

# CONTENT, PRACTICE, AND CREDENTIALS

BUILDING A VIRTUOUS  
LEARNING CYCLE



*sponsored by*



# Content, Practice, and Credentials: Building a Virtuous Learning Cycle

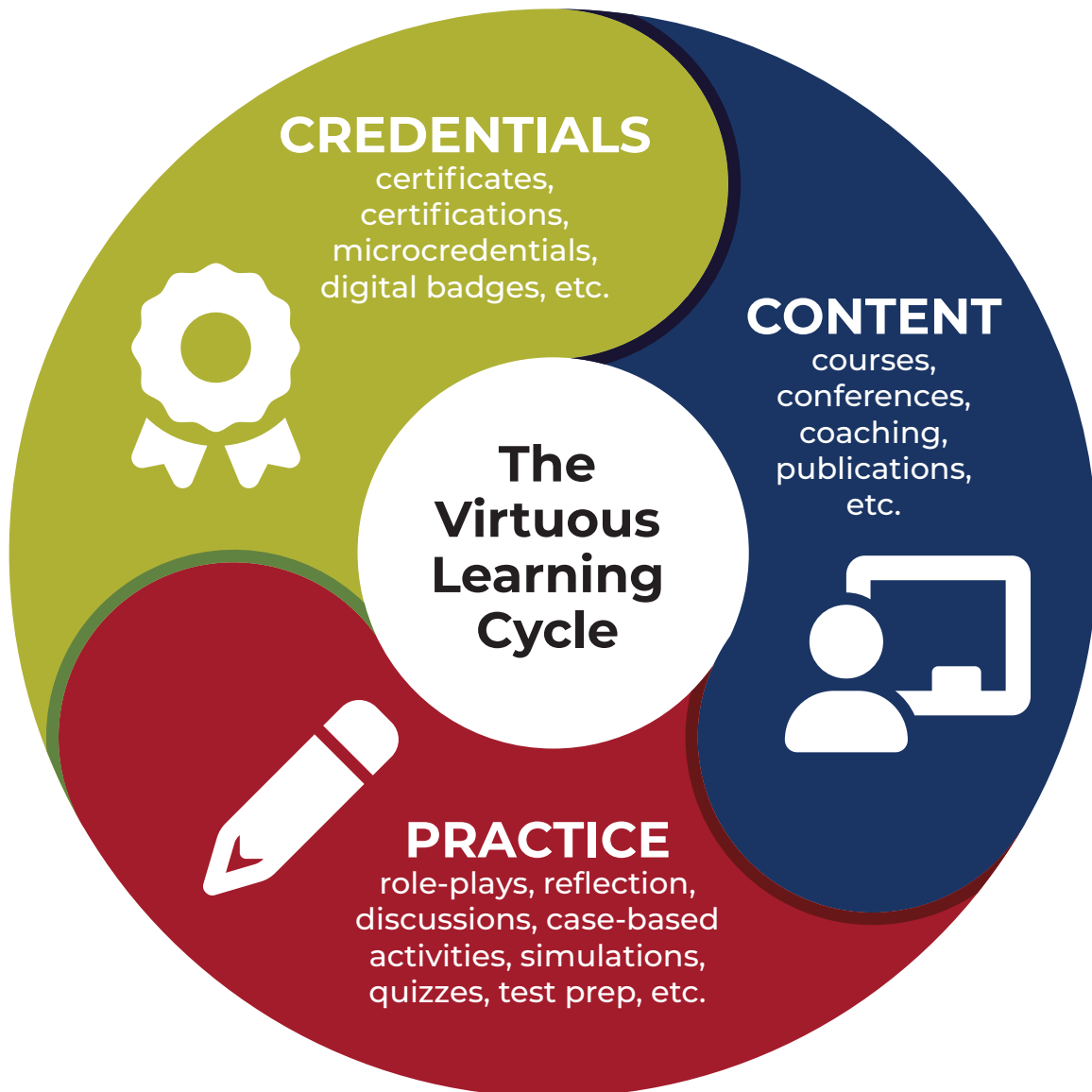
by Celisa Steele and Jeff Cobb

Learning is a process, not an event—and that process is rarely linear.

You can support learning's recurring nature and strengthen its outcomes by connecting content with practice and validation, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits both your learning business and your learners.

