Why the Future of Learning Is Instructorless

Semi-synchronous collaborative learning is transforming leadership development.

Here's what it is and how it will change learning forever.

There's something of a dirty secret at the heart of most learning solutions. They're not selling learning at all. Instead, they're selling teaching.

You can tell by the way they talk about their offerings. There's the "master" at the center of Masterclass, where Alicia Keys shows you the basics of songwriting and former US presidents guide you through their leadership philosophies. There are the star faculty touted by higher education institutions signaling their prestige. There are the "passionate industry experts" instructing LinkedIn learners. There's Scott Galloway's Section4, a thought-leader-driven brand where the "best minds in business" relay their expertise.

Teaching is important. We've all experienced the influence a skilled educator can have. Great teachers should be celebrated, valued, and empowered to do the things they do best, like facilitating an in-person, hands-on workshop.

But talking about teaching isn't the same thing as talking about learning.

And when it comes to the vast majority of L&D applications, particularly in the digital world, there's a problem with constantly putting teachers at the center of the experience: *this isn't how people actually learn at all*.

How we learn: what the research tells us

Study after study has shown that people learn best not from teachers, but from peer interactions, which are more important than instructor skill in fostering both knowledge retention and application.

> **A growing body of research demonstrates that social interactions spur deeply powerful learning in a way a solo learning experience simply cannot.**

Similarly, emerging evidence indicates that the social dimension of cognition matters more than most of us ever suspected. Peer instruction has been proven especially effective for helping learners solve novel or unexpected problems and challenges. Particularly when learners are working through divergent viewpoints together, the exchange of ideas between peers improves both teamwork and critical thinking.
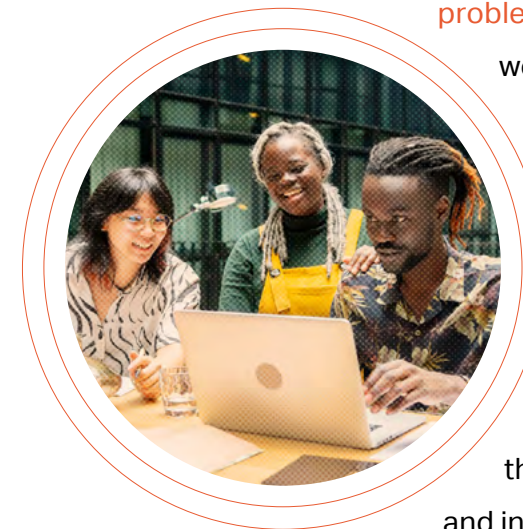
When you think about it, you'll probably find this is true to your own experience. We often ask people to describe their most transformative moments as learners, and one factor typically links these moments across generations, geographies, and industries: social interaction. In these stories, while an instructor may have introduced a novel concept, it's almost always discussions with peers that help the learner make sense of that concept and incorporate it into their understanding of the world.

Semi-synchronous collaborative learning

We see this in practice in our Academy all the time. We don't have instructors at Nomadic. Instead, we use a **semi-synchronous collaborative learning** model. It's **semi-synchronous** because though our Programs are time-bound, with learners moving through the content during the same five or six weeks, learners log in when it's convenient for them, with no set schedule for completing each section. And it's **collaborative** because our entire Academy is cohort-based, with social interaction between cohort members at the core of the learning experience.
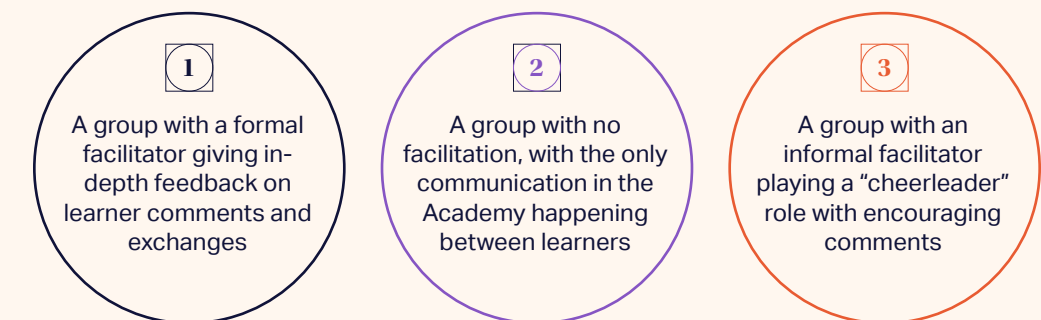
Here's what this looks like in practice. Learners log into the Academy during the flow of their workday. They explore multimedia learning content, react to their peers' comments and insights, and deepen their thinking by refracting their understanding of the content through the perspectives of their fellow learners. Cohort members discuss how the learning content applies to their goals and tasks. They workshop ideas together. They dig deep and get vulnerable.

