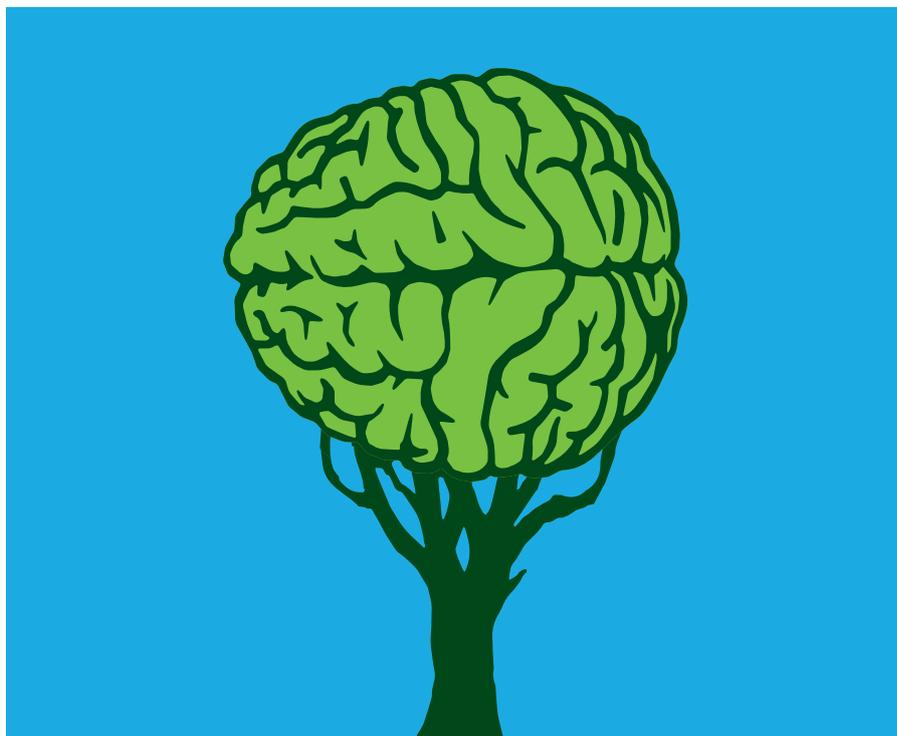


# EVERYTHING IS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE: A DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE

BY CHIRRYL-LEE RYAN



Learning experiences are no longer lessons taught by teachers in classrooms for children or tedious corporate training systems. Like the actor from American TV sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, Angus T Jones, once said, “everything is a learning experience.” A learning experience is any interaction where a person learns something.

Our world is changing faster than ever before, accelerated by the digitisation of everything. Our interactions with the world shape us, and in return, we shape our world. As a result, our expectations shift and we look for new, faster, cheaper, smarter and better ways to satisfy our needs and desires. Intentionally or unintentionally, the result is experience. But what does that mean for future learners?

Design is a term used so frequently it has almost lost its value, whilst at the same time, it is more powerful than ever. Everything man-made is designed, and as complexity increases, design evolves and new applications emerge. Making, crafting and aesthetics (like fashion,

products and graphics) are all valid forms of design - but so too is the application of design for other kinds of problem solving.

Consequently, big business has realised what some have known for years: rather than making things pretty, design is a mindset or way of thinking about solving problems. Design-led companies like Apple, Google and Facebook are setting the benchmark for how design can impact lives, make useful products and tools, build better futures and generate a lot of revenue.

Learning and development, a multi-billion dollar industry straddling everything from secondary education to professional development, is no exception. Like every other industry, learning and development is chasing the tail of disruption. In a world of automation, transformation and skill-churn where learners are more distracted, overwhelmed and impatient than ever, it's no surprise that quality learning experiences are critical to business success.

# Today change can mean swift; shifts in business model, culture and learning. Take IBM for example: did you know they no longer sell computers?

Learning is easier than ever. People have never had so much access to more knowledge and resources. Simply search Google or YouTube for a topic to gain a basic understanding of almost anything, instantly. Organisations like Lynda.com are making the most of shortening attention spans and appetites for instant access via digital platforms built for delivering bite-sized micro-learning experiences.

Education and events have collided, creating a cottage conference industry within learning and development itself. The shift away from tired industry junkets to rockstar speakers, panel discussions and focused specialist workshops has turned conferences into multi-day rock-festival-esque programs, like South by Southwest, where attendees shape the agenda and create their own learning experiences.

Internally, organisations struggle to support their people to keep up with the pace of change. Today change can mean swift; shifts in business model, culture and learning. Take IBM for example: did you know they no longer sell computers?

At the other end of the spectrum, universities and colleges are scrambling to transform their traditional offerings (long term, human-delivered learning formats) and find innovative new ways to entice and engage students. Off-campus, micro degrees and MBAs have become more prevalent as these institutions face drastic government funding cuts and students face skyrocketing fees.

Somewhere in between, the demand for specialist professional courses is increasing, along with fast, flexible delivery and bang for buck. Design-led

learning organisations like Academy Xi, Hyper Island and General Assembly are leading the way, delivering affordable, short-to-mid length courses that produce entry-ready graduates with the design-led mindset desperately desired by big business right now.

## Design Tips

- **Take a learner-centered approach.**

Work with learners to understand their needs and areas of opportunities for innovation - like turning a lack of time for learning into an opportunity for bite-size micro-learning that takes advantage of natural, on-the-go, learn anywhere systems like mobile devices, social media and video.

- **Choose your own experience.** There are many types of learners, learning in many different contexts. To facilitate the kind of trust needed to foster learning that engages and sticks, give learners the foundational tools and materials they need to learn for themselves.

- **Have conversations.** Jargon is a blocker, and successful learning experiences speak the language of the learner. Spark up simple conversations with learners to help them understand the value of continuous learning in their context.

- **Learning by doing.** Learners respond and accept change better by learning on the job for themselves rather than learning by being instructed. Structure learning experiences in a way that learners have to learn for themselves.

- **Celebrate failure.** Nothing teaches better than failure, and learners will gain more from making mistakes than they will from being right every time.

In safe learning environments, set learners up for failure and support them through turning failure into opportunity.

- **Specialists and generalists are both important.** Thinking broadly and having areas of specialisation are only becoming more desirable, and the appetite for cheap, fast and accessible specialist learning isn't going to slow down. This is where partnering with organisations that specialise in this kind of learning can be of great benefit.

- **Foster openness and curiosity.** When everything is a learning experience, nothing is impossible and anything is possible - no matter what anyone says. Encourage learners to keep an open mind and question everything.

It is up to those designing learning experiences to consider the needs of the learner and how to satisfy their fluid expectations. Thinking about the impact of the current learning landscape can help determine what learning experiences will be in the future where learners have the freedom to learn their own way.

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