## What Is a Virtuous Cycle?

A virtuous cycle is a recurring chain of events that reinforce themselves through a feedback loop. The result is that each part of the cycle increases the benefits of other parts. Simple but versatile, virtuous cycles have been used to visualize everything from complex macroeconomics to product-specific marketing tactics. A virtuous cycle can also help us better understand how learning happens and the value learners and other stakeholders perceive in learning.



Learning content—courses, conferences, coaching, publications, and other learning resources and experiences—becomes more durable and more likely to be retained by learners when combined with the opportunity to practice and apply skills and knowledge.

In turn, when learners practice—participating in role-plays, reflection, discussions, case- and problem-based activities, simulations, quizzes, test prep, and more—they can uncover areas where they need more content to better understand concepts and how to apply them to their specific situations.

The combination of content and practice pave the way to achievement, very often acknowledged through some form of credential. Credentials range from simple course completions to capstone research projects to assessment-driven certification to quantifiable improvements in the learners' work. While credentials look to the past and what has been accomplished, they also point forward to new opportunities:

- **More content**  
A learner might unlock access to more advanced courses after completing the prerequisite introductory course in a topic.
- **More practice**  
An individual just awarded a certification might be allowed to undertake new on-the-job responsibilities.
- **More credentials**  
Someone who has earned a microcredential might be motivated to pursue three more that, when stacked, constitute a certificate.

If you offer content, then expanding into practice or credentials makes logical, ethical, and business sense. Let's explore how.

### What is a **learning business**?

First, a **learning business exists to generate revenue** through selling learning and education experiences to a target audience.

Second, the **individuals working in the learning business recognize that revenue generation is a fundamental reason for the organization's existence**. That is, they are conscious of and focused on that goal as part of the organization's identity and part of their own identity. This second aspect is important because it distinguishes learning businesses not just by their activities but also by their mindset.

## Retention and Improvement Rely on Practice

Most learning designers tout the importance of practice philosophically. They know practice is the key to combating forgetting. But, in practice, practice is frequently short-changed—or entirely ignored. All too often, practice is considered the lone responsibility of the learners.

Practice is the learners' responsibility. But leaving the responsibility for practice entirely to learners produces inferior results. The individual learners benefit less, and the learning business misses a chance to understand the real-world challenges and opportunities facing the learners it serves. Taking the time and energy to scaffold practice is worth the effort.

Not all practice is equal. Psychologist Anders Ericsson observed that two people putting in the same amount of time to acquire knowledge or a skill may have dramatically different results. One might master the skill or knowledge while the other makes mediocre—or worse—progress. For practice to be effective, you need both quantity and quality.

While much could be—and has been—written about practice, we'll focus here on three qualities that go into supporting good, effective practice.

- **Spaced repetition**

Spaced repetition (also called distributed practice or spaced practice) involves breaking practice into more and shorter sessions over a longer time than massed practice, which consists of fewer, longer sessions.

The classic example of massed practice is cramming for an exam the night before. Spaced practice spreads the review and preparation for the exam out over the weeks leading up to the exam—and it's more effective. "Durable learning...requires time for mental rehearsal and the other processes of consolidation," the authors of *Make It Stick* explain. "Hence, spaced learning works better. The increased effort required to retrieve the learning after a little forgetting has the effect of retriggering consolidation, further strengthening memory." (*Make It Stick* is a resource we highly recommend for a research-based look at what is known about effective learning. The authors devote many pages to the topic of practice.)

Spaced repetition combined with reflection and a focus on continuous improvement that stretches the learner beyond existing skill and ability makes for effective learning.

- **Real-world application**

The closer the practice hews to real-world situations, the more effective it will be. That sounds commonsensical, but often practice artificially isolates pieces of knowledge or subskills. It's common for language learners, for example, to be taught and then asked to practice a single verb tense. In reality, most conversations don't involve a single verb tense. Speakers shift between multiple tenses, even in a short and simple conversation.

Instead of isolating knowledge and skills artificially, we should use interleaved practice. When interleaving, you don't go from a complete practice set or session on one topic to another complete practice set. You mix related topics in a single practice set. This might mean using a conversation that involves present tense, past tense, and the imperative in our language-learning example. It could mean studying a variety of patient intake forms and trying to diagnose the case versus studying only cases of patients presenting pulmonary issues.

While highly effective, interleaving usually feels—and is—slower to the learner. “But,” as the *Make It Stick* authors write, “the research shows unequivocally that mastery and long-term retention are much better if you interleave practice than if you mass it.”

