Types of content

06

We live in an age of science and of abundance. The care and reverence for books... is no longer suited to... the conservation of learning. EZRA POUND, CHAPTER ONE, *ABC OF READING*, 1934

We have explored what it means for something to be a learning technology and have examined briefly the ways in which learning content can be stored and distributed. In this chapter we go on to explore what exactly we mean by learning content, with particular reference to how we source it. The aim of this chapter is not only to describe, however. It is also to suggest a new relationship between L&D and content very different from the traditional one.

First, I aim to describe a landscape in which content is no longer rare. In the words of the American poet Ezra Pound, we live in an age of abundance. L&D can draw on this abundance, using what already exists, rather than recreating it, and so liberate time for other work. Second, with this, I believe that we will come to abandon the 'care and reverence' for content that Pound speaks of. Increasingly the majority of it will come to be seen as transitory. Third, and finally, L&D's focus on (and sometimes obsession with) controlling content will end. In the past it was our *raison d'être*, in the future it will be just one part of a wider role.

When I began as a classroom trainer in the 1980s, L&D's function was largely to deliver training in the classroom to a regular, often annually published, schedule. This situation continued to the early 21st century. The term 'learning content' was never used. There were courses, and books, and even audio or video cassettes for the more forward-thinking trainers. However, with the spread of e-learning, the breadth and variety of media we could learn from multiplied. With that trend came the term 'e-learning content'; eventually the 'e' fell away as terminology caught up with the fact that we have, for a long time, been living in a world with multiple sources of information.

Today, increasingly, 'learning content' is abbreviated to simply 'content', in realization of the fact that, as natural learners, we can and do learn from anything, whether it was produced with the aim of learning in mind or not. 'Content', then, includes courses and reference materials explicitly produced for learning. It also includes books, magazines, e-books, videos, podcasts and broadcasts, anything, in fact, which can be recorded and distributed in some way. A conference presentation may contain useful information to learn from, but it is not content in this sense. However, the slides from the presentation and the video recording definitely are.

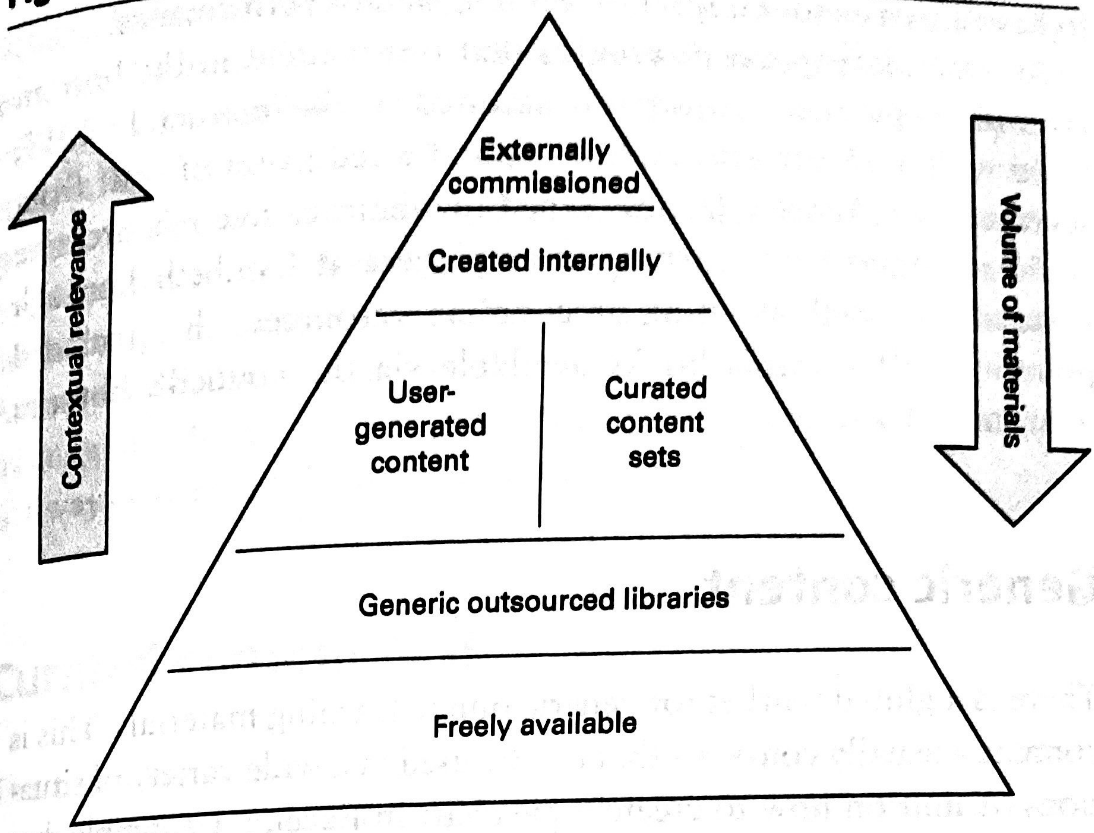
Some learning and development professionals are specialists in producing content for one medium or another – video, say, or e-books – others have a predisposition to using one form over another. As a result, discourse on content tends to focus on the medium and the tools used to produce content for that medium. For this book, though, I will consider content by how it was sourced: where did it come from, and how contextually sensitive is it? This has an important impact on how L&D deals with it, as well as an influence on how it is used with learning technologies.