> **Most importantly, as learners share their struggles and victories with their peers, they create connections between the learning content and their lives: the exact type of connections that make the learning relevant, applicable, and ultimately transformative.**

Putting instructorless learning to the test

From the beginning, we saw that this semi-synchronous collaborative learning model led to huge gains in learner engagement, completion rates, and metrics related to both business outcomes and transformation. But even with all the research pointing to peer interaction as the most important factor in learning, creating an instructorless Academy in a world where it's nearly impossible to talk about *learning* without talking about *teaching* felt radical. So we wanted to understand more about why this model was working so well.

To this end, we carried out an experiment with Citi using one of our Programs. We split the instructorless cohorts into three groups:

1

A group with a formal facilitator giving in-depth feedback on learner comments and exchanges

2

A group with no facilitation, with the only communication in the Academy happening between learners

3

A group with an informal facilitator playing a "cheerleader" role with encouraging comments

Each time we ran this experiment, the third group saw significantly more engagement and interaction between learners. The second group followed, while the group with a facilitator playing a more traditional

instructional role consistently lagged behind. After that, we interviewed learners about their experiences in the different groups.

> **It quickly became clear that the presence of a formal instructor made the learners feel less responsible for driving active conversation with their peers.**

In fact, sometimes the interviewees wanted to speak up and share their insights, but they felt they'd be stepping on the facilitator's toes if they were too engaged with their fellow learners' ideas—that was the teacher's job, after all.

Discover untapped talent

One note about the "cheerleader" role. Outside the bounds of this study, we've seen that in a given cohort, a small group of learners almost always takes on exactly this role: encouraging their fellow learners, kicking off great conversations, and leading the way in modeling curiosity, openness, and deep engagement with the learning material. This pattern is so consistent that we've begun seeing it as a key indicator of a healthy learning cohort.

Interestingly, these unprompted "cheerleaders" are rarely the employees organizations anticipate. The behavior thus provides another useful data point about internal talent, potential emerging leaders, and quiet forces within the organization—one our clients never would have observed with an instructor in the mix.

One learner described this phenomenon well, saying that instructorless cohort-based learning draws "a wider range of ideas from a broader group of individuals." The learner also noted that introverts in particular tend to express more ideas in the Academy than they might in a meeting

setting, benefiting from the mixture of individual reflection and group collaboration that semi-synchronous learning provides. Similarly, another learner pointed out how the Academy allows non-native language speakers time to gather and express their thoughts more comfortably than they would in a live workshop—all factors that make the learning experience not only more effective, but more inclusive and more conducive to discovering new internal talent, too.

Implementation tip
Engaging learners with semi-synchronicity

L&D professionals often split learning solutions into two major categories: synchronous and asynchronous. We've found that the best learning sits somewhere in between: **semi-synchronous learning**.

In Nomadic, learners engage with the content in a self-directed fashion in the flow of their work. But our Programs are also time-bound: there's a start and end date for each cohort. This means that though every learner moves through the Program at their own pace, they're doing so within the same timeframe as their fellow cohort members.

The semi-synchronous model allows learners the advantages of asynchronous communication—flexibility, time to think, a written record of the great ideas that emerge—while also offering the motivation, community atmosphere, and intellectual spark that comes from engaging with the material at the same time as their colleagues. Interestingly, instant messaging solutions like Slack occupy a similar gray area between synchronous and asynchronous communication. **This may be one reason learners find the rhythm of interactions in our Academy very natural!**

Semi-synchronous collaborative learning: what does it look like in practice?

