Collaboration between Higher Education and Corporate Learning

By Elliott Masie

Colleges and universities enroll approximately 15 million full-time students in the United States. Most of these learners will soon be joining the more than 139 million employees in the U.S. workforce, where their education will continue through corporate education, training, and development. There are many similarities between the learning and technology challenges faced by IT directors at colleges and universities and those faced by their counterparts in corporate education. All are being asked to provide more agility for students and teachers with a rapidly changing technology base, the expanded consumerization of information technology, and more connected, more demanding learners.
It is thus exciting to think about a deeper connection between the IT functions of higher education and the IT functions of corporate learning. Higher education and corporate learning are ideal candidates for ongoing collaboration. Yet these two worlds are almost 99 percent disconnected.

At the MASIE Center, we host The Learning CONSORTIUM (http://www.masie.com/Center-Information/the-learning-consortium.htm), a collaboration of 242 major corporations (e.g., American Express, Google, JetBlue, Wal-Mart) focused on benchmarking, networking, research, and collaborative projects in the learning and training field. These corporations have expressed an interest in expanding digital collaboration with higher education in order to facilitate the following:

- Learning management system interfaces
- Video collaboration between the field and the classroom
- Shared research on learning technology deployment
- Teaching to corporate settings

**Learning Management System Interfaces**
Let’s start by building a bridge between the college and the corporate learning management system (LMS):

Pat is a student graduating from college with a BS in physics. In its LMS, the IT department of the college has a robust summary of Pat’s classes and academic achievements.

**The Good News**: Pat is hired into a field job in a manufacturing company and is ready to go to her first day of work. The company sets up a new record for her in its LMS and, ironically, makes absolutely no mention of her eight semesters of education. Although the interview team read Pat’s transcript and resume, there is no simple interface for this data to become part of her company LMS or talent record.

**The Bad News**: In addition to physics and science courses, Pat took two semesters of Mandarin in college, receiving a grade of A. When it is time for her employer to look for someone to step into a new project being launched in China, this data does not appear in Pat’s corporate LMS record.

**The Solution**: Some organizations are starting to do a more robust entry of transcript data at interview time, but why not build an optional link between Pat’s LMS record from college and the corporate LMS? And the LMS connection can work in both directions. A large number of midcareer students in higher education are attending school with tuition assistance or corporate support. Why not allow a student to share his/her corporate LMS record with the college, either at the point of admission or for use by faculty members?

It would not be difficult to build a permission-based interface between two LMS systems. However, that functionality is not on the radar screen of the LMS providers because the higher education and the corporate worlds are strangely disconnected.

**Video Collaboration between the Field and the Classroom**
Colleges and corporations are ripe to be connected for video collaboration. Corporations are rapidly deploying video chat, videoconferencing, and teleconferencing to connect their employees for ongoing collaboration, especially with distributed, global teams and home-based offices. These video connections can be extended for collaboration with colleges and universities in several ways:

- **Instant Visits to Workplaces**: An English professor might have the ability to do a ten-minute video visit to an editor’s office at a news magazine for a video conversation about editing and copy proofing.
- **Multiple Sages on the Side**: Imagine several low-cost plasma screens positioned around the sides of a classroom, each able to instantly bring a different expert either to take part in a content debate or to work with several students in subgroups.
- **Career Links with Alumni**: What if alumni could add themselves to a list of coaches who are willing to work with students on specific career questions or prepare students for interviews with potential employers?

Sure, faculty members could hook up a PC to Skype and have a video chat with a colleague they know at a corporation, but we are talking about significantly greater access, agility, and teaching flexibility:

- **Video Experts Directory**: A college could maintain a directory of corporate resources who are open to arranged video connections, with links between corporate video systems (Microsoft Lync, Polycom, Google, Cisco, or Skype). A faculty member or student would be able to easily arrange a short video connection.
- **Classroom Technology**: Colleges can evolve their use of webcams to get more of the class on the screen, deploy access to side screens (for “sages on the side”), and give faculty single-button, easy access to video deployment.
- **Record for More**: Corporations are now using video servers to allow for easy recording of segments to be edited or used in their entirety in future
The opportunity for deeper collaboration between the corporate and the college learning worlds can have an impact on the revenue and reach of higher education institutions.