Varied practice also can help with making sure learning can be applied in real-world situations. Varied practice means changing the contexts in which learners study and practice. It's one thing to recall a procedure, like CPR, in the context of a training classroom or online module. It's another to be able to recall the steps on a sidewalk with pedestrians pushing by, car horns honking, and stoplights and crosswalk signs blinking—and yet the second is much more like a situation in which someone might need to actually perform CPR after learning it.

- **Feedback**

Feedback is a broad topic. It runs the gamut from formal (e.g., the score from a proctored exam) to informal (e.g., the unfiltered expression on a colleague's face when you share an idea). Feedback can be formative (e.g., end-of-module quizzes throughout an online course), summative (e.g., a certification exam), or somewhere in between. Feedback can come from a variety of sources: a teacher, an expert, text provided after submitting an online quiz, peers, the learner's supervisor, or the learner herself. Feedback can also be explicit (e.g., written or spoken) or implicit (e.g., conveyed through body language). Feedback can also be offered in a constructive and supportive manner, or it can take a remedial or negative tone. In *Mindset* (another book we highly recommend), Carol Dweck discusses how feedback can foster or inhibit a growth mindset. A growth mindset creates receptivity for learning, while a fixed mindset severely inhibits an individual's ability to learn and change.

Despite all the variation just mentioned, we can say one thing definitively about feedback. As they practice, learners need meaningful feedback on their performance. Learners need evaluative and corrective information about how they're doing. To support effective learning, the goal of feedback should focus on improved learner performance. Any feedback that undermines improved learner performance is counterproductive.

Feedback should take the learner and the situation into account. Ideally, individual learners should be considered when giving feedback. Feedback for confident Naomi may not be appropriate for hesitant Rasheed. If taking individuals into account isn't possible or feasible (for example, in the case of a self-paced e-learning course or test prep for a standardized exam), then consider appropriate feedback for different

types of learners, such as novices versus experts or native English speakers versus non-native English speakers.

More expert learners are more likely to be able to process nuanced feedback and feedback on a variety of aspects. Novice learners may be overwhelmed by too much feedback and may need help understanding what to do with the feedback. For example, a recommendation to a novice public speaker to be more engaging won't be as meaningful as that recommendation coupled with some examples of how to use stories or strategic movement on the stage to be more engaging. We need to be more directive with novices and more facilitative in our feedback to more experienced learners.

It's also important to keep in mind the subject matter. Feedback on a knowable, reproducible task or procedure (e.g., giving an injection) will be different than feedback on a more open-ended topic (e.g., being a more strategic thinker). With knowable tasks, the corrective side of feedback is important. There's a right way to give an injection, and you want to make sure learners get it. With more open-ended topics, the feedback will be more evaluative than corrective. There's not a single right way to be a strategic thinker, but there are some things you can say or do that might point learners in the right direction—hints, cues, or details that can get them thinking and experimenting.

There are many ways to provide practice that involves spaced repetition, real-world application, and feedback:

- Role-plays
- Reflection questions
- Discussions
- Case- and problem-based activities
- Simulations
- Quizzes
- Sample tests
- Writing assignments
- Field work
- Research projects

When thinking about a virtuous learning cycle, think through the range of options available to your learning business. Some practice can—and should be—baked into existing content, such as in-person or online courses. Additionally, there's likely the opportunity to create entirely new products that support practice more deeply or in a more personalized way.

You might offer a product that provides learners with a cadence through your learning management system, a drip e-mail campaign, a quiz app, or a customized calendar to help them practice repeatedly and at appropriately spaced intervals.

You might also partner with employers to provide on-the-job practice and feedback from peers and those higher and lower up on the org chart. You could develop a toolkit to support employers in that work.

Keeping the virtuous learning cycle in mind reminds us that often learners don't need another course as much as they need a reminder and an opportunity to practice.

## Create Valid Credentials

We've known from our earliest research that learning experiences associated with a meaningful, valued credential tend to attract the highest levels of demand. Learners value the validation of their learning—having a way to show to themselves and to others that the effort they invested led to something meaningful.

How the meaning of the learning achievement is communicated varies. Degrees are the traditional standard credential of higher education. Certifications have been the traditional standard of continuing education. But there are other options. The current demands for alternative forms of credentialing—assessment-based certificates, digital badges, and microcredentials for, example—means there is an opportunity for learning businesses to offer many kinds of credentials.

