



PRACTICE MAKES PROFIT

THE BUSINESS AND LEARNING
CASE FOR PRACTICE

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Practice Makes Profit: The Learning and Business Case for Practice

by *Celisa Steele and Jeff Cobb*

At the core of any learning business is the goal of ensuring that learners improve not only in what they know but in how they apply that knowledge. To support that goal, learning businesses offer products and services. But all too often portfolios are short on practice options.

“Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice.”

—Anton Chekhov

Yet we know, from our own experience and from a growing body of scientific studies, that practice is highly effective in supporting learning. One might even go so far as to assert no learning happens without practice.

Practice is good for learners, and practice is good for the learning businesses supporting their practice.

For learners, practice improves accuracy and efficacy. Their performance during practice opportunities, including mistakes made, gives them invaluable insight into their progress and helps them focus future study and practice more accurately. Practice can also bolster confidence, reduce the stress learners feel when called on to perform, and consequently improve future performance.

For your learning business, offering practice opportunities represents a revenue source and potentially differentiates you from competitors. It also presents an opportunity to better understand the market you serve and, most importantly, a way to provide more impactful learning products and services.

What is a **learning business**?

Learning businesses are market-facing organizations that play an essential role in providing continuing education, professional development, and lifelong learning.

Trade and professional associations; commercial training and consulting firms; nonprofit training and consulting firms; and college and university professional, continuing, and online (PCO) units are all learning businesses.

Defining *Practice*

Practice is a deceptively simple term. Because it can be interpreted differently, we want to be clear about what we mean when discussing practice. Simply put, practice involves an individual performing or applying a skill or knowledge.

You will also see the term *practice* applied to professions or jobs, as is the case with practice analyses that look at the knowledge needed, for example, by certified financial planners or registered nurses to be competent on the job. Such practice analyses are then often used in creating bodies of knowledge and certification requirements. *Practice* can also describe a particular way of doing things, as in the phrase “best practice.”

Our focus, however, is on learners performing and applying skills or knowledge. This type of practice covers a wide range of activities, from simple and short to longer and more complex. Here are four examples of practice that fit our definition:

- Preparing for the bar exam
- A golfer’s session at a driving range
- Developing and delivering a speech as part of a public speaking course
- A social work student’s 400-hour field practicum

The benefits and importance of practice apply to both hard and soft skills. Giving injections, swinging a golf club, showing empathy, and communicating more persuasively all benefit from practice.

Not All Practice Is Equal

Getting individuals to perform and apply skills and knowledge is highly effective, but not all practice is equal. Effective practice is deliberate and focused on the goal of improved performance, targeting the **zone of proximal development**.

The zone of proximal development represents the space between what the learner can do unsupported and what the learner can’t do even with support. Effective practice helps the learner stretch and grow. If the practice is too easy, she won’t improve because she’ll simply repeat what she already knows and can do. If the practice is too challenging, she may fail—and become discouraged from trying again.

It’s important to know that the zone of proximal development isn’t static, which means practice needs to change over time to support the learner’s progress and improvement. As certain aspects of performance become easy, the practice should shift to focus on additional, more challenging facets.

Sports provide ready examples because practice is an expected and foundational part of learning and getting better at almost any sport. A novice soccer player might start with a simple drill that involves passing the ball to another player. Over time, she might pass and then trap a return pass. Once she’s proficient with passing and trapping, she might trap the ball, pass it to another player, and then shoot on an empty goal when the player passes it back. Later still, she might do all the above with a defender trying to intercept the passes and a goalie working to block her shot.

As the player's zone of proximal development shifts, the drills need to change to allow her to continue to improve her skills and add new ones. In other words, effective practice is iterative, not solely repetitive. Learners need to devote time, over time, to practice, but the focus of the practice also needs to be pitched to the learner's evolving skills and knowledge.

To understand how to effectively use practice in your learning business, you should understand conditions that influence practice and tactics for implementing practice.

Conditions That Influence Practice

Conditions refer to the broad factors that influence learning experiences, including practice opportunities. Conditions create an optimal context for practice. We'll focus on three conditions learning businesses can influence: motivation, mindset, and memory.