Thinking about content in this way led me to the 'learning content pyramid' (Taylor, 2013), which drew on a blog by Clive Shepherd (Shepherd, 2008) – itself based on conversations with Nick Shackleton-Jones and others – that suggested three types of content. My 2013 pyramid had five layers, the new version has six. This extra layer includes a recent development where content providers or brokers work with an organization to create 'curated content sets' (Figure 6.1).

The arrow on the left, showing that contextual relevance increases higher up the pyramid, is based on a suggestion by Danish e-learning designer Jakob Gravesen (Gravesen, 2013). The arrow on the right emphasizes the shape of the pyramid, indicating that there is more material available at the bottom than at the top. Usually, although not always, the production values increase as you go further up the pyramid.

From the bottom of the pyramid, the six layers are as follows:

Figure 6.1 The learning content pyramid



Freely available content

This is content available for free, usually via the internet. For L&D professionals the trick is to build this into organizational learning in a helpful way rather than simply pointing people at a vast array of unfiltered resources. This has been happening for some time. In 2013 in the UK, Virgin Media incorporated content from free language-learning site Duolingo into their corporate LMS (LearningTechUK, 2013). Other organizations do this with free content from iTunes U and YouTube, with TED talks proving especially popular. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from suppliers such as Coursera, Udemy and FutureLearn also fall into this layer of the pyramid.

Some content available for free on the internet is of very average production value. Some is exceptionally high – as with Duolingo's courses and BBC content. We should not confuse the quality of production with the quality of learning it will support, however. It is possible to create wonderful-looking courses, performance support tools and other assets which, despite their aesthetic appeal, do not help people learn well. And it is quite possible for an unexciting asset to have a tremendous impact on learning and/or performance.

Another assumption to avoid is that free content in the bottom layer of the pyramid is invariably accessed via the internet. In 2013, faced with a 45 per cent budget cut and a reduction of staff from seven to two, Andrew Jacobs turned to whatever free resources he could to support the learning of employees at Lambeth Borough Council. As well as using free online resources, this included pointing staff towards books available via the council's libraries (Gardner, 2013).

Generic content

There is a global market for generic online learning materials. This is content – usually courses – that can be used in a wide variety of situations. A unit on how to create a pie chart in Excel, for example, has a broad application, regardless of what size or type of organization it is used in. Supply of this generic content is dominated by SkillSoft, a global content company headquartered in Dublin, Ireland, which not only owns a considerable, wide-ranging catalogue of material, but also a content delivery platform and an LMS. After merging with SmartForce (see Chapter 2) in 2002, SkillSoft became the most significant global player in this field, valued at US $1.1 billion in 2010 (Bersin, 2010). While the marketplace for content has become more complex since then, there remains demand for this content and before commissioning a course, L&D must always ask who else might have already produced it. Any large organization is likely at some point to have bought libraries of courses on topics such as Microsoft Excel and Word, as well as generic soft-skills courses such as that perennial favourite 'handling a performance review'.

Generic courses will not put the content in the employee's exact context. Sometimes they may not meet the particular standards of production that the L&D or marketing departments would like, but the question to be asked here is simple: do these materials do the job well enough? If they do, then the L&D team's time can be spent on something more strategic than replicating a course.