Most learning businesses face more competition today than ever before. Learners have countless options, including many low-cost and even free ones. Credentials can bolster the perception of your offerings in the market and indicate that they have real substance and value.

We use credentials as the umbrella term that encompasses everything from formal accreditation down to simple course completion. We'll focus on three approaches to communicating the validity of your credentials. Use one or more of those approaches to stand your offerings out from the crowd, and, all else being equal, learners and buyers will gravitate to the offerings that have validity.

- **External validation**

NCCA accreditation and ANSI accreditation are both examples of external, or third-party, validation. You must go through a rigorous process to get your organization or one of your programs (such as a certification) approved, and that process and ultimate accreditation signal to learners and other stakeholders that the offering meets certain quality standards.

- **Internal validation**

Another approach is for your learning business to hold itself to internally established standards for quality and rigor. Assessment-based certificates, or ABCs for short, are a clear and effective approach to validity. You require learners not just to show up and complete particular courses but also to pass a final assessment.

We've found consistently that learners want to be able to show clearly that they have risen to a learning challenge. And employers, of course, appreciate it as well.

- **Outcomes-based validation**

Competency- and knowledge-based credentials look to the past and attest to what a learner has achieved or completed. A CPR certification attests that the holder has the necessary knowledge and skills to perform CPR.

But there's also the possibility for a credential to point forward. This third approach to validating credentials focuses on outcomes. What have past learners gained because of the credential? What data do you have—or can you collect—about the improved performance and positive outcomes tied to credential? That may mean the credential holder gets a job, a promotion, or a raise. It might mean she provides better care for those she serves (think of health care professionals caring for patients or a CPA helping clients prepare for retirement more accurately). Or it could mean she works more efficiently, which means better financial performance for her employer.

Validation can also help in monetizing your content or allowing you to charge a higher price—because you're offering not just content but value. Take the example of massive open online courses, or MOOCs. Most MOOCs, such as those offered by edX, are free for learners to enroll in and complete, but, if they want a certificate, that costs money. That's proof of the value of validation.

### **MAINTAIN A FIREWALL BETWEEN EDUCATION AND CREDENTIALING**

While content, practice, and credentials fit naturally together, if you seek accreditation for your offerings, get familiar with the requirements of the relevant accrediting body. For example, the ANSI requires that a certification body maintain clear firewalls between training and certification if it offers education and training programs that support the certification.

And, whether you seek approval from an accrediting body or not, keeping some separation between content and credential will make your credential more valid and valuable. If there is tight collaboration between those creating a credential and those creating the content that prepares learners for the credential, it can cast doubt on the credential's validity and create the belief—accurate or not—that the courses and other prep materials are less grounded in the appropriate competencies, skills, and knowledge and instead “teach to the test.”

## **Are You Ready to Support the Virtuous Learning Cycle?**

Building and supporting a virtuous learning cycle requires a learning business with a strong and broad foundation. The Learning Business Maturity Model is a framework that can help you better understand your organization's strengths and weaknesses in key areas, which will help you assess what work you might need to do before being able to successfully undertake a developing a virtuous learning cycle.

The model articulates the characteristics and practices of a successful learning business and the stages that typically precede full maturity. We envision maturity progressing through four stages: static, reactive, proactive, and innovative. In each stage, we gauge maturity according to characteristics and performance in five domains: strategy, marketing, leadership, portfolio, and capacity.

# LEARNING BUSINESS MATURITY MODEL™

STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL GAP

VALUE AND IMPACT

## STAGE 1: STATIC

- LEADERSHIP**
  - No clear vision or accountability
  - Operational focus
- STRATEGY**
  - Missing or poorly articulated strategy
  - Unclear objectives and measurements
- CAPACITY**
  - Lack of resources
  - Poorly defined or no processes
- PORTFOLIO**
  - "We've always done it this way"
  - rational
  - Information-focused offerings
- MARKETING**
  - No validated understanding of market, competition, or audience
  - Limited, random, unmeasured use of marketing channels

## STAGE 2: REACTIVE

- LEADERSHIP**
  - Vision but no broad buy-in
  - Accountability for current performance but unclear how to sustain or improve it
- STRATEGY**
  - Strategy that does not differentiate and has not been shared broadly
  - No tracking and measurement
- CAPACITY**
  - Resources adequate for current needs but not for growth
  - Processes implicitly understood but poorly documented
- PORTFOLIO**
  - Efforts made to assess learner needs but inconsistently
  - Some performance-focused offerings
  - Some evaluation beyond smile sheets
- MARKETING**
  - Anecdotal view of market
  - Offerings communicated consistently via one channel but limited tracking of results