MOTIVATION

Motivation encompasses the drive, curiosity, and interest that lead individuals to engage in practice and persevere through challenges. Practice can be hard, and learning businesses need to take the time to activate learners' intrinsic motivation so they'll stick with it.

Extrinsic motivation can help, but it's not as useful as intrinsic motivation for adult learners. Malcolm Knowles makes this point in *The Adult Learner*, a classic text in the field of andragogy, or adult learning: "Adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), but the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like)."

Edward Deci is another expert on motivation. One of the most interesting findings he shares in his book *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* is that extrinsic motivation isn't only less effective than intrinsic motivation; extrinsic motivation erodes intrinsic motivation. This means your learning business should focus less on extrinsic motivators—whether praise, a digital badge, or a certification designation—and more on fostering learners' intrinsic interest in practicing skills and knowledge.

One way to tap learners' intrinsic drive is by providing them with options. The more choices you provide to learners and the more decisions they are empowered to make, the more your learning business creates conditions that foster intrinsic motivation. Here are some specific ideas for how you might foster intrinsic motivation in your practice opportunities.

- Allow learners to choose their own path, whether within an offering or among offerings. If learners need to practice seven distinct skills that don't need to be mastered in a particular sequence, let them decide the order. This allows them to work first on the skill that's most immediately useful or interesting to them.
- Structure projects to mimic real-world situations and allow learners to choose their own topics or areas of focus. This helps ensure the practice is as relevant and practical as possible.

- Create responsive practice opportunities that adapt to the learners' evolving skills and knowledge. Using the earlier example of seven distinct skills again, learners could bypass some by demonstrating mastery and then focus on practicing the skills where they're less proficient.

While choice can be a powerful tool for tapping into intrinsic motivation, be careful to provide options that don't undercut the learning purpose of the practice or that leave a novice learner wondering where to start. Your learning business needs to set context and frame things to ensure the choices are appropriate for the learners.

MINDSET

Mindset means the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions we hold about our abilities, intelligence, and potential for growth. Mindset influences everything we do—at work and at home, socially and intellectually.

Read the following two statements, and then pause to decide which you believe is true.

- “You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are.”
- “No matter what kind of person you are, you can always change substantially.”

According to Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, your answer reveals whether you possess a fixed or growth mindset.

If you have a fixed mindset, you believe “your qualities are carved in stone,” Dweck explains. A growth mindset, on the other hand, is founded on the “belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts.”

We want learners to bring a growth mindset to the practice opportunities they engage in. That growth mindset allows them to believe that their practice will lead to improvement and helps them continue even when the practice is hard, time-consuming, or unpleasant.

Here are some specific strategies for how your learning business can help foster a growth mindset in learners:

- Tell learners that whatever they're about to practice can be learned and that the experience you're offering gives them the chance to improve.
- Give learners a text to read that prompts a growth mindset. This could be a scientific article that describes people who did not have natural ability but who developed exceptional skills through the effort of practice.
- When setting rules and norms, the instructor (or the text or video in a self-paced experience) can stress that effort is valued above doing something right or doing something quickly.