There is plenty of generic content produced to high production values. Video Arts, (also see Chapter 2) continues to successfully produce high-quality generic management training materials. And while it is impossible by definition for generic courses to relate to specific activities, they can be written for particular sectors. As the generic marketplace for catalogue content matures and is dominated by large players, vendors have developed courses aimed at particular sectors, or one sector in particular. In both Houston, Texas and Aberdeen, Scotland, there are clusters of companies specializing in training only for the oil and gas industry. Before creating a course, it is always worth checking if it already exists.

Curated content sets

There is a lot of material available online, whether free or in catalogues of generic content (which typically run to tens of thousands of courses). So much so, that a time-poor L&D professional can find it difficult to know where to source content and how to organize it for employees. Recognizing this, some providers of generic learning content are now providing what can be called 'curated content sets'. These are collections of content suitable for a particular role, department or territory within an organization. They are more context-specific than content chosen from a catalogue, because they are usually written with a particular job role or sector in mind. A course might, for example, be titled not 'Creating pivot tables in Excel' but 'Pivot tables for sales managers' or 'Pivot tables in supply chain management'.

Although relatively new as an idea, there is potential for this concept to grow. It makes absolute sense for generic content companies to do this, but there is no reason for this service to be confined to them. In the future, we can expect to see niche organizations doing nothing but providing consultation on the best free and generic content available for a particular specialist area of work.

It is also possible for a company to act as a central clearing house for specialist producers of e-learning content. This is the role that OpenSesame has adopted. Founded in 2011, the Portland, Oregon, company provides the complex infrastructure for publishers to upload content and for enterprises to download them. This can be done either piecemeal, or *en masse*, or as part of a curated content set that an OpenSesame consultant has created following an engagement with the enterprise.

User-generated content (UGC)

At work, people naturally create vast amounts of materials which others can learn from, whether it is explicitly designed for learning or not. It could be as generic as the company's annual report, as transitory as a briefing for the next few days, or as rough as some notes from a meeting.

As well as material created inside the organization, user-generated content (UGC) includes material created in online social forums, such as the extensive chat created during the Learning and Skills Group webinars (LSG, 2016) or during Twitter chat meetings.

While the content itself is not paid for, UGC is not entirely free, either. There may be no upfront cost for access to a catalogue, as there is with generic content, but it certainly takes time (and sometimes money) to set up and maintain the systems for sharing UGC. And there is more than technology involved here – simply collecting content in one place is not enough. Content that is useful in theory is useless in practice if it cannot be found. To allow it to be found, it needs at the very least a good filing system or search mechanism. It may also need interpretation to put the content in context. Also, it is usual for the value of some UGC to decay over time, and at some point it may need to be removed from the collection. The L&D jargon for looking after other people's content is *curation*. The alternative to curation is too often that a collection of UGC becomes bloated and unwieldy and loses its credibility.

Internally created UGC meets the needs of the organization in a way that generic content never can, because it is written in context. The challenge for much UGC is that the context can be too specific. If the author works in marketing, the content might not necessarily apply in finance or operations. If this is the case, then the L&D

department may wish to intervene to edit or otherwise augment the content.

Another concern with UGC lies with its accuracy. An L&D department steeped in the tradition of providing all courses used by an organization will find it difficult to let go of the reins and allow the free flow of information between employees. This is a fair point – after all, repairing the damage done by putting bad practice into circulation is far more time consuming than preventing it getting into circulation it the first place. On the other hand, organizations need rapid distribution of information to meet the demands of the modern working world.

The solution is for the L&D department to take a pragmatic approach to balancing the need for speed against the risk of bad practice. How bad is the risk, and how likely is it? Sometimes, 'good enough' information that reaches the point of need fast is far better than perfectly accurate information that arrives too late to be of any use. If the severity and likelihood of risk are both low, then L&D can step aside.

On other occasions, there is a need to balance speed with accuracy. When Black & Decker (now Stanley Black & Decker) gave their sales force Flip cameras to record videos for colleagues to view, the videos were not immediately posted onto the Black & Decker platform. They went to the central L&D team, which first checked and tagged before posting them (Albright *et al*, 2011).

And sometimes, only 100 per cent accuracy will do. If there is a risk of a severely dangerous outcome, then even if that risk is very low, the L&D function has a duty to ensure that material is thoroughly and expertly vetted before it is disseminated.

Content created internally

Whereas L&D departments were once the main providers of learning content, now internally created materials have to compete with a vast amount of free or low-cost content and UGC. To justify the necessary commitment of resources, any content created internally must relate to the organization in ways that other forms of content cannot.