## STAGE 3: PROACTIVE

- LEADERSHIP**
  - Vision embraced by cross-functional team
  - Shared understanding of how to sustain and improve performance
- STRATEGY**
  - Broadly-shared strategy that provides for differentiation
  - Metrics tracked and acted on
- CAPACITY**
  - Resources adequate for current and emerging needs
  - Key processes documented
  - Some investment in staff and volunteer development
- PORTFOLIO**
  - Good awareness of learner needs and learning theory but inconsistently put into practice
  - Increased evaluation beyond smile sheets
- MARKETING**
  - Periodic efforts to assess market and competition
  - Efforts to establish segments and priorities within audience
  - Use of multiple marketing channels with efforts to measure results and adjust
  - Nascent brand and name recognition

## STAGE 4: INNOVATIVE

- LEADERSHIP**
  - Vision shared by top organizational leaders
  - Clear accountability and responsibility with succession and transition plans
  - Culture of learning
- STRATEGY**
  - Distinctive positioning
  - Strategy that is shared and embraced broadly
  - Metrics tracked and acted on consistently
- CAPACITY**
  - Resources to address current needs and support innovation
  - Well-defined processes that are continuously improved
  - Consistent investment in staff and volunteer development
- PORTFOLIO**
  - Clear understanding of learner needs and learning theory consistently put into action
  - Effective alignment of offerings with learner needs and strategy
  - Evaluation focused on assessing change
- MARKETING**
  - Validated understanding of market and competition
  - Use of segmentation and clear segment priorities
  - Strategic use of multiple marketing channels
  - Strong brand and name recognition

CAPABILITIES

Determining whether your learning business is ready to pursue developing a full virtuous learning cycle should involve consideration of all five domains in the model.

- **Strategy**

First and foremost, whether to develop a virtuous learning cycle is a strategic decision.

What content, practice, and credentials does the learning business currently provide, and how do they support the strategy? What might new initiatives targeted at building out each of the three parts of the cycle do to support the strategy? Are there ways that new initiatives might hurt the strategy? Or require a revision of strategy?

- **Marketing**

Part of answering the question of whether to pursue a virtuous learning cycle will be solid market knowledge. Depending on what you already know, this may require research to understand what similar offerings already exist, who might decide to create a competitive offering, and what demand there is likely to be for any new offerings you create.

- **Leadership**

Leadership will need to play a role in exploring the option of developing a virtuous learning cycle, and, if the decision is to proceed, leaders will have an essential role to play in communicating the change internally and how it aligns with strategy. They will also likely have a role to play in identifying potential partners in development or marketing and forging partnerships with stakeholders, such as employers.

- **Portfolio**

There are implications across a learning business's portfolio—for what you currently offer, what you might add, and how you position your products and services. A potential benefit of pursuing a virtuous learning cycle is that it can help your offerings feel more cohesive, as learners begin to see that your products and services fit into one or more stages of the cycle.

- **Capacity**

Should your learning business opt to build out a virtuous learning cycle, there are implications for the human resources and technology needed. If, for example, a plan is developed to create a certification, there will be specialized skills and knowledge needed around that process. If a decision is made to create a toolkit to support employers in providing on-the-job practice, different skills and knowledge may be needed.

Learn more about the  
**Learning Business Maturity  
Model** at [www.tagoras.com/  
maturity](http://www.tagoras.com/maturity).



Offering quiz-based microlessons or connecting learners with mentors might mean you need to invest in additional technology.

The needed human resources can be hired as employees or provided by expert consultants. Similarly, the technology may be custom-built or something you choose from among existing learning platforms.

Not every learning business should build a full, independent virtuous learning cycle, but all should understand that these three pieces—content, practice, and credentials—factor into learning. Supporting all phases of the cycle, through proprietary offerings or by knowing who to connect your learners with, will solidify your learning business as the trusted go-to source for learners in the field you serve.

The reinforcing nature of the exchange creates the potential for exponential results in the virtuous learning cycle. Content plus practice plus credentials can equal more than the sum of the parts and continuously send the learner back to learn more, better, and deeper. That flywheel effect benefits the learners, those served by the learners, the learning business, and society at large. ▶▶

## Looking to travel your path to maturity faster?

We can help. Our Maturity Accelerator Program™ (MAP) is a multi-week program designed to help organizations leverage the Learning Business Maturity Model™ effectively and efficiently.

