

Adding value to the Virtual Classroom.

By Ben Johnson September 2020 (with additional material by Geof Cox)



The COVID-19 pandemic has enforced a transformation in the world of learning and development. The virtual classroom, which has existed as a limited delivery mechanism for years, has become standard almost overnight, training in the physical classroom having all but disappeared. In parallel a lot of training content has been put online and is available round the clock and at no charge. There are still a lot of highly ineffective and dull presentations, a simple reproduction of what would have been delivered in the physical class, with no contact and no interaction; there is also a growing body of highly professional and engaging content on an ever-wider range of topics, produced by reputable sources. The objective of this article is not to advertise on their behalf, they are perfectly capable of doing that themselves, but to look at the question of to what extent this high-quality, no-cost, always available training can replace the physical instructor. Will it do to teachers what Amazon is doing to retailers?

To help us put the question into context it is useful to refer to the four levels in the Effort in Learning Model (*Figure 1*). The first is the “I know” level, which requires learning content and being capable of passing a written exam. The more facts that need to be learned and the more complex the topic the harder it is to pass the exam. Nonetheless, this knowledge has little practical use but is the basis for moving up to the next level: “I can do”. This requires physically doing things to transform the

knowledge into concrete actions. In training this is done through graded exercises and simulations which enable the participants to become familiar with the appropriate movements and gestures in a safe environment. If they mess it up there are no consequences, on the contrary, it is part of the learning process. This requires far more effort to do proficiently than “just” assimilating facts. Up to now most professional training has covered these two levels. If a large number of people have needed the training, then the exercises and simulations are standard for reasons of efficiency.