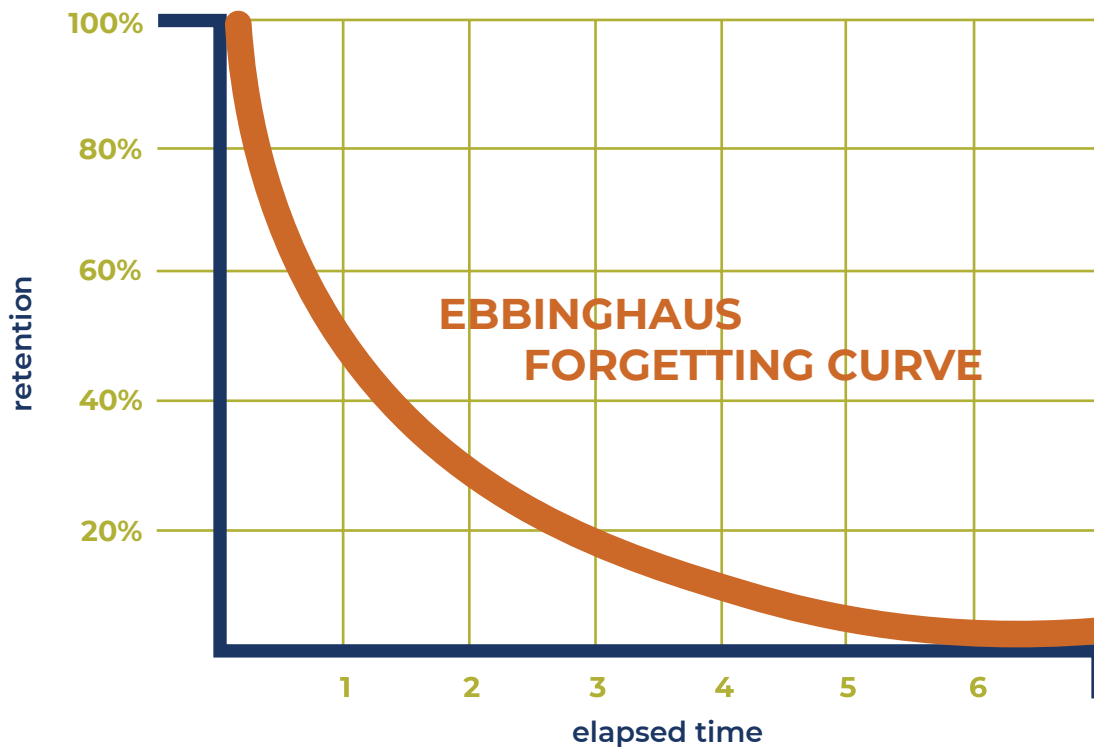
Beyond prompting at the outset, ensure that what happens throughout the practice opportunity remains focused on the growth mindset. Feedback should stress and praise learners' effort and process rather than judging learners' talent or “natural” ability.

But be aware that, just as we can steer learners towards a growth mindset, we can also push them towards a fixed mindset. When designing and delivering practice

opportunities, you need to understand what triggers different mindsets. Labels can trigger the fixed mindset. Even positive labels can do this—calling someone “smart” equates that person with their achievement. To prompt a growth mindset, praise effort or a way of thinking. “That was a smart way to think about the problem” is different from saying, “You’re smart.”

MEMORY

Humans’ working memory is extremely limited, and we’ve known this for a long time. The Ebbinghaus forgetting curve—which shows that we forget the vast majority of what we “learn”—has been around since the 1880s.



Patti Shank, author of *Manage Memory for Deeper Learning*, asserts, “One of the largest constraints that learning designers and developers don’t realize that they have when working with instruction is the nature of our memory.”

There are three types of memory that impact all learning, including practice opportunities.

- **Short-term memory** involves the recall of information for a relatively short time (around ten seconds) and has an extremely limited capacity (roughly five bits of information at a time).
- **Working memory** involves storing, focusing attention on, and manipulating information for a relatively short period of time. (While working memory and short-term memory are sometimes used synonymously, they are believed to be distinct systems. Short-term memory passively holds information while working memory actively processes it.)
- **Long-term memory** involves the storage and recall of information over a long period of time (days, weeks, or years) and is thought to have potentially limitless capacity.

Practice is one of the most effective tools we can use to move knowledge and skills from our very limited working memory into our potentially limitless long-term memory. Working memory acts as the gatekeeper to learning, and, because working memory is so limited, it may also bottleneck learning. So learning businesses need to design with **cognitive load** and working memory's limitations in mind.

Cognitive load refers to the working memory resources used for a task or in a situation. The central principle of **cognitive load theory** is that instructional design techniques that accommodate the limitations of working memory optimize the learning experience.

