Informal Learning: Lynda.com

Susan Van Alstyne

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Dr. Amerman

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Introduction

Informal learning has taken many forms through the years from mail order courses to online learning, both free and fee-based training such as Kahn Academy and Lynda.com, respectively. The following research will provide a brief history of Lynda.com, the psychology of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the business side of the online learning trend, and the future of informal learning.

Background

The economy of the 1990s was the perfect backdrop for Lynda.com and similar companies to emerge and establish themselves as leaders in the online learning industry. For several reasons, people have always engaged in some form of informal learning. Beato (2015) refers to a 2013 60 minutes interview with Bill Gates showing his collection of over 200 Great Courses DVDs. Beato defines edutainment as the "academization of leisure" where products and experiences that "seek to improve learning" by making learning fun. Many other institutions such as the Smithsonian and National Geographic offer freely available online courses and additional courses with classroom resources or teachers. The author dates informal learning to Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The individual is in control of the learning process with informal learning, as there are no prerequisites or homework associated with watching TED (technology, entertainment, design) lectures, as an example. Today's economy encourages lifelong learners to remain competitive. Informal learning can be voluntary or required as Beato's example in the article how a retirement community has a yearly requirement for residents to complete 450 hours of learning and fitness activities.

History of Lynda.com

Since the company's founding in 1995, Lynda.com upholds its mission "To help you learn the skills you need to achieve your full potential" (Lynda.com, "About Us," 2018). In the

mid-1990s Lynda Weinman, co-founder, was a faculty member at the Art Center College of

Design published her popular book *Designing Web Graphics*. She became a sought-after expert

in the field, and that was the start of Lynda.com (Staff, 2011). With her co-founder Bruce

Heavin, they raised the capital needed after the dot.com crash and decided to implement a

monthly fee subscription model. The current cost is $19.99 for the basic plan and $29.99 a month

for the premium plan. During the beginning years of Lynda.com, YouTube was not available in

addition to many other technologies to support the growth of the business. The Senior Vice

President of Enterprise Learning Solutions (Lynda.com, 2012, 0:56) lists three main reasons for

the success of Lynda.com: people want to learn something new; they want to get better at

something they already know; and to get help such as a virtual helpdesk. Another executive

mention "serendipitous discovery" meaning people go to Lynda.com to learn one skill but see

comprehensive a library full of material and may find something else that piques their interest.

The Lynda.com business model has changed over the last 20 years. Following the success

of the monthly paid subscription model for individual and corporate use, and a pilot launch at the

New York Public Library in 2012, Lyndalibrary, a subscription model for public libraries

launched in 2014 (Enis, 2014). Subscribing libraries pay according to the number of patrons or

population for the area, libraries will negotiate the site licenses and number of users. Patrons of

subscribing public libraries have free access from home. The public libraries realized the need

for the courses for patrons to learn new job skills. The corporate model includes government and

international partners offering Lynda.com to their employees. Lynda.com may have dominated

the market because of the high-quality content of the courses. Lynda.com is always looking for

experts in the field and great communicators – "like a friend," Lynda.com is a customer-focused

company. Students learn by following and duplicating what an instructor in Lynda.com is doing

on the screen Losh (2014). Lynda offers more than 3,900 online courses covering a variety of courses from design to business. The high-quality content and increase of corporate, government and international subscribers led to LinkedIn's acquisition of Lynda.com in 2015 for $1.5 billion.

The Business of Informal Learning

Leisure learning and corporate training are two areas maximizing the use of available technology operating at relatively low cost (Plunkett, 2017). Lynda.com is the leader in the leisure education market where users pay a monthly subscription fee to get access to thousands of online courses. The Great Courses has been offering DVDs and online instruction for years covering lecture from professors on a variety of topics ranging from history to web design. Rosetta Stone is a leading language learning software. "Corporate training and education was a $76 billion market in the U.S. in 2016, and a $160 billion market worldwide, according to Plunkett Research estimates (Plunkett, 2017)." Although many large corporations have their in-house training departments, many decide to outsource their training. For example, Udacity, one of the first Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) has changed their focus from providing college courses to now offering corporate training. Many other companies are offering online learning taking many forms from free webinars to self-paced tutorials, and courses leading to certification or credits. According to the IBIS industry report (Saylor, 2017), there is still a need for the benefits of a traditional university as access to professors and networking with peers, even though online learning is more accessible than ever, there will always be a market demand for the traditional university. The industry outlook prompts further investigation as to why people will engage in informal learning.