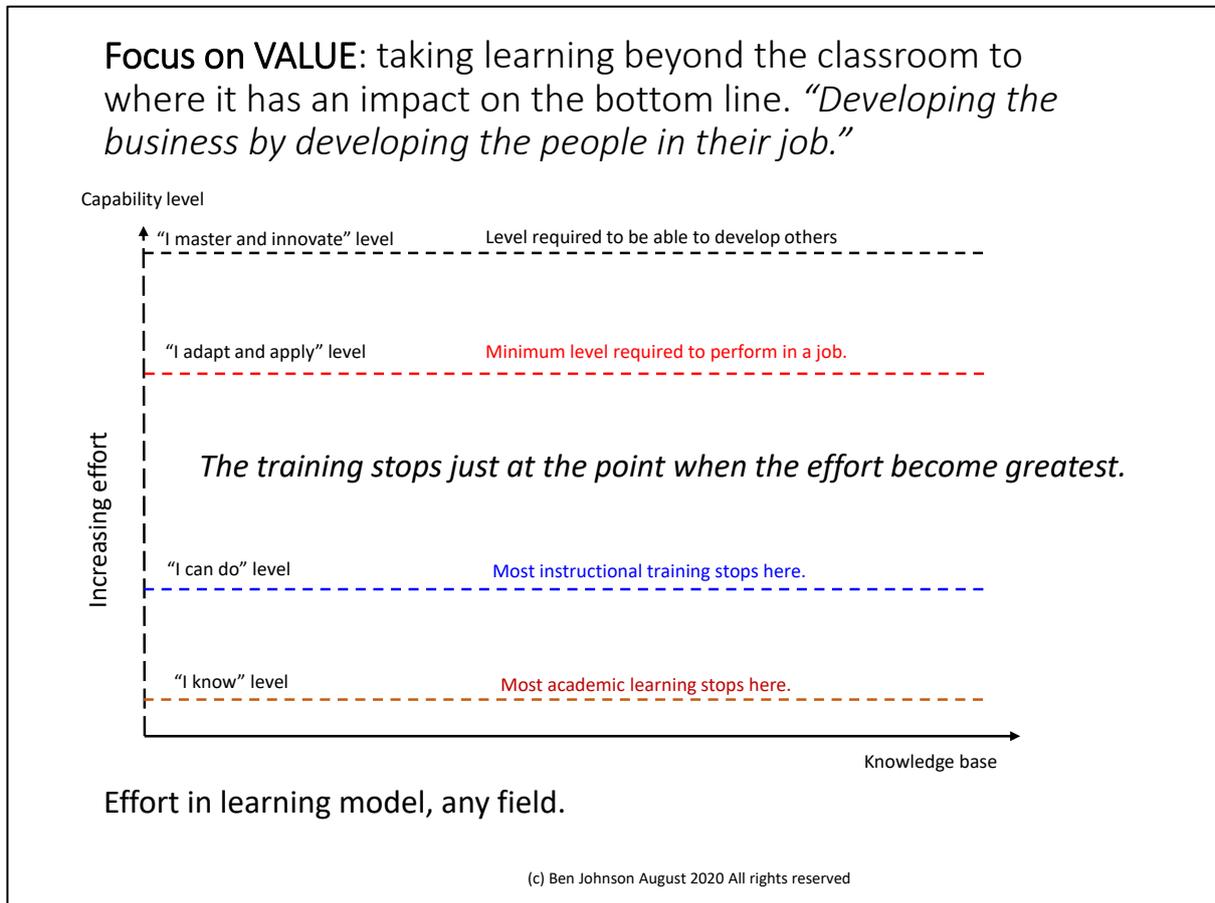


Figure 1: Effort in Learning model

However, for the learner, the real challenge comes in reaching the third level “I adapt and apply”. The basic training up to the “I can do” level is a minimum requirement to get the job, but not enough to earn a salary. The learners are no longer finding the answers to set exercises or working through simulations, they are no longer in a safe environment. They are face to face with reality and if they mess it up the consequences can be disastrous.

This is the step in the learning process, between “I can do” and “I adapt and apply”, where the facilitator can make the biggest, and most valuable contribution, with no competition from free online learning, no matter how well it is designed and delivered.

The advice and guidance of an experienced instructor who has lived through this type of situation on many occasions will make all the difference to how well the knowledge will be applied. Since it is only at this point that the training provides any benefit at all being able to spend time on this is of high value. The role of the instructor is most valuable when helping learners to apply knowledge to real life

situations, how to apply knowledge and continue to learn through work. They now fill the role – which many of us have always done - of learning facilitator or trainer/coach (Figure 2).

