From catalogues to dynamic curation

Prepared by OfCourseMe

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At the dawn of e-learning, digital training was typically offered in the form of a catalogue. Specialised training companies had instructional designers whose job was to develop a consolidated and more or less static corpus on their particular topics. In parallel, companies – especially large ones – established a tendency to make at least part of their employee training virtual, perhaps the less specialised, more cross-functional part, in order to make operations more scalable and efficient.

The catalogue still tends to be the method (almost) always chosen, even for the most advanced topics and in the most modern contexts, such as soft skills catalogues, collections of

inspirational videos, and highly topical repertoires on themes and techniques for personal and professional improvement.

In 2021, however, this is no longer the full picture: the changing context and the rapid obsolescence of skills (especially hard and specialised ones – think of STEM areas and more besides) have imposed a new paradigm where the static catalogue (however vast and well curated) no longer seems the most efficient solution. The new keywords when it comes to e-learning content are flexibility, adaptability and freshness.

> The new approach consists in exploiting the ability to explore and compare all existing online content, whatever its format and source, to produce selections (or playlists) of content tailored to your company: in various formats, from various platforms, and modifiable over time.

OfCourseMe has already enabled dozens of companies to embrace a strategy that complements and goes beyond the single catalogue: we'll call it "dynamic curation".

The new approach consists in exploiting the ability to explore and compare all existing online content, whatever its format and source, to produce selections (or playlists) of content tailored to your company: in various formats, from various platforms, and modifiable over time. Catalogues also come into dynamic curation, as parts of them flow directly into our playlists, but the new strategy (with catalogues as a subset) is by its nature more powerful and in a way transcends them.

Numerous companies have asked us which types of businesses should move towards dynamic curation and why, rather than sticking to the comforting old habit of buying a good catalogue on the topics you want to invest in. Some tend to assume that the difference is the quantity: hundreds of thousands of titles rather than a few dozen. This in itself would be more of an obstacle than an advantage: why have to orient yourself in a vast ocean when you can be satisfied with a single trusted supplier?

We therefore want to clarify and explain in detail the specific advantages of dynamic curation and why it's already becoming the new standard, potentially also alongside – and not in place of – catalogues.

> Incidentally: no, it's not
> a question of mere quantity.

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The variety of forms

Let's start from a basic premise: with technology where it is, digital training no longer only means online courses.

In the daily lives of employees nowadays, online educational content (or rather digital content that can be used for training) ranges from YouTube tutorials to structured MOOCs produced by universities, from talks by authoritative subject matter experts in very diverse contexts to learning pills ably curated by skilled trainers to convey atomic concepts.

There is structured and unstructured content, audio, video, text, long and short content, introductory or in-depth content. Sometimes we speak improperly of formats, alluding reductively to the editorial type of content, but from a more abstract point of view they are really forms: different forms of transmitting knowledge, experience and information.

Well, in a complex universe of different forms, just as if they were triangles, squares, rectangles and circles, a new educational opportunity arises. Different forms work better or worse depending on the training objective, the nature of the topic, the individual or group they are addressed to, and the educational time or context in which they are offered. A content catalogue typically consists of items which are similar in terms of editorial format, didactic approach, duration, style, and tone of voice. In a nutshell, a catalogue often contains items with the same form, and this is also true for the most contemporary or even futuristic catalogues from a technical or training perspective.

The message the business takes from this is too often that only certain employees are open to online training, while for others you have to resign yourself to providing mandatory training, trust in on-the-job training for everyone else, and keep your fingers crossed.

If the premise is philosophical, the consequences are extremely practical: what happens if we offer an entire company population a catalogue of triangles, when entire departments are accustomed to circles? Are there didactic situations that are perfect for squares, while certain topics should really be handled with rectangles? Typically, only part of the content is effective for part of the population, on part of the topics. The message the business takes from this is too often that only certain employees are open to online training, while for others you have to resign yourself to providing mandatory training, trust in on-the-job training for everyone else, and keep your fingers crossed. It doesn't have to be this way.

Dynamic curation means consultancy dedicated to the individual company and selected content with different forms: triangles, circles, squares and rectangles. There are catalogues too, but they are only part of the spectrum of forms we can call upon. Different people, different situations, different forms. Objection number one: how do you know which forms work well for which people and contexts?

