UPSIDE LEARNING

Position Paper

Microlearning

A buzzword we hear a lot about is 'microlearning'. Famously trademarked (inappropriately) at the height of the hype, it has persisted as a marketing concept. Proposed as a reaction to content-heavy learning designs, the general promise is smaller content, with associated benefits. While nothing can be the panacea that the wildest claims promise, is there some real value to be found?

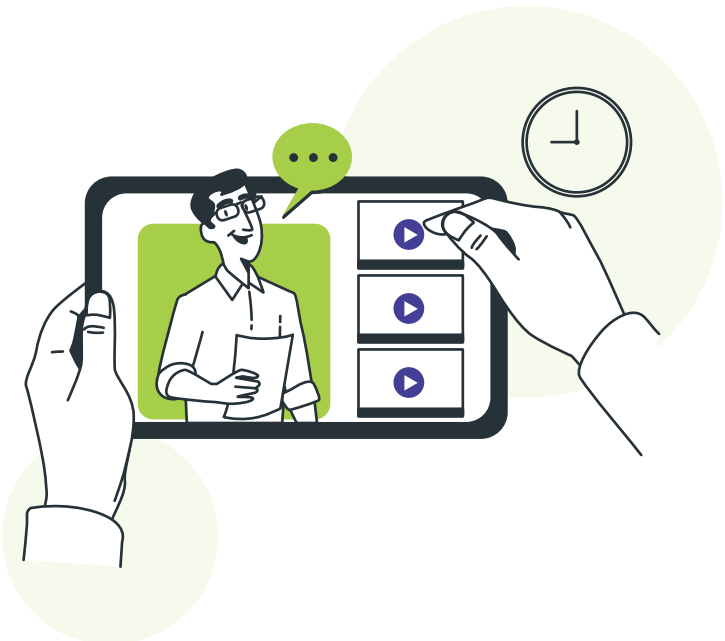
We believe that the underlying ideas that lead to the value of microlearning are worthy of attention, but the nuances are important. Here, we explore those nuances.

What is it?

What is 'microlearning'? The obvious interpretation is a small bit of learning. In all cases, it's a little bit of content. There are several promised benefits from this design. There are three general proposals for what microlearning is.

One of the general claims is that microlearning is like YouTube videos where you can look up how to do something. This is also one of the interpretations of workflow learning; you can get help when and where you need it to get something done. It's generally viewed to be the smallest amount of content that will help someone achieve their goal. The good point here is that people are getting things done without any unnecessary time and resources.

Another common interpretation is that microlearning is a course spaced out over time. This is touted on the basis that our brains can strengthen connections – the underlying mechanism of learning – only so much at any one time before rest is needed. By breaking content up, we match the learning experience to our cognitive mechanisms.



A third, but less common proposal, is that it's a unitary bit of content that meets a learning objective small enough to be learned in one shot. The notion that sometimes accompanies this approach is that most learning can be broken up into such small learning objectives. Thus, microlearning here can be considered to be both a small solution and an extended one.

Why is it important?

In all cases, the small size of any one experience is proposed to have benefits. For one, the development costs are expected to be lower if you're producing less content. A second benefit is that learners are less likely to tune out, and even be engaged by recognizing that this is only a little bit each time. There are also arguments about the experience being more effective, with the mention of alignment to human learning.

With the proposed benefits, microlearning has the opportunity to be a meaningful change in how we work. The focus on minimalism leads to learning effectiveness and development efficiency in one effort. We obtain better performance outcomes while also reducing development costs.

This potential for improved outcomes explains the continuing prevalence of microlearning in L&D discussions. However, there are areas of concern.

Why is it problematic?

The first problem is found in the three different major uses of the term. Each of them is different, with different design requirements. Lumping them all together in one concept suggests that the vendor and the consumer (whether internal or external) could be talking about different things (or, worse, not understand what they're talking about).

In the case of immediate help, this is a well-known and valuable concept. The approach of performance support – job aids – is valuable, and also well known. Here, we're *not* concerned with learning! It's about helping people without learning being required (or even desirable). What's required isn't learning design, but information design (there are differences).

The second approach, breaking up learning into smaller chunks, is again a valuable idea, and also well-known. Spaced learning, as it's known, has very specific components involved in successfully designing a solution. One requirement is sufficient to practice; learners need to actively learn, as opposed to the ability to consume for the sake of performance.

Our need is to accurately identify the appropriate amount and timing of spacing, specifically focusing on what needs to be reactivated. The frequently-seen approach of taking an existing course and just breaking it up into chunks doesn't reflect this. There's a different design process required.

Which leads to the third approach. This is what you'd do if you were doing a good job with the first approach, but it's not clear that it *all* can be done in small chunks. There's reason to believe that an initial experience – introduction, concept, example, and at least a first practice – may not be able to be addressed in a small bit of content.

Further, thinking that such a design of microlearning will yield lesser development costs is potentially misleading. While development costs may be less, the design costs may be as much or more. The upfront analysis to determine the best approach also is likely to be more than taking an order for any one solution.

Our approach

At Upside, we believe strongly in using the appropriate technique for the desired performance outcome. There are times when learning isn't the best approach, and it's better to put the guidance into the world rather than in the head. Similarly, when learning is required, the situation – complexity, importance, and frequency – determines the amount of spacing required.

To do this properly requires appropriate analysis. Taking an order for a course isn't ideal; too often it's easy to apply for a course when there's a better solution. Similarly, a typical content-dump course isn't going to have the persistence of appropriately spaced learning.

Then, we need an aligned design process. Whether a job aid or learning experience, each has its unique drivers and the resulting outcome. Using the right approach is critical for ultimate success. We strongly believe that minimizing content is to the benefit of the performer, whether for performance support *or* learning. We also are big proponents of learning designed to achieve retention and transfer, not just 'exposure'.

A solid understanding of the cognitive and learning sciences provides a basis for determining what content and when. This includes determining whether to use performance support or learning. This also includes designing either of them. In the latter case, it requires considerable elegance to create an effective sequence of learning events that will eventually lead to a persistent new ability to do. We welcome a conversation about microlearning, to ultimately lead to better outcomes for your organization. That's what we are all about. How about you?