



We are Professionals, Aren't We? What Drives Our Performance?

by Will Thalheimer, PhD

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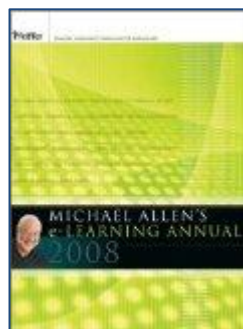
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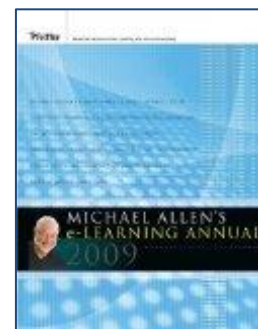
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Will Thalheimer

Will Thalheimer is a learning expert, researcher, instructional designer, business strategist, manager, marketer, speaker, writer, and visionary. Dr. Thalheimer has worked in the learning-and-performance field since 1985. He founded Work-Learning Research in 1998 to bridge the gap between research and practice, to compile research on learning, and to disseminate research findings to help instructional designers, e-learning developers, trainers, and performance consultants build more effective learning-and-performance solutions. His clients have included giant multinationals, e-learning companies, government agencies, and institutions of higher learning. His research and writings have led the field in providing practical research-based recommendations through his online publications (www.work-learning.com/catalog), published articles, and his industry-leading blog (www.willatworklearning.com). Dr. Thalheimer speaks regularly at national and international conferences. His conference presentations always receive numerous evaluation-sheet comments like the following: “This was one of the best presentations I attended—solid information delivered in a style that helped me learn.” Will holds a BA from the Pennsylvania State University, an MBA from Drexel University, and a Ph.D. in educational psychology: human learning and cognition from Columbia University.



We're Professionals, Aren't We?

What Drives Our Performance?

Will Thalheimer

In this article, one of the learning and performance field's leading visionaries looks back on his twenty-two years in the field with both love and regret, while looking forward to the future by challenging all of us in the field who see ourselves as learning-and-performance professionals. Dr. Thalheimer's challenge is simple. He asks every person in the field to understand the forces that control their thinking and influence their decision making. It's as if the author wants to say: the unexamined profession is not worth having.

I started in the “training and development” field in 1985. I was hired right out of grad school as an instructional designer. I had four courses in instructional design, a master's degree in business, and a bachelor's degree in psychology. The only thing I knew as I was looking for a job was that I wanted to build simulations to help people learn. I still remember paging through *Training* magazine, looking at the advertisements, trying to find a good place to enter the field. And then, there it was—an ad for the Strategic Management Group, Inc., “world leaders in business simulation.” Perfect, I thought. I could combine my MBA with my instructional-design background. Where were they located? Unbelievable, just four blocks from my apartment in West Philadelphia. The very next day, I put on my best business suit—my only business suit, the one

my dad had helped me buy at Brooks Brothers—and I walked four blocks into the training field.

It's twenty-two years later, and I've begun to realize how little impact I've had on the field—even though I set out to make big changes in 1998 when I founded my research and consulting practice, Work-Learning Research. I had decided to start Work-Learning Research when I noticed how our field tended to jump from one fad to another and hang on sanctimoniously to learning methods that didn't work. My diagnosis at the time? We had no anchoring principles to guide us. We didn't have a common body of knowledge that we could rely on to be valid and reliable. My thought—which I now realize was gonzo naïve—was that I could help move the field toward professionalism by compiling the learning research from the world's best refereed journals and by sharing

that research through my work and writings. I was then, and probably am now, a complete idiot for believing in the power of good information. It takes more than that. Much more.

This chapter will explore the history of our field through my eyes—my cynical eye and my optimistic eye.

The Most Obvious Changes

Let me get the most obvious changes out of the way quickly. I'm just going

to list them here, mostly so that you don't think I spent the last twenty-two years as a dentist or forklift operator.

- What we called the “training-and-development field” has morphed into the “learning-and-performance field.” Today, everybody knows that training must be designed to get business results, whereas in 1985 there was much less of that mentality. The evidence: ISPI changed the name of its magazine from *Performance and Instruction to Performance Improvement*. ISPI began offering a certificate in performance technology in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Both ISPI and ASTD now offer certifications that focus on getting business results, ISPI's CPT (Certified Performance Technologist) and ASTD's CPLP (Certified Professional in Learning and Performance).
- Technology for learning has changed radically: where lean-media computer-based training was at the forefront in 1985, today m-learning, e-learning, blogs, and wikis are out on the bleeding edge. The world is connected via the Internet and wireless technologies. The evidence: the articles and advertisements in our trade magazines in 1985 focused on CBT, audiovisual equipment, and the like. Today's media highlight e-learning and the other Internet-based technologies, along with authoring tools that go far beyond the authoring tools of 1985.
- Where training folks hardly had to worry about the legal department in 1985, today a whole new industry has arisen around the area of compliance training. The evidence: one of the most sought after educational degrees for HR directors today is the law degree. There are now industry organizations devoted solely to compliance issues and a high percentage of the vendors exhibiting at their conferences are training companies.
- For large companies, training often has global requirements, and companies must deal with the