Autodidactism

There are several reasons for self-education or autodidacticism. Solomon (2014) asks if the passion to learn start in childhood? The author presents 14 case studies to explore why people engage in informal learning. The researchers discovered four common themes from the case studies: emotional/cognitive balance; learning environment; life mission; and ownership of learning. Recognizing intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is necessary to self-directed learners' motivations to engage in self-directed or informal learning. (Sansone, C. & Harackiewicz, 2000). Extrinsic motivators may include factors outside of the actual learning experience, while intrinsic motivation refers to internal rewards with the learning experience. Sansone & Harackiewicz (2000) mention several studies about the consequences of using reward systems for children while learning. Rewards can hinder intrinsic motivations for learning. The authors present several other studies about motivations; it is important to know if some motivation is purely for the love of learning while others may want to learn for employment purposes or advancement. Maslow's hierarchy of needs of esteem and personal accomplishment (50minutes, 2013) come to mind when trying to understand a user's motivation. Mary (2017) presents three different theories: the achievement motivation theory; the goal setting theory; and the interest theory. The achievement theory of motivation considers the activity's success and value, the individual's need for achievement, and the individual may view the completion of the activity a reward on its own. According to the goal setting theory, the individual must have a result or purpose of their action. The interest theory states people are motivated when they are simply interested in an activity (Mary, 2017). Though the psychology of motivation is beyond the scope of this paper, there are studies to consider for understanding the self-directed learner. McCartney, Boustedt, Eckerdal, Sanders, Thomas, and Zander (2016) present the results of their study of why computing students chose to learn computer subjects independently. The researchers want to

learn the reasons and what subjects the students prefer to learn on their own. Learning this may help with curriculum development and deciding what topics to include in instruction. The researchers held 17 interviews, and their findings of self-directed learners' motivations include the following themes: "projects, social and peer interactions, the joy of learning, and fear" (p.2).

Workplace

Learning in the workplace has taken many forms as well as different motivations both on the part of the organization and the learner. Garrick (2002) explained the "hidden curriculum" of punishment and reward systems in the professional development of staff in the workplace. Interviews with human resource development employees uncover how many see online training as a strategy to save money, while others theorize training is Taylorism under the guise of personal development. Noe, Tews & Michel (2017) research how individual differences and workplace conditions influence informal learning. Terry (2017) concludes organizations must align training with the company's objectives. The key to successful training is to put the learner first and to support an environment of social learning and communities of practice. This recommendation aligns with Dennen & Myers (2012) finding that information learning via online communities of practice is enhanced by learner participation in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter for example. Organizations must recognize and support the difference between formal, structured training and informal learning. Organizations must continually assess the learning that is happening within their organizations though it may be difficult to assess the results of informal learning. "Over 70% of what we learn in life and at work is learned informally and socially (CARA,2010, p.1).

Reward Systems

Completing a course is an accomplishment, and many complete a course for a variety of reasons and with the completion of a course, the learner may want to share the accomplishment depending on the user's motivation. In addition to courses leading to certification or credits in a specific path, badges are also popular. Internal training programs may create badges in addition to sharing completion certification credentials on online profiles such as LinkedIn. Micro-credentialing refers to "mini-degrees" or digital certificates in a specific subject area. Micro-credentialing through blockchain is a new method of recording informal learning or educational accomplishments. (Vander-Ark, 2017). Blockchain technology will automate the recording and sharing of micro-credentials. Blockchain technology will make it easier to share credentials, but blockchain is new in its use in education.

The Internet has made informal learning accessible to all, and the market is still open for more learning opportunities for users with different motivations for learning. The informal learning or education market is growing—evident with LinkedIn's acquisition of Lynda.com. It is too early to assess how the acquisition will influence higher education. Advances in technology, changes in consumer demand, and the job market may provide many more opportunities for the next Lynda.com.

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