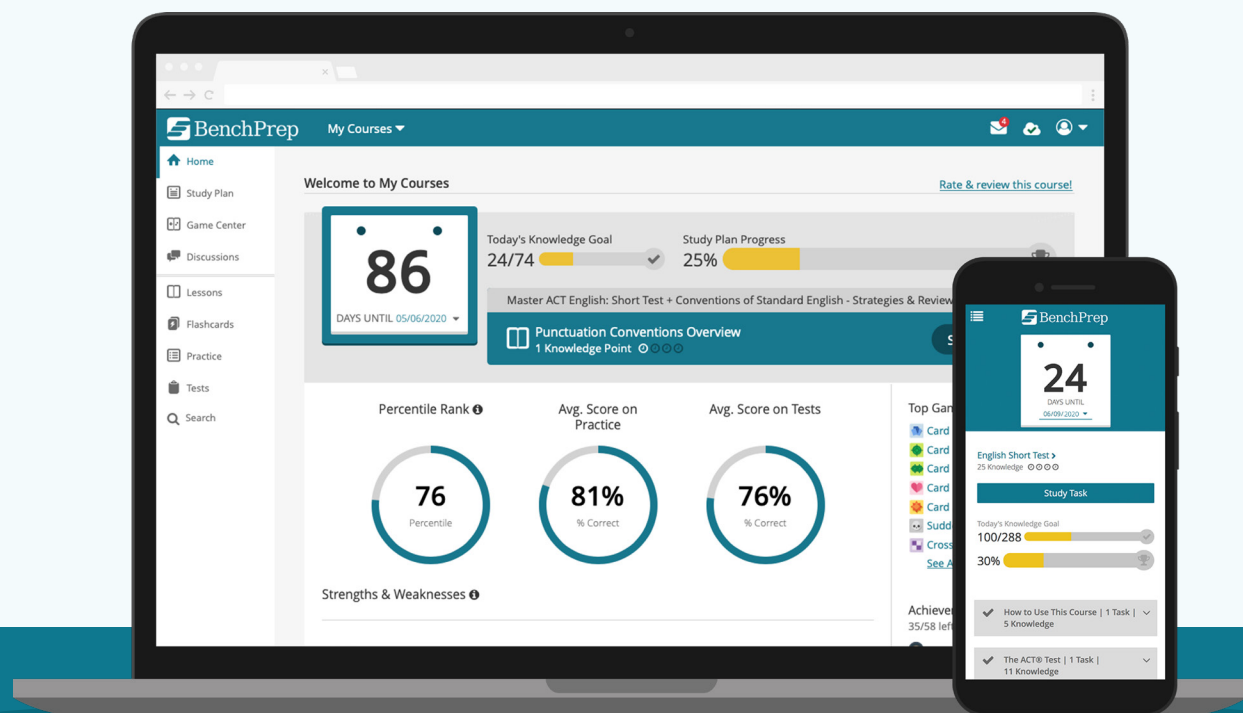
We work with you and your team, aligning the model to your specific situation and needs and helping you move along the path to full maturity with greater speed and confidence.

Learn more about MAP at [www.tagoras.com/maturity-accelerator-program](http://www.tagoras.com/maturity-accelerator-program).

# Your learners deserve a better practice experience.

BenchPrep is the only LMS built for certification training and exam prep.

Grow your revenue with scalable, test-like study experiences that boost learner confidence and get them ready for the exam.



 BenchPrep

Visit [benchprep.com](https://benchprep.com) to learn more

# Your Learners Deserve a Better Practice Experience. Will You Be the One to Provide It?



by Ashish Rangnekar, CEO, BenchPrep

Education and its value in the professional world have changed—quickly, fundamentally, and drastically. The change is far-reaching and permanent. Once considered the gold standard of verified credentialing, colleges and universities have been too slow to adapt, creating an enormous opportunity for learning businesses to define the workplace of the future.

More than [1 million fewer students](#) are enrolled in college in the U.S. today than before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Undergraduate enrollment has dropped 6.6 percent since the fall of 2019, the highest decline in more than 50 years. Meanwhile, 56 percent of [certification bodies reported increased demand](#) for their credentials in 2021, and 68 percent plan to offer new certifications in the next three to five years. [Women's enrollment](#) in entry-level professional certifications reached an all-time high of 43 percent in 2021. And [66 percent of adults](#) considering enrolling in education prefer a non-degree pathway.