inherent logistical and learning difficulties surrounding those issues. The evidence: globalization is a big theme in the popular press now, but was barely mentioned in 1985. Indian companies are snatching up U.S.-based training companies like crazy. In 1985, nobody in the industry even thought of India. Now almost every large company has a significant cohort of employees working internationally.

- We moved from a lecture model of training to a more “learning-centered” model of training. Malcolm Knowles’ revolution around the notion of the adult learner was just beginning to bubble up in 1985. Cognitive psychology hadn’t really made inroads into training practice in the 1980s, and constructivism and the notion that learners build their own memory structures only gathered traction with learning researchers in the 1990s. The evidence: today, “learner-centric” is a big buzzword. Instructional designers are taught to trust their learners—not always a good idea, by the way. Wiki’s and other group-knowledge-creation mechanisms are widely touted to be superior to older expert-driven top-down approaches.

So now that I’ve gotten the obvious stuff out of the way, I want to explore the critical levers that control the direction of our field. I’m going to blend some of the obvious stuff into the mix, but will reveal some other critical factors as well.

What Drives Our Performance?

Thinking drives performance. It drives the performance of our learners and

it drives our performance as learning-and-performance professionals. The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the processes we typically work in.

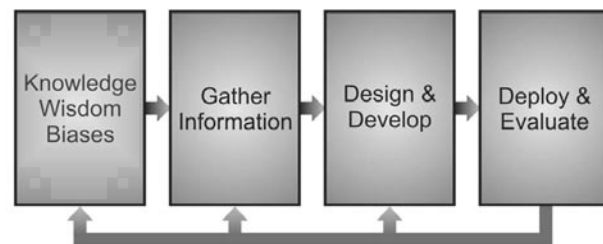


Figure 1. The Instructional Design Processes

We bring our knowledge, wisdom, and biases to our work. These drive everything else we do because they control our thinking. They impact the information we notice and gather. They restrain our design and development work. They dictate how we deploy our solutions and how we evaluate our work. It is our knowledge, wisdom, and biases that enable us to

do our jobs, while constraining our horizons and our success.

Let's call our "knowledge, wisdom, and biases" our "thought blocks," to give them a useable label and two connotations—one as our building blocks and one as the blocks that wall in our vision, thinking, and action. You'll notice in Figure 1 how these thought blocks dictate the rest of the instructional-design process.

If our thought blocks control our output as professionals, then it's pretty obvious that if our thought blocks can be changed, our performance can be changed. So one of the most important questions then becomes: What controls our thought blocks? Or as I put it more colloquially in the title, "*What drives our performance*" as instructional professionals?

The rest of this article will outline the most powerful forces that control the decisions we make as members of the field. If we understand these forces, we are more likely to free ourselves from the shackles they impose. We're also more likely to get disgusted enough to help make them better.

1. Our Educational

Preparation Our educational background affects our thought blocks in a big way. Unfortunately, many of our schools of instructional

design teach inflexible procedures and encourage students to believe that there is one right way. This type of chicanery is anathema to a thinking profession. What we need instead are learning-and-performance professionals who can think critically about the myriad of variables that affect productivity and performance. We need folks who can evaluate refereed research with diligence and skepticism, who can view a vendor's presentation and see where the truth lies and know where the lies begin, who know they can't rely only on the fragile tools they were given in school but must also keep learning so they can deepen their wisdom.

There is no evidence that the schooling of our profession has changed much. If anything, our learning-and-performance schools have become more monolithic and practice-based. I know of a few executives at instructional-development companies who refuse to hire graduates of instructional-design programs because those graduates are too rigid, they lack mental flexibility, and they don't have enough deep knowledge of learning to make intelligent instructional-design tradeoffs. Fewer and fewer students are learning the tools of the scientist-practitioner. This doesn't mean that they should be doing science, but they

ought to know how to think in the critical manner of a person versed in science.