There are three types of cognitive load:

- **Intrinsic cognitive load** is the level of difficulty inherent in whatever skill or knowledge is being learned or practiced. While learning businesses can't alter the intrinsic cognitive load, recognizing it is crucial. It's much harder to assess the damage sustained by someone who's experienced a stroke than to remember what the FAST acronym stands for. The higher the intrinsic cognitive load, the more important it is for us to manage the two other types of cognitive load.
- **Extraneous cognitive load** is determined by the design of instructional materials and practice opportunities, and it's something learning businesses can control. There are many possible ways to teach any subject, and which one we choose has profound implications for extraneous cognitive load. For example, if the goal is for an individual to hit a tennis ball, the coach needs to only demonstrate racket grip and swing mechanics. There's no need to explain scoring yet, and doing so now will make the task of hitting the ball harder.
- **Germane cognitive load** deals with schemas, or frameworks, that represent an aspect of the world. Schemas influence learners' attention—learners are more likely to notice things that fit into their schemas—and schemas help with organizing and understanding new information, which makes them a powerful tool in the service of learning. When designing learning experiences, including practice opportunities, promote germane cognitive load by helping learners create or modify schemas that deal with the knowledge and skills being taught. Drawing parallels between familiar and new knowledge makes learning easier. If you're teaching someone who already knows how to play ping-pong how to play tennis, emphasize the similarities between the two activities.

Design your offerings to minimize extraneous cognitive load and to optimize for germane cognitive load, and recognize that the higher the intrinsic cognitive load, the more critical your role in extraneous and germane load becomes. To say it more simply, design to control cognitive load, and focus learners' working memory on what's relevant and necessary to learn.

Tactics for Implementing Practice

Tactics are the mechanics that learners and learning businesses can use to create effective learning offerings that incorporate practice. We'll touch on six tactics: spaced practice, effortful retrieval, elaboration, interleaving, appropriate feedback, and metacognition.

SPACED PRACTICE

Spaced practice (also called distributed practice or spaced repetition) involves breaking up practice into more shorter sessions over a longer time period 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, write Peter C. Brown, Henry Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel in *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. “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.” That commentary from *Make It Stick* points to our next tactic.

EFFORTFUL RETRIEVAL

Effortful retrieval involves actively recalling information from memory, which strengthens learning. It also promotes deeper understanding compared with more passively reviewing content or notes. Learning businesses have an opportunity to prompt learners to actively recall and engage with the skills or knowledge.

To incorporate effortful retrieval, design practice opportunities that are experiential and require learners to grapple with a situation or problem and arrive at an answer before being shown a solution that others found. The effort that goes into such practice pays off. “[E]ffortful learning changes the brain, building new connections and capability,” note the authors of *Make It Stick* (emphasis theirs).

Some learners may resist putting in this level of effort. But, if you appeal to learners' intrinsic motivation and explain the importance of this kind of hard work in creating durable learning, fewer will resist, and more will participate fully.

Just as importantly, consider effortful retrieval from a strategic standpoint. Learning experiences, including practice opportunities, are more effective, memorable, and impactful when they require effort, and that can help your offerings stand out from the commodity learning experiences that flood many fields.

ELABORATION

Elaboration involves learners making connections and providing additional details or examples to deepen their understanding and facilitate retention. Elaboration improves learners' mastery because it increases the mental cues available to them as they try to put what they've learned into practice.

Relating skills or knowledge to what is already known is a common approach to elaboration. Learning businesses can encourage elaboration by having learners express ideas and concepts in their own words (versus repeating the “official” definitions verbatim) and by having them connect the subject matter to what they already know.

As an example of elaboration, in an educational Webinar, the presenter might ask attendees to share in the chat specific ways they can apply a concept just covered to their current work.

INTERLEAVING

Interleaving mixes different topics or types of practice to enhance learning and transferability. With interleaving, learners don't go from a complete practice set on one topic to another complete practice set. Instead, related topics are combined in a single practice set. That might mean, for example, learners are tasked with studying a variety of patient intake forms and trying to diagnose the medical condition versus focusing only on patients presenting pulmonary issues.

While highly effective, interleaving usually feels—and usually is—slower. “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.”

Interleaving can also involve varied practice, in which the setting or type of practice changes. For example, rather than doing the practice solely in an online simulation, the learner may also practice hands on in a hospital or lab.

Interleaving, like the other practice tactics we're discussing, is tied to higher-level learning. From *Make It Stick*: “[V]aried practice helps learners build a broad schema, an ability to assess changing conditions and adjust responses to fit. Arguably, interleaving and variation help learners reach beyond memorization to higher levels of conceptual learning and application, building more rounded, deep, and durable learning....”