**Very simple answer:
we don't know, but we learn.**

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The power of data
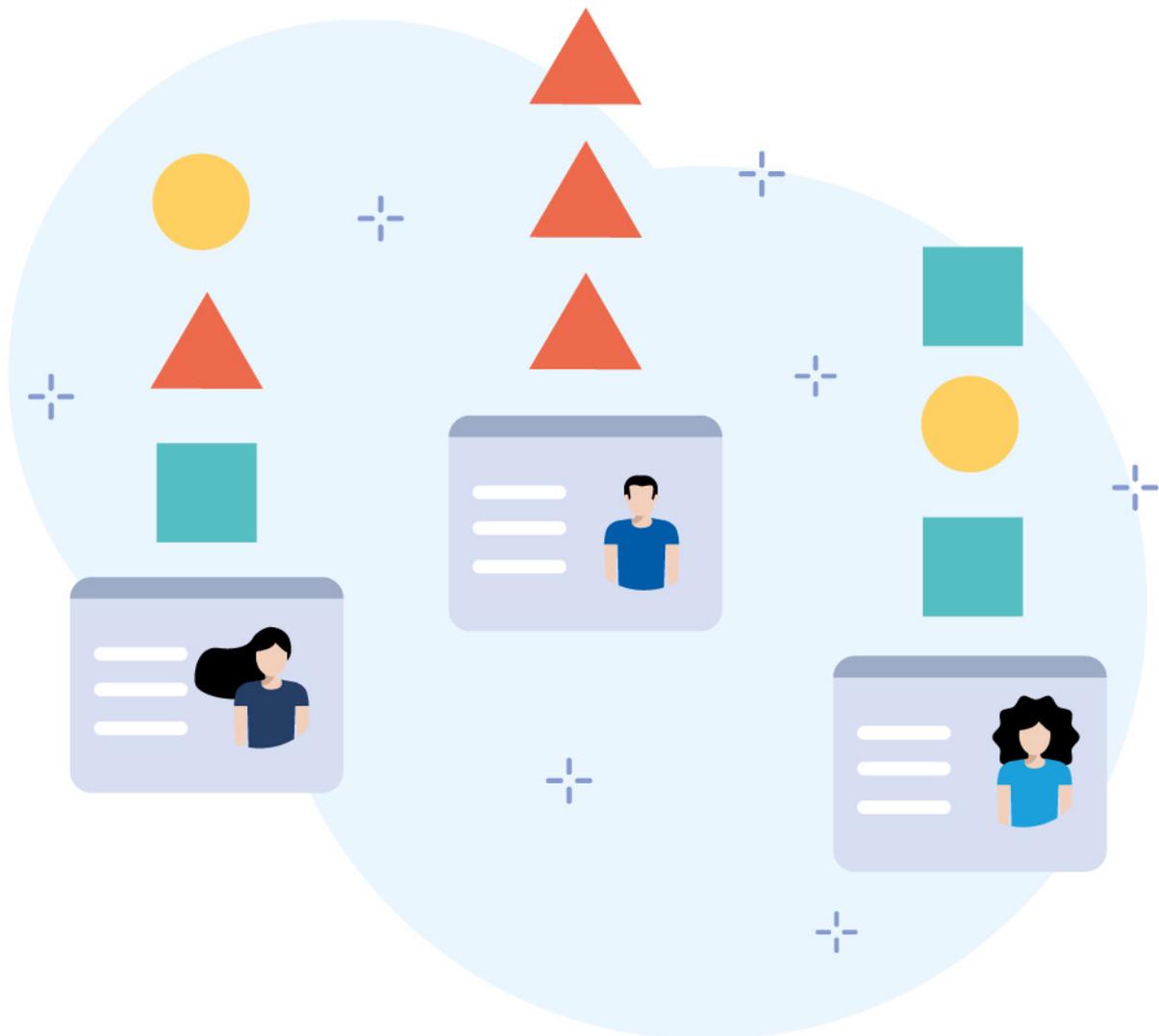
When we start working with a company, we define the scope of the training together.

The L&D team enumerates the topics to be explored for each company department or subpopulation. Together we define the personas of the employees we want to reach and hypothesise the formats, languages, durations and types of content that are worth proposing to each one. On this basis, we develop playlists we believe in, following the process detailed in this guide. Finally we launch the training project, and from day one we start analysing the data, which

tells us which content works best for which group. People are able to search freely and find content besides what we propose: this gives us valuable information on how we might change our initial choices.

Sometimes we've guessed right: we've suggested the perfect content for a particular group. Most of the time we've had some big surprises, made unexpected discoveries, and learnt. All of our case studies describe the lessons we've received, and at this point, we feel like we'll never stop learning.

Finding out what works well and what really doesn't is fundamental to correct the strategy, but it's actually much more useful than that for L&D departments: tactically, it gives precise indications on which catalogues or how many licences it's worth buying from a particular supplier; strategically, it clearly highlights any shortcomings or gaps to fill in when it comes to training and more generally to people strategy. For example, many people looking for communication content may indicate the need to invest more in collaboration between departments: these types of insights enrich the work of L&D.