Through this lens, then, the cycle of content, practice, and credentialing (at BenchPrep, we call this framework Learn → Practice → Certify) becomes imperative for learning businesses that wish to fill the gap—both in education as well as the skills gap plaguing our modern workforce. Learning programs alone won't suffice. Verified credentials are the new workplace currency. Adding high-quality practice opportunities for candidate success is the true path forward.

Best-in-class certification bodies are already investing in learning and practice experiences. Just look to the CFA Institute, Microsoft, and Amazon Web Services for a few examples. These organizations and other leaders in the space see learning as a strategic growth driver.

They drive learner success through more confident, better-prepared candidates. They recognize there is 10x more revenue opportunity in training and education than in the certification alone. And they're redefining which part of their business owns and understands the customer (hint: it's the learning business leaders who hold rich insights into how candidates learn, what keeps them engaged, and who will actually follow through to take the certification exam and earn the credential).

To stay relevant, you must solve for the entire candidate journey, not just part of it.

**Learning** includes traditional learning business fare like content-focused courses, curriculum, and continuing education. It should also include exam prep and certification training courses to help your learners master the material.

**Practicing** involves building spaced repetition, real-world applications, and continuous feedback cycles into your programs, and it must also include practice test questions, question banking, self-assessment, and mock exams to help candidates build confidence as they prepare to pass the test.

**Certifying** is the bread and butter of most associations and credentialing bodies, but focusing on the exam alone is a missed opportunity. Why not also create smaller, stackable certificates your learners can build into a larger certification? And what about finding partners to help you combine your learner data with exam data to better understand your candidates and create predictive models?

A comprehensive candidate journey that offers timely and appropriate education at each of the Learn, Practice, and Certify steps will solve the ever-growing workforce skills gap that threatens our economy today.

Professional education may be in flux, but the organizations that pay attention to what their learners need and build programs accordingly are the ones who will radically redefine what matters on a resume—and the impact verified skills will have on the workplace, the economy, and the future. ▶◀

# BenchPrep

## **About BenchPrep** *sponsor of this executive briefing*

BenchPrep is an award-winning learning platform purpose-built to help candidates feel more confident and prepared for their credentialing and certification tests by delivering an intuitive, efficient, and engaging study experience.

BenchPrep helps organizations drive revenue by making it easy for learners to search, discover, purchase, and enroll in online study courses rich with interactive learning experiences. BenchPrep's data capabilities also unlock valuable insights so organizations can make better, more data-driven decisions on factors that affect course content, candidate sentiment, and learner behavior.

Many of the world's leading associations, credentialing bodies, and training companies trust BenchPrep to power their online study programs, including ACT, AAMC, ASCM, CFA Institute, CompTIA, GMAC, ISACA, Richardson, McGraw-Hill Education, and many others.

More than 8 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain academic and professional success. Learn more at [www.benchprep.com](http://www.benchprep.com). ▶◀

## About Leading Learning *publisher of this executive briefing*

Leading Learning ([www.leadinglearning.com](http://www.leadinglearning.com)) provides a range of resources to help learning business professionals excel in the global market for lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development.

Leading Learning resources include a podcast, Webinars, an e-newsletter, publications such as this executive briefing, and more. The goals for Leading Learning are to do the following:



- Raise awareness of the third sector of education and the critical role that learning businesses play in it.
- Help learning businesses increase the reach, revenue, and impact of their offerings.
- Support individual learning professionals in achieving high levels of performance in their work.

An initiative of Tagoras ([www.tagoras.com](http://www.tagoras.com)), Leading Learning was co-founded by Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele, who have each been working in the business of lifelong learning since the 1990s. They have worked for multiple learning technology companies and have built and sold a learning technology and online course production company of their own. For more than a decade (through Tagoras), they have consulted with a wide range of learning businesses to help them improve their performance. Last, but certainly not least, they are in the learning business themselves. ▶◀



© Tagoras, Inc. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Quoting from this executive briefing on a limited basis for the purposes of creating articles, blog posts, and other publications is considered within the realm of “fair use.”

For additional copies of this briefing, please visit [www.leadinglearning.com/virtuous-learning-cycle](http://www.leadinglearning.com/virtuous-learning-cycle).