While it can be beautifully prepared or emotionally engaging, internally generated content need not be. It need only be context-rich, steeped in the reality of the organization, and useful. It may also be that the content is confidential and unique to the organization, in which case L&D certainly should be involved in managing the content distribution.

When power tool manufacturer TTI wanted to improve efficiency in handling returned goods, it produced a clear, online course covering the 10 most common mistakes in handling returned goods. It was not complex to produce. It did, however, generate US $35 million in savings for the company over a two-year period (Infor, 2012). We will learn more about this case study in Chapter 9.

The key for such content is that it should be contextually rich and valuable. The longer a piece of content is likely to be in use, and the more it is seen as representing the values of the organization, the higher the production values it needs. For highly important materials, L&D will typically turn to outside providers for help, and commission the content.

Commissioned content

Organizations cannot always produce what they need, which is why there will always be a place for high-quality commissioned content. The subject may require specialist knowledge. The high-profile nature of the work may demand great production values, or specialist techniques. Those specialist techniques may, however, only have a short shelf life, and if there is no rush for the content, it is always worth waiting for the skills to become more widely spread. When the use of smartphones for accessing content took off in 2013–14 there was a boom in demand for the services of specialist companies capable of producing suitable content for smartphones. In particular, there was a demand for content that could adapt to different devices, and companies were prepared to pay for the expertise to deliver that. Already, at the time of writing (late 2016) those skills are becoming more commonplace both across a wider range of vendors and within L&D departments' own design teams.

This pyramid is only one way of considering the content that organizations use for learning, but it is a tool that I have found useful to help people think about their own approach to learning content. It tends to prompt questions such as:

- Are we spending too much time creating our own content?
- How high do our production values have to be for this content?
- Are we using our internal (non L&D) experts well enough?
- What free resources could we benefit from?
- What is our most important content, and how should it look?
- What sort of content do we need to support this particular task?

It is worth bearing in mind that the shape of the pyramid is a fiction. It the pyramid were drawn to scale, with each layer reflecting the amount of material available, it would not be a pyramid at all. Rather, it would resemble an enormous pancake, perhaps the size of one of the Great Lakes with an insignificant bump in the middle the size of an upturned soup plate. That vast pancake would be the lowest layer – the super-abundant 'freely available' layer of the internet. The soup plate would be the UGC. On top of the soup plate would be a thimble, representing content created or outsourced. The pancake is huge and growing faster than the rest of the pyramid, and this super-abundance of free material is the miracle of the information age, one we regularly ignore, possibly because it is almost incomprehensible.

With so much information available for free, and with vast amounts of UGC created in large organizations, L&D cannot continue to operate on the model that worked when I began as a trainer in the 1980s – focused on creating and delivering courses. Not only is the task impossible for today's fast-moving workplace, it is an ineffective way of building skills and knowledge, and attempting it absorbs the time that L&D could use for other, more effective activity. It is time to move to a different set of skills, a skillset we will examine in more detail in Part Three. This skillset includes a shift from creating content to curating it. It also includes widening L&D's focus to encompass the creation of learning experiences and developing individuals' ability to learn. All this involves adopting new ways of working, something we explore in detail in the next chapter as we consider a range of models of change.

Key takeaways

1. Learning content (or just 'content') has long been a primary concern of organizational L&D. In the past this has meant creating almost all of it. Today there is considerable opportunity for using content from elsewhere.
2. The internet provides a vast repository of freely available materials to learn from.
3. Some vendors have specialized in creating considerable online libraries of generic content, a useful way of training for some tasks.
4. To help organizations find the right content for particular roles, some companies now offer a consulting service to create curated content sets that effectively package sets of third-party content.
5. A great amount of valuable content is created at work that has the benefit of being highly relevant to the context of the organization. Making the most of this UGC is one of the great opportunities and challenges faced by L&D departments today.
6. Creating original content was once the main role of the L&D department. This is such a time-consuming activity that it should only be undertaken when there is no viable alternative. Good reasons for creating content internally include where content is urgent, relates to high-risk issues and/or is confidential.
7. Some content is so important that it is worth commissioning from specialist production houses. This includes in particular 'flagship' content that expresses the values of the organization, or which is likely to have a long shelf life.
8. Although currently focused on the creation or sourcing of content, and on its delivery, in the future, L&D's role is likely to widen considerably.

References

Albright, S, Bailey, M and Walker, D (2011) [accessed 25 November 2016] Next Learning Unwrapped, ...