APPROPRIATE FEEDBACK

As learners practice, they need meaningful, appropriate feedback on their performance, which provides evaluative and corrective information about how they're doing. Sometimes a learner can assess her own progress—a wrong note on the piano, for instance, may sound wrong, and the piano student can hear it. But often useful feedback comes from a teacher, facilitator, or mentor.

Feedback should focus on improving learner performance. Any feedback that undermines improved learner performance is counterproductive. It's not hard to imagine (or perhaps even remember) examples of ineffective feedback. Imagine the case of a manager telling a supervisee that his facial expressions while delivering a report were unpleasant and ugly. Instead of working on more pleasant facial expressions, that employee might be discouraged and speak up less frequently in meetings and opt not to present at events.

Feedback should also take the learner and the situation into account. Ideally, specific, individual learners should be considered when giving feedback. Feedback for confident Naomi may not be appropriate for shy Ilya. If taking individuals into account isn't possible or feasible, then consider appropriate feedback for different types of learners, such as novice versus expert or native English speakers versus non-native English speakers. Knowing who's receiving the feedback allows us to structure it in a way most likely to achieve the goal of improved performance.

More advanced learners can often 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. A recommendation to a novice public speaker to be more engaging won't be as meaningful as that recommendation coupled with concrete examples of how to use stories and strategic movement on the stage to be more engaging. Be more directive in feedback to novices and more facilitative in feedback to experienced learners.

It's also important to account for the subject matter. Feedback on a knowable, reproducible task or procedure (e.g., giving an injection) will be different from 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 should be more evaluative than corrective. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to being a strategic thinker, but we can offer hints, cues, or questions to point learners in the right direction.

METACOGNITION

Metacognition is an awareness and understanding we can bring to our thought processes and practice activities. Metacognition allows learners to not only perform but to analyze and evaluate their own performance. This self-awareness is powerful because, when learners notice when and why they do better or worse, they can adjust and optimize their learning approaches.

A learner might, for example, begin to notice that they perform better on high-stakes tests when they're less stressed or when they're not hungry. That realization allows them to create an environment for themselves that fosters success—they eat a protein bar before the exam or use box breathing to relax.

Metacognition involves learners being mindful of their learning processes. Dr. Ellen J. Langer, known as the mother of mindfulness and author of *Mindfulness*, offers a simple example. Think about this question: What is one plus one?

When asked, most of us reply automatically, "Two." But, if we add clothes from one pile of laundry to another pile of laundry, we still have one pile of laundry—albeit a bigger pile.

Becoming mindful of what supports (or distracts from) their performance allows learners to adjust factors for greater success. When they assess their performance, they can use that self-feedback to target different areas for practice, leverage their competence in one area to get better in another, and apply processes and problem-solving techniques they already use in novel situations.

Your learning business can support metacognition by inviting learners to ask themselves questions that require them to reflect and assess their progress and understanding.

Conditions and Tactics That Support Practice

EXPLANATION	IN ACTION
MOTIVATION refers to the drive, curiosity, and interest that lead people to engage in practice and to persevere.	Offer choices, such as letting learners choose the order in which they practice particular skills when the sequence isn't important.
MINDSET refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that people hold about their abilities, intelligence, and growth potential.	Foster a growth mindset by telling learners that what they'll practice can be learned and that the practice opportunity gives them the chance to improve.
MEMORY is the process of recalling what has been learned and retained.	Minimize extraneous cognitive load to focus learners' limited working memory on what's most relevant.
SPACED PRACTICE breaks practice into more shorter sessions over a longer time period than massed practice.	Provide learners with a cadence (e.g., via a drip e-mail campaign or a customized calendar) to help them practice at spaced intervals.
EFFORTFUL RETRIEVAL involves actively recalling information from memory.	Design practice that require learners to try applying a skill <i>before</i> being shown how others do it.
ELABORATION involves learners making connections to deepen their understanding and facilitate retention.	Encourage learners to express concepts in their own words and to connect the subject they're practicing to what they already know.
INTERLEAVING mixes different topics or types of practice to enhance learning and transferability.	Provide different contexts (e.g., in a lab and at work), and encourage learners to practice multiple aspects rather than focus on one aspect at a time.
APPROPRIATE FEEDBACK provides evaluative and corrective information to learners about their performance.	Provide coaching at checkpoints to offer learners improvement-oriented feedback they can use to adjust their performance in the future.
METACOGNITION is an awareness individuals can bring to their thought processes.	Ask learners questions that require them to reflect and assess their progress and understanding.