2. Our Impoverished

Feedback Loops There are basically two sources of information that can be brought to bear on any project, (a) the information we bring the project (our thought blocks) and (b) the information we learn from doing the project (our feedback loops). I'm highly skeptical about our thought blocks, but I'm even more skeptical about our feedback loops. The fact is that we receive very little valid feedback about how we're doing as learning-and-performance professionals. As evidenced in ASTD and other annual reports of our industry, more than 75 percent of companies rely most heavily on Level 1 smile sheets—learner ratings of instruction. Unfortunately, these smile sheets are not predictive of learning or on-the-job performance, having correlations that are very weak (for those of you who are statistically inclined, correlations (r) are typically less than .2) (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver, & Shotland, 1997).

Our measures of learning tend to be biased to the measurable, not the authentic, and are additionally biased toward good results because the

Level 2 assessments we do are done at the end of the learning event in the same context as the learning event. Measuring learning when it is top-of-mind in situations that provide unfair hints is a completely bogus enterprise. (See Thalheimer, 2007, for a complete explanation of these measurement biases.) These flaws make most Level 2 evaluations worthless at best—and deceptive in our favor, at worst. Most companies do very little assessment of the on-the-job performance (Level 3) or of the business results (Levels 4 and 5). So the truth is that we don't receive very good feedback about whether our learning interventions have improved learning, performance, or business results.

This situation hasn't changed at all since 1985, even though ROI, metrics, learning analytics, and Kirkpatrick's four levels are a mainstay in our conference sessions, books, and articles. Our impoverished feedback loops leave us in the dark. We simply don't receive good enough feedback to improve our performance. We can have all the common sense in the world, we can have forty years of experience, we can hire our field's best experts, but if all of this common sense and experience has been burnished in a dark caldron with poor feedback, then it's a pretty

dubious knowledge base we're talking about. And good research only helps a little in this regard. Research tends to focus on general situations, not specific ones. So, although it is a good guide, we still ought to be testing our solutions and obtaining feedback from our specific situations.

3. Our Freakin' Arrogance in Light of the Darkness

Despite the dark fog we work in—or maybe because of it—many of us have an unrelenting arrogance that we have all the answers. How many claims have you heard like these?

- Learning objectives should not include the word “understand.”
- All our courses should be moved to e-learning.
- Feedback should be given immediately.
- Instructional design is irrelevant.
- The first step of instruction is to gain learner attention.
- Instructional designs must account for learning styles.

All of these statements are false, misleading, or are gross oversimplifications that lead to bad learning design—and yet many instructional professionals will look you in the eye with a holy passion and claim their universal truth.

Arrogance is one thing. Arrogance from ignorance simply cannot be tolerated in a profession as important as ours. Arrogance leads to blindness and bad results. If you're arrogant, you don't listen, you don't challenge your long-held paradigms, you don't learn. As professionals devoted to learning, the irony that our arrogance impairs our learning is just too grating to tolerate.

Our overall level of arrogance has not changed much since 1985. We're still bloody arrogant. But the forces that drive our arrogance are a bit different. Today, with so much more information available—the almost cacophonous deluge of information from the Internet, from our vendors, and from the increasing number of books published each year—there are more sources of information to challenge our mental fortresses. On the other hand, the increasing marketplace competition and drive for the bottom line has made it increasingly difficult for us to have time to reflect on our practices. These forces seem to have cancelled each other out.

4. Trade Organizations, Conferences, and Magazines

Trade organizations seem like benevolent creatures. Ideally, they provide the field with good information, enable

collaboration between members, and support interactions between buyers and sellers. Unfortunately, most of the trade organizations in our field have not reached the ideal. In the United States, ASTD is the largest organization, with annual revenues above \$28 million. All the other trade organizations are small by comparison. ISPI brings in about \$2 million in revenue. Other organizations are private and so their financials are private. These include The Masie Center, the eLearning Guild, Nielsen Business Media (publishers of *Training* magazine), and CLO Media (publishers of *Chief Learning Officer* magazine).

What all of these enterprises have in common is that they have to raise funds to stay in business. Thus, the most critical incentives for these organizations rest in their ability to bring in money through membership fees, sales of books and periodicals, sales of educational materials, conference admission fees, credentialing fees, and workshop fees. So these trade organizations have a tendency to emphasize information that sells, to the detriment of information that is proven, time-tested, and true.

There are more magazines, more conferences, more books, and more trade associations to choose among

than there were in 1985. The increased competition has already improved the quality of the information being exchanged, at least to some extent. For example, the eLearning Guild now goes to great lengths to ensure that vendors don't control the information that is conveyed. The increasing competition enables niche branding opportunities. So ASTD has become the mainstream vanilla provider, ISPI is the rigorous provider, Masie provides the new and high-tech, the eLearning Guild provides the e-learning community with opportunities to learn from each other, and CLO caters to learning executives and the vendors who chase them.