It's probably happened to you. You read a book with your book club or go out to a movie with friends. When you all get together, *you can't stop talking about it*. One person couldn't stand a certain character while the other person related to them deeply. One person thought the story was all about a certain theme while someone else had a different interpretation entirely.

Great content leads to great conversation, and great conversation deepens our understanding of both that content and the world.
To foster the kind of peer interaction that will lead to transformative outcomes, learning content must work in much the same way. The material needs to provide the spark for great conversation, including debate and disagreement. It shouldn't spoon-feed learners; instead, it must present ideas that will spur them to make essential connections on their own.

If you think this sounds a lot like what a skilled educator might do in the classroom, you're right.

> **In semi-synchronous collaborative learning, well-crafted content plays the role of material and facilitator, both presenting the concepts and sparking the discussions that lead to great learning outcomes.**

And unlike that skilled educator, it can reach tens of thousands of learners at once— a key feature of semi-synchronous collaborative learning that we'll touch on in a moment.

When it comes to the specifics of what this content should look like, first, there are what we think of as the baseline necessities: content should be curated to meet learners' needs, well-crafted and beautifully produced, up-to-date with the latest insights, and deeply engaging. This is all important, and at Nomadic, we work hard to ensure our content is and does all these things. But what's even more important is how content drives learning outcomes.

> **Does the content encourage debate? Does it motivate the cohort to apply learned concepts in professional settings?**

When you ask these questions, it becomes much easier to actually measure whether content is successful rather than relying on a vague idea of "good." In our Academy, we track comments, engagement, social interaction, and influence across a number of benchmarks. This allows us to measure content quality in a more meaningful way: that is, relative to its effects on the desired learning and business outcomes.

Better content, better learning design

Looking at all these different elements of great learning content—from staying up-to-date to engaging learners and fostering the debate that leads to great learning metrics—we can confidently say that at Nomadic, **our semi-synchronous collaborative model makes our content better**. Removing the instructor from the center of our learning design has

allowed us to think much more strategically about how our Academy can best serve learners and their organizations.

Rather than one "sage on the stage," each of our Programs features several top experts and practitioners, ensuring we share the best thinking in a given topic and present a range of perspectives. For example, our Program on hybrid work features academic experts from **Stanford** and **New York University** and practitioners at the helm of remote work decisions at **Google** and **Boston Consulting Group**. This eclectic group offers learners a more complete vision of a topic than a single voice ever could.

In addition to a variety of voices, semi-synchronous collaborative learning has given us the freedom to structure the learner experience more precisely, with research about attention, psychological safety, and learning "stickiness" informing each of our design decisions.

Some examples of these learning design decisions include:

- Presenting the content in a variety of formats

- Sequencing content to ease gradually into more vulnerable discussions once learners have established a connection to their cohort

- Providing content in a cadence that allows for learning reflection and scaffolding over a sustained period, avoiding "one-and-done" learning scenarios

Ultimately, this is all about creating the same effect as a great book club book or a thought-provoking movie: inspiring a discussion that will help learners connect the material to their lives and ultimately change the way they think and work.

Implementation tip
Designing for innovation

In 2007, Steve Jobs introduced the first iPhone to reporters. To these reporters' dismay, the device was missing a physical keypad. One journalist struggled while attempting to type on the screen. Jobs simply replied, "Your thumbs will learn."

It had long been gospel in the cellular industry that physical keypads would be the central user experience for years to come. Our thumbs did learn, however, and by the time Blackberry realized the market (and users) had moved on to touch screens, it was too late.

Blackberry's approach was based on skeuomorphism: that is, the impulse to carry over familiar design elements from one iteration of a product to another. Skeuomorphism isn't always a bad thing. The folders on your computer desktop, for example, signal their function in a simple and elegant way. This phenomenon only becomes a problem when it holds us back.

In digital learning, most new entrants to the cohort-based learning market are skeuomorphic, simply bringing basic classroom instruction online. This often takes the form of something that looks like a Zoom meeting with a bit of LMS and administrative capability around the edges. Like Blackberry's keyboard, this model is appealing in its familiarity. But it doesn't take full advantage of the technology at hand.

Stepping outside skeuomorphism and leaving behind the traditional instructor-led learning model creates space to ask a whole new question.