Why Conditions and Tactics Matter

Understanding the conditions that influence practice and the tactics that promote effective practice is crucial for learning businesses. It's this understanding that can then be translated into identifying and integrating meaningful practice opportunities into the learning experiences you provide.

What's more, it's beneficial for your learning business to educate your learners on these tactics. This helps learners take charge of their learning experiences and shape them to be as relevant and valuable as possible to their specific situation and needs.

Why and How to Make Practice (a Bigger) Part of Your Portfolio

Like effective practice itself, your learning business's use of practice should be strategic, deliberate, and iterative. To realize the benefits of practice for your learners and your business, you should clarify the business case, assess the current situation, and then develop plans for how to add more practice to your portfolio.

GETTING CLEAR ON YOUR BUSINESS CASE FOR PRACTICE

The learning case for practice is clear. Practice has been proven to support deeper, more durable learning for all types of learners, across all types of subjects. But, to get the most value out of practice, you should also be clear on the business case for practice.

Practice supports the three fundamental goals at the core of all learning businesses: reach, revenue, and impact.

- Practice can produce **revenue** for your learning business.

New practice-focused products mean new revenue streams. You can also realize additional revenue by adding practice opportunities to improve existing products. The practice makes the products more valuable, allowing you to charge more for the products. (Our [Value Ramp tool](#) can help you better understand the value-price relationship.) You might also choose to make practice opportunities optional for-fee add-ons to existing products.

- Practice improves the **reach** of your learning business.

When you release new practice-focused products and add more practice to your existing offerings, you broaden the appeal of your portfolio, allowing you to attract and convert new learners into customers.

- Practice ties directly to **impact**.

Practice makes products more engaging and more effective, which helps you retain customers and create loyal learners who will return to your catalog rather than looking to competitors for practice opportunities. The results of the more effective products also give you meaningful data to leverage for marketing and for improving your offerings.

ASSESSING THE STATUS QUO

When assessing the status quo, look both at your own portfolio and at competitive and complementary offerings in the broader learning landscape.

To guide your internal assessment, ask questions like these:

- What practice opportunities are part of your current portfolio? How prominent a part does practice play in each product? Do you offer stand-alone practice-only products?
- Are practice opportunities implemented equally across all topical areas in your portfolio? Is there a logical reason for any variance in emphasis on practice in products, and is that reflected in pricing or product positioning?
- What data do you have about the appeal and effectiveness of practice? Do you have learner evaluations, measures of time spent on practice activities, feedback from supervisors, or other on-the-job data that speak to the perceived and real value of practice?
- When developing new products, is practice a consideration? How are you keeping practice front of mind for your internal team and outside subject matter experts?

To accompany your internal assessment, look at what others are doing. You may discover practice examples you can adapt for your own portfolio, and you'll get insight into whether practice might be a strategic differentiator for your products or whether more practice is needed to keep pace with competitive offerings.

When reviewing products developed by others, think about the following:

- How prominent a role does practice play in the products?
- How effective are the practice opportunities (to the extent that you can tell, either by direct participation or through marketing materials)?
- How are practice opportunities marketed or presented in product messaging?
- What might be used to improve your practice opportunities or add new ones?

IMAGINING YOUR FUTURE PORTFOLIO

Use what you learn in your assessment of the status quo to imagine the future. Your assessment should lead to ideas about where you might add more or more effective practice. In the simplest terms, there are two options.

- Integrating practice into other learning products
- Creating stand-alone practice-only products

The first option involves building practice opportunities into longer learning experiences that introduce skills and knowledge. According to our simple definition of practice (the performance or application of a skill or knowledge), fill-in-the-blank quizzes, journal assignments that ask learners to recap key points in their own words, and on-the-job assignments all can be practice opportunities—and these practice opportunities can be built into all types of offerings, including self-paced online courses, instructor-led seminars, and conference sessions.

