

## Connect Then Learn

### Description

## Connect Then Learn: Learning, Like the Modern Workplace, Should Be Social and Collaborative

In 1999, Sugata Mitra wrote about conducting his [“Hole in the Wall” experiment](#); a computer was positioned in a kiosk in a wall at child height in a slum neighborhood in Delhi, freely accessible to any children passing by. The aim was to see whether children, irrespective of who or where they are, could learn to use computers and the internet on their own without any formal guidance or teaching. What unfolded was, according to Mitra, astonishing; he claimed that children taught themselves a range of skills from “character mapping” to “DNA replication” without any assistance from an adult.

### Learning ‘Effortlessly’ Together

Mitra and his team had rediscovered the essence of learning: it’s fundamentally a [social and collaborative](#) process, and one that happens naturally—effortlessly, even. The classic example here is how children develop their vocabulary. So what’s going on? It’s simple: They learn from each other, from older kids, from their parents, from books, from TV. They have the motive to learn and communicate with others, they have support from each other, and they have the resources: the world around them. It’s all they need.

### Giving Back Control

What has this got to do with corporate learning? Quite a bit—in particular, how we can unlock the potential that digital learning promises, but rarely delivers. A lot of digital learning, like the formal school system, chooses not to trust people to learn by themselves, but would much rather control what, how, and when they learn. This is odd given that digital learners are often motivated adults (at the very least they want to keep their job, and most would welcome anything that made their working lives easier or paved the way for promotion) surrounded by other highly competent adults they can learn with and from.

So, rather than being a social and collaborative experience, much of the digital learning that businesses offer their employees is a solitary experience: Read this, watch these, recall that. This would be acceptable if evidence showed that it works, but such proof is decidedly thin.

For example, many people reading this will know from experience that most businesses have an

underperforming learning management system, often more than one. This is often explained away as “too much” or “too little” content, or it is “too old-fashioned” or “too quirky,” or “not relevant” enough, or “too hard to find what you want.” All of those things might be true, but a simpler explanation might be that people learn with and from other people, especially those they relate to or feel are on their side.

It’s not that a seemingly effortless learning experience can’t be delivered digitally—the medium is irrelevant—or that an instructor-led approach isn’t without its uses. The example of YouTubers springs to mind; while these “influencers” are not trained instructors, their millions of subscribers effortlessly learn to paint their nails, code software, or get fit for summer. YouTubers’ secret is that they connect at a very human level while offering the skills and insights that help their subscribers meet their personal or professional ambitions, in many ways playing out a “master and apprentice” relationship.

Of course, effortless learning doesn’t mean that some of the content won’t be challenging or tricky to master, but the overall experience is akin to Csíkszentmihályi’s concept of “flow”: it’s immersive, involving, focused, and pleasurable. Josh Bersin’s concept of learning in the flow of work can speak to the same core idea.

## No Pain, No Gain?

Some readers might question the concept of “effortless learning,” saying they sweated through their exams. Indeed, they did, but those are atypical experiences in our lives, forced upon us by schooling systems driven by individual rather than collective attainment. Driven by the motivation to pass and move on, we often learn despite how we are taught than because of how we are taught.

While the best teachers encourage and get the best from us, it remains a system that makes learning solitary and cognitive in character. It’s been said that there’s a word for collaborating in school—cheating.

Thankfully, our working lives aren’t like that; our success, and that of our colleagues, depends on collaboration. The World Economic Forum’s [Future of Jobs Report 2020](#) places collaboration front and center, but corporate learning sends the opposite message: “it’s all about you.” We run psychometrics to help employees discover their individual preferences, give them a personal development plan, and provide them with metrics on how they are doing.

In essence, we are incentivizing learning, and like all incentive plans, we shouldn’t be surprised if the individual begins to focus, if not fixate, on the reward rather than the learning itself. Education researcher and writer Alfie Kohn’s provocative work in *Punished by Rewards: the Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes* (1993) serves as a warning of the unintended consequences of offering rewards for learning. Games and competitions are invaluable, probably essential, components of a richer learning experience that, in the short term, create engagement. But we also need to think through their implications for the learner’s behavior in the longer term as, again, these rewards can re-emphasize the individual experience over that of the wider group.

## Creating Connection Through Learning

Alternatives are possible. Learning is a perfect means to connect people, and digital technology provides the perfect medium. We can run group workshops, run simulations, provide team coaching sessions, and choreograph on-the-job assignments.

We can use digital technology as a way of connecting managers and teams. Adopting the adage that “teams that learn together, perform together,” we can exploit digital’s extraordinary potential to run immersive simulations across national boundaries and time zones, providing the opportunity to rehearse how the team deals with real-life issues and develop their capability as a group, not just individuals.

We can unlock the power of coaching. We can make coaching available to more people providing connection and support, the experience of having someone in their corner.

We can also simply use digital to simply connect people, wherever they are in the world. This is so important because connection is the necessary first step to learning. Students of leadership and management development will know that pioneer Kurt Lewin’s T-Groups started by simply putting a group of engineers in a room and getting them to share their experiences, frustrations, and problems. Lewin, like Mitra watching those kids in Delhi, watched as they learnt effortlessly from each other. We should learn to harness the power of connection better; there’s a lot more we can do with digital learning, than just provide digital learning.

Connection is a key theme explored in Kaplan’s New Hire program. Find out more [here](#).

### **Date Created**

June 2021

### **Author**

drew-teichman