The business models of these organizations force them to rely on volunteer speakers, writers, and collaborators. Because it takes a substantial effort to prepare a conference presentation, write a book or article, or share some other form of intellectual property, trade-organization volunteers come mostly from those who need to gain visibility to survive as commercial entities.

5. Consultants and Vendors

Consultants and vendors need sales to survive. To get sales, they need to let buyers know they exist. They can do this through advertisements, personal networking, and visibility. Visibility

is available in our industry at reduced dollar cost but increased cost of time and effort. Consultants and vendors make themselves visible by writing articles for trade magazines, writing

The pressure to be visible is a crushing weight on consultants and vendors.

books, and speaking at conferences.

Sometimes they can be paid for these efforts, but

usually they have to write or speak for free. The pressure to be visible is a crushing weight on consultants and vendors; thus they are the ones most likely to endure the proposal-writing, session-development process. Most of our conference sessions are developed with the expressed purpose of making a sale. Even if the presenter doesn't seem to be trying to sell him/herself or a product, almost certainly that is a large part of the intention and the design.

Sometimes consultants and vendors even have to pay to speak. Conference proposals are accepted at a rate of about 10 to 20 percent. Thus, many who want to speak are denied. Many conferences offer paid exhibitors speaking slots, asking as much as \$30,000 for the privilege.

Consultants in particular have a great incentive to write books and articles. Again, this kind of pressure increases the likelihood that the messages we receive will be tainted

by their commercial interests, not necessarily by the truth or certainty of the ideas presented.

The needs of consultants and vendors never change. To maintain their status, they have to find ways to maintain their visibility. This will never change, and certainly hasn't changed much since 1985. What is different is that there are more potential buyers now, more trade organizations, and more consultants and vendors. Having more sources of information will tend, in the long run, to improve the best information that is communicated, while simultaneously making it difficult for members of our profession to determine which information is good and which is faulty.

6. Learning Research In refereed journals such as *Cognition & Instruction*, *Educational Psychology*, and the *Journal of Applied Psychology* there is a wealth of knowledge that might inform our practices as learning-and-performance professionals. Unfortunately, the researchers who do the research don't have the time, the incentives, or the capability to take their research and make it directly usable for practitioners. There are hardly any research-to-practice translators—only Ruth Clark and I attempt to do this

full time. Moreover, practitioners have been so ill-prepared to be consumers of research-based information that attempts at translation tend to fall on deaf ears or be misunderstood.

Compounding these problems is the lack of extrinsic incentives for practitioners to build more effective learning-and-performance interventions. Most of us want to do good work, but very few of us have to build effective learning interventions. Since we don't really need to, we don't go the extra mile to parse the sources of information that might help us—sources like the learning research or the translated versions of that research.

7. Industry Research When learning-and-performance professionals have to persuade their organizations to adopt a certain learning approach, the evidence that carries the most weight is industry research and benchmarking against other organizations. The thinking goes something like this. “If Nabisco, Wal-Mart, and Raytheon are using such-and-such, it must be a proven learning method.” Unfortunately, the logic doesn't make sense. Just because another company is using a particular learning method—even if they're happy about it—doesn't mean that it's going to be the right method

for a second company. It doesn't mean the benchmarked company did enough due diligence in the first place. It doesn't mean the benchmarked company did the right kind of evaluation to prove its effectiveness.

But what about research that has been done on a wide swath of companies? For example, surveys of two hundred companies or so. Unfortunately, most of this research is seriously flawed, surveying the opinions of one or two people in a company, drawing from a sample of the willing, not a representative sample of the industry. Year-to-year data tends to represent a new sample of respondents, making year-to-year comparisons suspect at best. Regardless of whether this type of research is done in our largest trade organizations or through private research companies, the information is seriously flawed and tends to represent mediocre practice,

not leading-edge, state-of-the-art thinking.

Since 1985, more and more so-called “research reports” have

been promulgated in our industry. Unfortunately, when we pay attention to these, we utilize valuable time that could be better spent mulling

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over better information. When we make decisions based on this flawed information, we do ourselves, our organizations, and our learners grievous damage.