Shared Research on Learning Technology Deployment

In November 2011, I invited Diana Oblinger, President and CEO of EDUCAPE, to be a keynote speaker at Learning 2011, attended by more than 2,000 corporate education leaders. One of our most powerful conversations was about the opportunity for collaboration around research on learning technology deployment. The following are a few of the potential areas for joint investigation by higher education and corporate education:

- Technology Impact: What technologies, when deployed in the classroom, affect learning outcomes for students? Corporate education is leveraging interactive whiteboards, videos, and tablets, for example. It would be fascinating to compare and contrast the use of these technologies and their impacts on learning in the two worlds of higher education and corporate learning.
- Teaching Extended by the LMS: A faculty member has access to Blackboard or Canvas during the planning and delivery of his or her program. How does that influence the teaching and learning in that course? And what skills do teachers need to better utilize LMS data and context?
- Faculty Readiness for Technology: Some technology is quite fun but may not add a single iota of value to the learning process. Other technology will require a good amount of faculty preparation and readiness before it can yield value. What are the two learning worlds finding out about the nature of teacher training and pedagogy when deploying learning technology?
- Learner Visibility to Learning Data: What if we gave learners more access to the data in our learning systems, revealing patterns in both their own performance and that of other students? What if we developed more detailed skill and competency maps—integrating curriculum and career goals—that were updated throughout students’ college careers? And what if we were able to give learners more feedback on the types of informal learning they could/should be pursuing with regard to their specific career aspirations?
- Shared Learning Labs: It would be fascinating to have a series of regional shared learning labs, where IT directors from both the corporate and the higher education worlds could jointly experiment with emerging technological and pedagogical approaches.
- A Working Example: As I am writing this article, my team at work is using our new 3D printer, which has the ability to manufacture small parts from a CAD/CAM drawing. 3D printers are becoming less expensive (approximately $1,200), and the software/visualization process is getting easier. How might 3D printers affect learning? What if a college and a few corporations in its geographical area could experiment with how 3D printing might be used for case studies, creativity enhancement, visualization, and other learning outcomes?

Teaching to Corporate Settings

The opportunity for deeper collaboration between the corporate and the college learning worlds can have an impact on the revenue and reach of higher education institutions. The world of corporate learning is always looking for assets that can add to their site and can facilitate learning experiences for the workforce. Many college faculty members currently augment their salaries with external teaching gigs, but there is a much larger set of opportunities for higher education institutions to reach into the corporate learning marketplace:

- Blended Classrooms: Workforce learning coordinators are not thrilled to enroll employees in one-hour, three-days-per-week classes at a local campus. Doing so involves too much travel for the desired outcome. But by allowing a few learners to attend a class via video connection linked to the corporate video systems, a college becomes a very valuable resource.
- Coaches and Mentors to the Workforce: Corporate settings are rapidly moving to more individualized and less classroom-based learning. There is thus a large need for mentors to work with learners on a “nano-coaching” basis to provide short and targeted video-based advice or feedback. College faculty and graduate students may be ideal resources, aggregated through a digital connection between the corporation and the higher education institution.
- Collaborative, Multi-Site Courses: As organizations become more distributed and global, higher education institutions can offer multi-site courses for corporations. For example, a college
could collaborate with Starbucks to offer a class to students from Starbucks stores in locations ranging from Saratoga Springs, New York, to Beijing, China. A business faculty member at the campus might host the class with colleagues from other colleges, adding unique perspectives. Workplace students from around the world would be collaborating in real time and asynchronously.

**Working and Learning Together**
Collaboration offers an incredible opportunity for both learning worlds. Speaking from the corporate side, The Learning CONSORTIUM is excited by the idea of having a wider set of colleagues who face similar challenges and can help us think outside the box. On a personal level, in addition to being the CEO of my company, I am on the Board of Trustees of Skidmore College. I have developed a strong and collaborative relationship with Skidmore's Chief Technology Officer, Justin Sipher. Almost every other week, one of us will share a new technological or pedagogical idea, and The Learning CONSORTIUM has supported Skidmore's expansion into Internet2 through a major grant. Working and learning together benefits both institutions.

In summary, some of the ways that technology leaders in corporate learning and higher education might work together globally, nationally, and locally could include the following:

- Joint meetings with LMS vendors for digital collaboration between campus and workplace
- Joint research projects on learning technology and efficacy
- Explorations of major learning technology innovations, such as tablet-based textbooks, in both the classroom and the workplace
- Visiting residencies, bringing campus CIOs to corporate headquarters and bringing corporate learning technology leaders to higher education

Learning is truly a lifelong process. Teaching in the digital environment is an evolving skillset. Career-readiness in a changing economy is creating new and significant needs for context and relationship. And, managing technology for learning is a unique and incredibly exciting role. Let's extend the digital and collaborative relationships between the higher education and corporate learning worlds to provide real wins for the learners, the workers, and our institutions.