knowledge Platform's instructional design function for the past two years. She has almost nine years of experience in the field of computer-based training and instructional design. In addition, she has also designed and delivered many classroom training programs in Instructional Design.

Purnima has also written papers on instructional design and performance improvement, which have been published and presented in forums such as International Society of Performance Improvement (ISPI), American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) and Brandon Hall.

About Knowledge Platform

Knowledge Platform is one of Asia-Pacific's leading instructional design, e-learning content development and learning technology solutions companies. Established in early 2000, Knowledge Platform has offices in Singapore, Tokyo, Delhi and Islamabad. By providing services such as E-Learning Content, Instructional Design, Training Solutions, and E-Learning Technology Solutions, Knowledge Platform helps its clients to increase their learning efficiency. Knowledge Platform has a rapidly growing, blue chip enterprise, banking, educational, and government sector client base.

The products division of Knowledge Platform specializes in creating generic and proprietary E-Learning products on subjects relating to business processes that enhance operations and reduce risk. The company has demonstrated leadership, subject matter

expertise and service provision in the areas of compliance including information security and privacy, code of conduct and anti-money laundering.

Let Knowledge Platform assist your company in designing and developing scenarios based E-Learning content that ensure that your learning objectives are met. You can reach us at +65 6236 7685.