8. Contests, Awards, Best-of Lists, and Other Forms of

Thought Control Finally, I must add a section on contests, awards, best-of lists, and other attention-grabbing devices. Each of these devices has four main characteristics: (1) they simplify reality, (2) they grab attention, (3) they distort the truth, and (4) they are designed to make someone a buck. In doing all these things, they control what we think. For example, contests of rapid-learning tools are great theater, but poor instructional design—especially since the metric is time-to-develop not effectiveness of design. e-Learning awards typically ask mediocre volunteer judges to pick from entries submitted using non-interactive video. Submissions are only accepted from companies that can afford to pay a hefty entrance fee. Gold medal winners typically have produced flashy products with new technological or visual innovations, but learning effectiveness does not seem to separate gold medal winners from the also-rans. Best-of lists can utilize the wrong metrics, for example,

the number of dollars spent on training. Or worse, best-of lists can simply be a list of an organization's best clients. More than one website in our field produces bogus best-of lists based on the amount of money their advertisers have paid in fees.

What This All Means

For the last twenty years or more, hundreds of millions of employees have

managed their way through learning-and-performance interventions that we have designed, developed, and deployed. They have certainly received great benefits from our work. But while we gave them some small seeds of knowledge and inspiration, we failed to give them deeper roots of knowledge, wisdom, and competence.

While providing value, we have failed to live up to our potential as an industry and as individual professionals in that industry. Much of this is not fully in our control. It is shaped by forces in our industry that capture large shares of our minds, overload the capacity of our working memories to focus on more important things, and make it impossible for us to make good decisions about our craft.

To briefly recap the failings of our industry:

1. Our graduate schools prepare technicians, not thoughtful scientist-practitioners who understand learning, think critically, and build wisdom over time.
2. We don't measure the outcome of our work in ways that enable us to build effective feedback loops and make improvements that will lead to better learning, on-the-job performance, and business results.
3. The work pressures we face (for example, Internet-induced information overload and business demands for cheaper, faster results)—combined with our tendency toward professional arrogance—don't predispose us to keep learning, to test our conjectures, to build a rich and complex knowledge base over time.
4. Our trade associations, magazines, and conferences provide us with information that sells, not information that necessarily tells the truth of how we should better design our products and services.
5. Our consultants and vendors are a large source of our information, and we tend to think uncritically about their offerings.

6. Learning-and-performance research is not utilized when it might provide substantial benefits.
7. Industry research is severely flawed, but we rely on it anyway.
8. Contests, awards, and best-of lists grab our attention and distort our thinking about what is most important.

Is There Hope for the Future?

Maybe the wasteland of the profession I've described is the way all

professions operate—with imperfect information and a maddening competition for the limited working-memory capacities of its professionals. Maybe in the next twenty-five years, nothing much will change in our field.

On the other hand, professions do change. Doctors used to use leeches and snake oil. Fisherman used to kill porpoises while netting tuna. Clothiers used to rely on sweatshops. Painters used to use lead paint. Professional basketball players used to use teamwork. Democracies used to act as governments of the people, by the people, and for the people.

I believe our profession can change for the better. If I didn't believe this, I'd get the hell out and find another vocation.

But enough about me. Are there any signs that things might change for the better? I'm pretty sure there are omens that are already signaling a change.

Here's the list:

1. In the medical profession, a set of practices under the rubric "evidence-based medicine" is sweeping the field.
2. In the K-12 education field, it has become a regulatory requirement to prove the effectiveness of learning interventions.
3. In the management field, people are beginning to talk about evidence-based management.
4. In our own field, research-based information—when it is presented with practical wisdom—clearly resonates with professionals. Business leaders like "e-learning guru" Kevin Kruse are taking the evidence-based training message to the marketplace.
5. New software is enabling training to be managed from training deployment all the way through to on-the-job implementation,

and new books are coming out suggesting that measuring our results is a critical discipline for training.

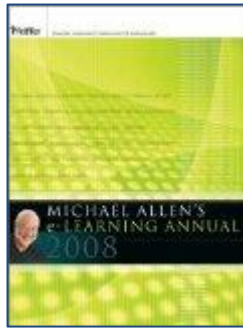
6. Compliance training's reliance on course completion is coming to be seen as the joke that it is.
7. New laws (for example, California's Law AB 1825) are being written that require effective training practices.
8. More and more learning vendors are including evaluations in their project proposals and contemplating ways to provide themselves with performance feedback to build cycles of continuous improvement.

Am I hopeful? You bet. But I also worry that we're just not doing enough. I encourage you to get your ass in gear. We need an army of soldiers to win this war.

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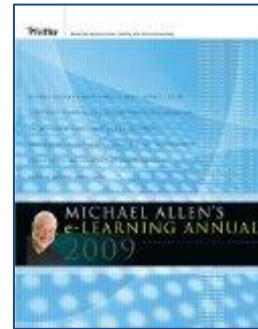
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