Stand-alone practice-only products can also include a wide range of offerings, from coaching and mentorship programs to sample tests to practice for a high-stakes exam—anything where the focus is on the application of existing skills and knowledge.

RESOURCES NEEDED FOR OFFERING EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

To make more and more effective practice a reality, we should consider the required resources. These resources fall in two categories: people and tools.

In the people category, consider the current skills and awareness of three key groups:

- **Creators** are the designers, developers, and subject matter experts who create and deliver your products, and they may be internal staff or outside contractors or consultants. They need a solid understanding of the importance of practice and of the tactics and conditions that contribute to effective practice.
- **Managers** include the people who oversee the design and delivery. They may also be directly involved in the design and delivery. Either way, their belief of the importance of practice will be important in ensuring your learning business's long-term, ongoing commitment to practice.
- **Learners** are the ultimate end-users of the products and practice opportunities offered by your learning business.

For creators and managers, a broad awareness of the conditions and tactics discussed earlier in this briefing is important. To signal the importance of practice to those two groups, your learning business might adopt a measurable goal to incorporate more practice opportunities into your portfolio. You might commit, for example, to ensuring that practice be a fundamental part of all you offer and that it constitute a significant portion of any learning experience. Patti Shank, author of *Practice and Feedback for Deeper Learning*, has asked, "How many courses have you seen where it's 95 percent content and 5 percent practice?" It's a common pitfall to focus on the content to the detriment of the practice.

If (despite the excellent arguments in favor of practice we've made here!) practice doesn't make sense for some of your products, then you might set a goal to include practice opportunities in every offering in product lines where practice would be valuable and supportable. Or you might set a general target to ensure that some significant percent of your overall portfolio incorporate practice.

In the tools category of resources, consider the technologies and other tools you have in place—or need to put in place—that can help your learning business expand, automate, and personalize practice opportunities. Automation and personalization are important considerations when structuring and delivering practice opportunities and providing feedback to learners on their performance. Providing effective practice and corresponding feedback can be hard to do at scale without leveraging technology.

Just as you should assess your staff's awareness and skills when it comes to designing and delivering practice opportunities, think through your current technology stack and how it can—and can't—support where you want to go with practice.

Choose platforms that can support your learning use cases and your strategic reasons for offering practice opportunities. Not all platforms will have capabilities to provide meaningful and engaging practice experiences. Some learning management systems, for example, may focus narrowly on launching and tracking self-contained SCORM-compliant lessons and not offer mechanisms to allow learners to upload projects they complete on the job.

When assessing technology, consider how the platform does (or doesn't) enable your learners. If, for example, test prep to support a certification exam is part of what you offer, probe on capabilities like question banks and mock exams and on features that allow learners to create practice sets based on previously incorrectly answered questions. Some systems may leverage machine learning or artificial intelligence to create adaptive learning paths, based on individual learner's performance.

You'll need to assess the capabilities of your current tools and technologies and identify gaps where you may need additional or replacement platforms to achieve your goals around improved practice opportunities.

Make More Practice a Best Practice

While the responsibility is ultimately on the learner when it comes to practice, there are things your learning business can—and should—do to encourage practice.

- Promote a growth mindset.
Remind learners of the importance of practice, tap into their intrinsic motivation for practicing whatever you're asking them to do, and design to accommodate cognitive constraints, especially our limited working memory.
- Create practice-friendly environments.
Foster environments that allow the focus and concentration required for high-quality practice. Consider building silence into Webinars or conference sessions to give learners a chance to practice something—which they can't do if the presenter continues to talk (given our limited working memory).
- Establish a practice cadence.
Provide learners with a cadence to help them practice repeatedly and at appropriately spaced intervals to leverage the benefits of spaced repetition and effortful retrieval. You might use a drip e-mail campaign, automated messages from your learning platform, or a customized electronic calendar.
- Support diversified practice.
Provide or challenge your learners to find different contexts for practice (varied practice), and encourage them to apply multiple aspects of what they're learning (interleaving). You might require evidence, like a report on the experience, as an assignment in a course.
- Support improvement-oriented feedback.
Provide checkpoints or coaches to give learners appropriate feedback so they can use that information to improve their future performance.
- Encourage connections.
Remind learners to connect what they're practicing with what they already know or can do (elaboration) and to reflect on how they're performing (metacognition).