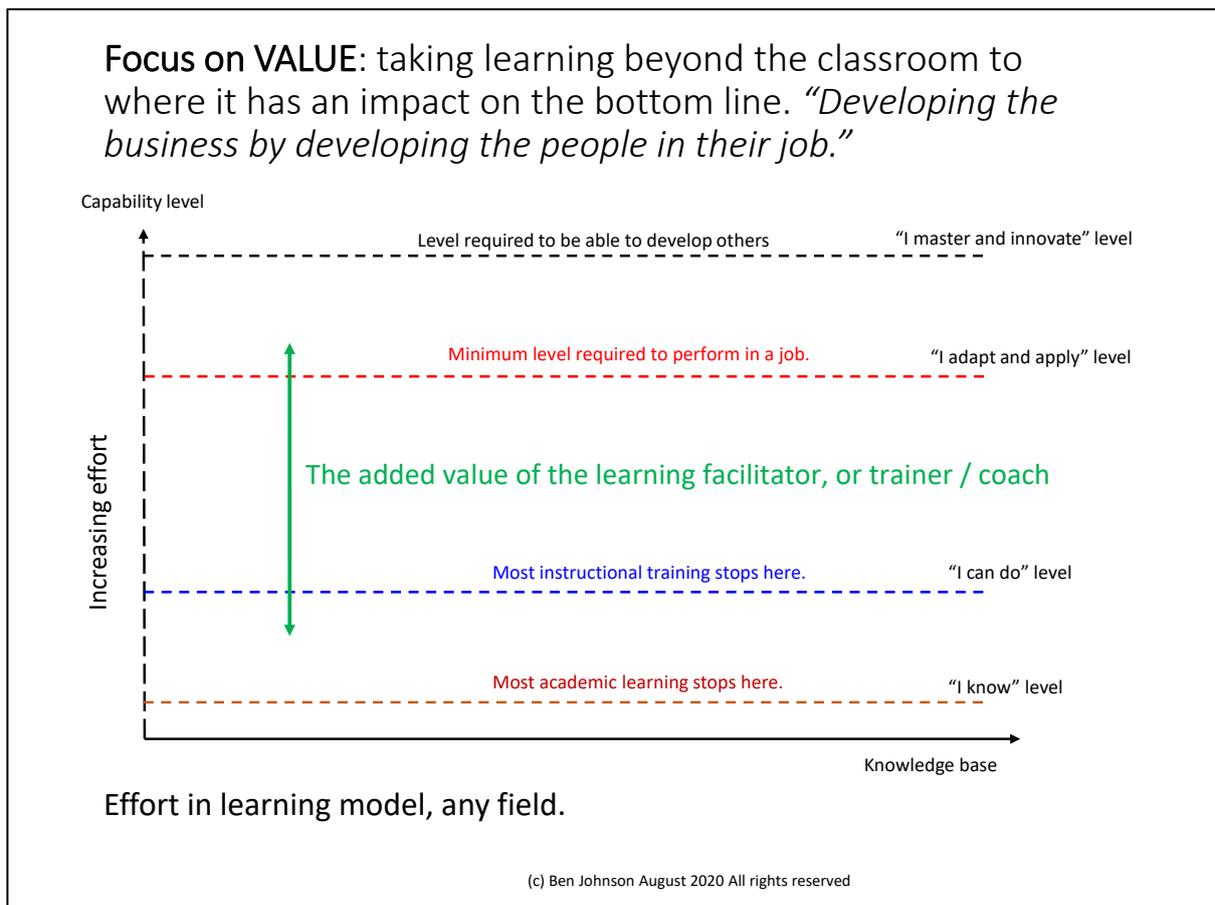


Figure 2. Taking learning beyond the Virtual Classroom

Up to now instructors have been paid essentially for the time they spend in the classroom, this is easy to plan and measure: a three-day course = three days’ pay. Using today’s technology there is the opportunity to spend the same time differently, precisely by making use of the freely available content. Structuring the learning over a longer period of time, building in self-paced modules with exercises, pointing the learners to free webinars, makes available hours that can now be used for the higher added-value work of on-the-job coaching, and setting assignments for action learning without necessarily taking any more time than was spent in the classroom.

As this trend accelerates the instructor will be spending less time preparing slides and more learning about the participants’ reality. Less time delivering content, more time checking participants’ understanding. Less time setting questions, more time working with the participants on finding the answers to the “Yes, but...”. Essentially spending time where most development takes place, as instanced by the research done by Morgan McCall, Michael M. Lombardo and Robert A. Eichinger at Center for Creative Leadership in the commonly used 70/20/10 framework (Figure 3).

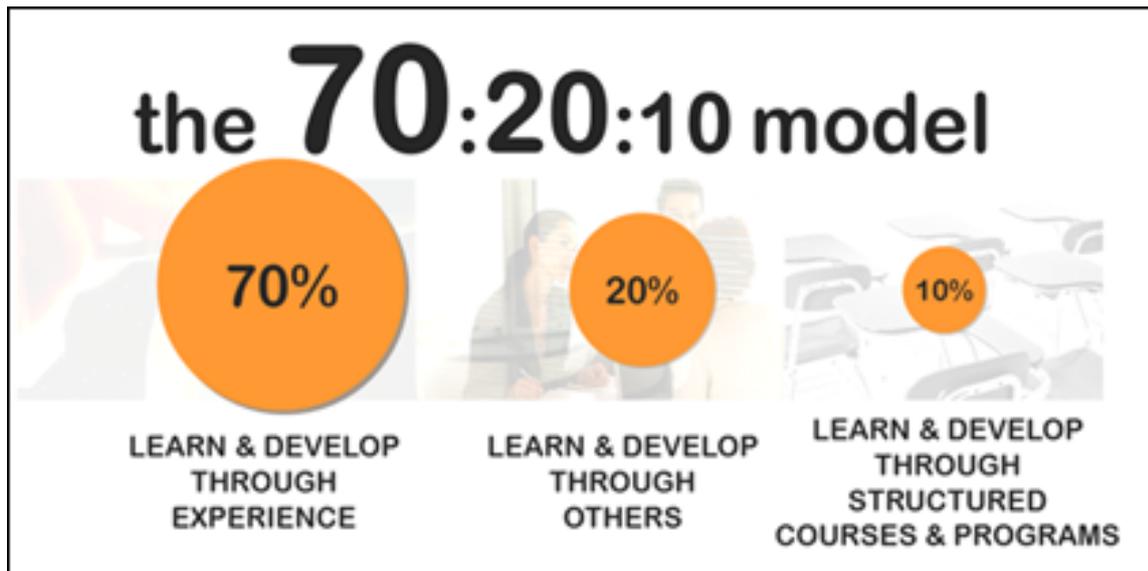


Figure 3: Most learning takes place outside of the classroom

Many of us have probably felt this already and started to adapt. Many more were already working in this space. The COVID-19 pandemic has not created this state of affairs, but has certainly put the foot firmly on the accelerator. It brings up new questions: how is the instructor remunerated fairly in this new world order? How is the value of the instructor-coach measured? But the instructor is still there and has not been wiped out in the collateral damage of COVID-19. By taking on more the role of “learning facilitator”, “reality expert” and “coach” working in partnership with the participants so they apply the knowledge for their benefit, and that of their customers, the “instructor” can confidently delegate the classic classroom teaching role to the best of the free online content.

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