> If we decided to only offer triangles to everyone, at best we might find that triangles are perfect for all company employees, in any field. We want to be clear on this: it never happens. Generally, the most classic of self-fulfilling prophecies occurs: as expected, only some of them are ready for triangles.
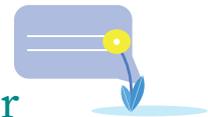
**What happens if you choose to rely on a single catalogue instead?**

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You don't learn, you don't evolve, you don't improve. The business will be more or less satisfied with the results, for next year they'll need to understand the uncertainties, and only one thing's certain: **the ball is no longer in our (your) court.**

See the difference it makes having different forms and being able to analyse the data?

And it doesn't end there.

Constant change, continuous optimisation
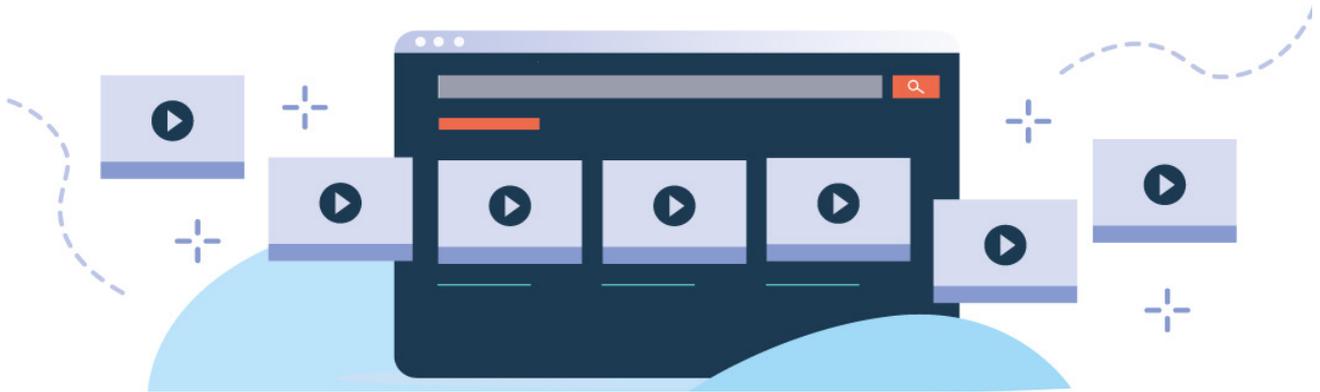
It's called dynamic curation because it evolves continuously over time.

You can change the titles within the playlists or create new ones at any time. This typically goes hand in hand with data analysis: training needs change over the months, and our analysts constantly support the L&D team by helping them understand what it's worth trying to change to maximise service efficiency. Data is never an end in itself: it is always functional to improving the training experience. However, if the idea of modifying the content based on signals sent by the learner population sounds too theoretical and abstract, we have much more stringent case studies.

In the age of continuous upskilling and reskilling, we know perfectly well that the tools, methods and approaches to apply in work and everyday life are constantly evolving. In coronavirus-stricken 2020, lockdown and smart working took this concept to the extreme. The hot topics on the agenda changed completely overnight. From ways to manage a team remotely to how to get the most out of Microsoft Teams, from the pandemic's labour law implications to effective remote communication. Even very traditional companies have had to deal with these situations, which no one was prepared for. In terms of training, could a catalogue be enough? Could a catalogue bought in 2019 still be topical in 2020? It could be argued that 2020 was an extreme case, but that's not so. Changing geopolitical situations, evolving legislative frameworks, new technologies and methodologies have marked all of the last few years. From the GDPR to Brexit, from cryptocurrencies to artificial intelligence, from agile methodology to the explosion of coaching to mindfulness: all these things have changed companies' training needs along the way.

It's happened every year and it will happen again

Conclusion: dynamic curation as a training strategy

On closer inspection, it's not even possible to compare catalogues and dynamic curation, because the latter is an authentic 360° training strategy which consists in continuously optimising content to maximise training efficiency, saving money and resources, and building a real culture of continuous training in the company.

As we've seen, this strategy is based on the continuous iteration of a three-step cycle:

1 **Selecting content with different forms;**

2 **Data analysis;**

3 **Content optimisation.**

It's certainly a modern and updated training approach, but it's not a revolution or a gamble.

We don't propose to implement a technology that's never been tested and is full of unknowns, but to adopt a well-established and consolidated process. And we don't say no to catalogues; on the contrary, we know some of the highest quality, but we propose to place them within a context of dynamic curation which allows the L&D Team to evolve quickly, guiding the business through the ever-new challenges it must face.

It's incredible how simple things always make the difference: systematically adopting and executing this strategy can really be enough to make L&D central and bring a true culture of training to the company.

And OfCourseMe will always be by your side throughout the journey there.