Practice is the key that unlocks the ability to apply what's being learned. It's the only way that what you teach transfers from course, classroom, or conference into the reality of the learner's situation.

Too many learning businesses view practice as only an instructional issue and solely the concern of instructional designers and developers. But, in the current market for lifelong learning, practice is also fundamentally a business issue. The imperative for education and training providers to deliver experiences that move the dial for learners has never been clearer.

Both learners and their employers expect results from their investments in learning, and practice is the most direct path to those results. Buyers will return to learning businesses that can reliably provide those results.

Adding more practice opportunities to your portfolio is good for your learners and for your bottom line. If you want your learners and your organization to grow and thrive, take what you've learned from this briefing and do exactly what it advocates: Put it into practice. ▶◀

From Knowledge to Mastery: The Undeniable Impact of Practice Products

by Ashish Rangnekar, CEO and co-founder, BenchPrep



Improving the learner experience is paramount for learning businesses. Offering certifications or credentials is a pivotal part of learner value and experience. Learners typically progress through three stages to achieve certification: learn, practice, and certify. The practice phase, although essential, often gets overlooked by learning businesses. Practice bridges learning and certification, enhancing the learner experience and building confidence. By emphasizing practice, learning businesses not only equip those they serve with refined skills but also unlock significant revenue opportunities.

Learners recognize the [importance of practice](#), especially for high-stakes certifications. If you don't offer supplementary practice resources, learners will turn to other prep providers. By providing these materials, you can retain learners, create a new revenue stream, and build loyalty, positioning yourself as the go-to source. Leading learning businesses and credentialing bodies such as the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), CompTIA, and the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) provide comprehensive practice products for certification exams. Remarkably, about 80 percent of members engage with these products, making them some of the most popular offerings in these associations' portfolios.

When learners seek third-party resources, there's a risk of misinformation or a discrepancy in quality. This could, inadvertently, reflect poorly on the original certifying body. By owning the practice products, organizations can maintain the integrity of the content, ensuring that what is practiced aligns perfectly with what is tested. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) recognized this challenge and partnered with BenchPrep to create [Study Hub](#), an innovative digital solution that provides free access to study materials for students worldwide.

Financial sustainability is a challenge for many learning businesses, and diversifying revenue streams is of utmost importance. Practice products represent an additional, often substantial, revenue stream. One top global business school association, the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), saw a [133-percent increase in sales](#) in the first year of unveiling prep and practice materials to its members.

Offering digital practice materials also gives organizations access to invaluable data. Monitoring how learners interact with practice content can shine a light into which areas they struggle with most, allowing for improvements in both the learning materials and the exams themselves. In fact, CFA Institute, a leading finance association, is able to predict with 90-percent accuracy who will pass or fail their exams based on the data from their certification training material.

Furthermore, practice products play an instrumental role in boosting learners' confidence. As learners familiarize themselves with the content and format through practice, the apprehension associated with high-stakes exams diminishes. This boosted confidence can decrease dropout rates and increase pass rates. It goes beyond gaining knowledge; it's fostering a readiness mindset. For instance, GMAC reported that 96 percent of candidates felt exam-ready after using its prep program.

The ultimate goal is to support your learners. Offering practice products sends an explicit message that you are invested in their success and career progression and support them as a comprehensive learning *partner*. This enhances the perceived value and reputation of your organization.

Offering practice products isn't just beneficial—it's imperative. Beyond the clear revenue opportunity, they drive learner engagement, foster loyalty, bolster brand reputation, and elevate educational quality. The question isn't whether learning businesses can afford to develop these products, but rather if they can afford not to. ▶▶

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 and credentialing bodies trust BenchPrep to power their online study programs, including the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, Amazon Web Services, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), CFA Institute, CompTIA, the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), ISACA, the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME), the Project Management Institute (PMI), and many others.

More than 9 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain professional success. Learn more at www.benchprep.com. ▶▶



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About Leading Learning *publisher of this executive briefing*

Leading Learning (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), 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. ▶▶

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