> **Suddenly, it's not about "How can we bring the physical classroom online?" Instead, it's "What actually leads to the sort of transformational learning experiences that will, in turn, lead to real business transformation?"**

Reaching more learners, driving more transformative outcomes

We've been talking a lot about the benefits of semi-synchronous collaborative learning when it comes to impact at the level of the individual learner. For many organizations, there is also a very practical side to the decision to opt for this model: the types of skills managers need today and the scale at which they need them.

To understand this, we need to look at the rise of soft skills, which are more in demand than ever. Historically, these skills—also called power skills, mindset skills, or emotional IQ—were mostly associated with leadership's upper echelons. But now, whether working remotely, in-person, or some combination of the two, today's knowledge workers have deeply collaborative jobs that require teamwork, decision-making, creativity, and strategic thinking. And managers at all levels are being called upon to flex their soft-skill muscles.

- The World Economic Forum has rated critical thinking, analysis, problem-solving, and resilience as some of the most in-demand skills over the next five years.

- In a survey of 900 executives, *The Wall Street Journal* found that 92% said soft skills were as important or more important than technical skills, and 89% struggled to find employees with these skills.

- Deloitte forecasted that soft-skill-intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030.

For learning professionals, this shift poses both an opportunity and a challenge. Reskilling is more crucial than ever. As a result, at many companies the C-suite now recognizes L&D's central role in driving business outcomes and has begun bringing learning leadership to the table for decisions about business strategy, organizational design, and more.

There's just one problem: soft skills aren't easy to learn or teach.
Challenges like managing a hybrid team, using analytics to drive great strategic decisions, and communicating with empathy require more than a set of memorizable concepts copied from a PowerPoint. Old models like click-next e-learning were fine for technical reskilling. Today's needs call for a whole new approach.

Learning for today's business needs

In decades past, leadership capabilities could be taught in an offsite for the C-suite. Now we have a learning landscape that feels like a giant word problem. Instructor-led solutions simply can't scale, and thus can't drive the kind of organizational transformation that large-scale learning makes possible. So—if tens of thousands of managers need leadership skills but flying everyone to an offsite in Cancún is cost-prohibitive (and frankly, ridiculous) ...what's an L&D team to do?

The answer, for many, has become semi-synchronous collaborative learning. It's the only digital learning model that can scale to tens of thousands of learners, while maintaining quality and effectiveness in teaching today's leadership skills.
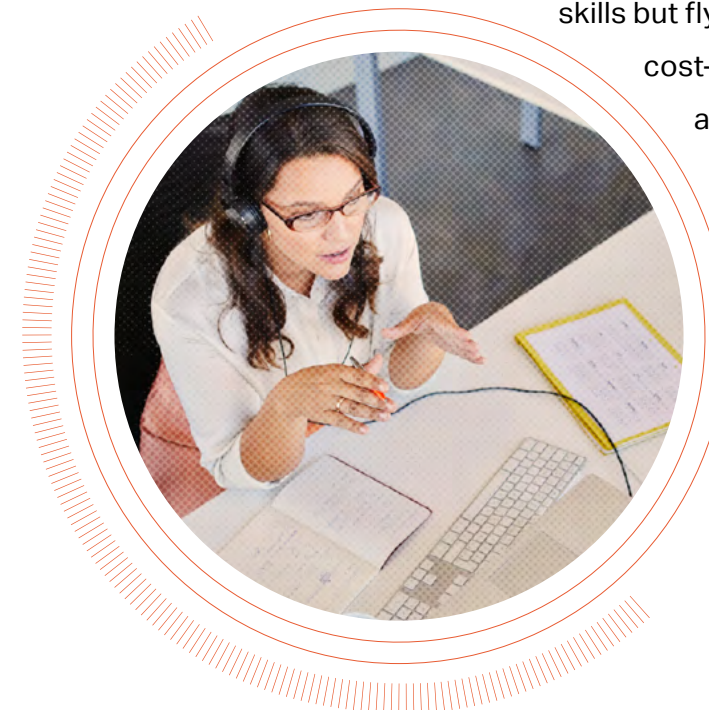
Removing the instructor removes the main barrier to scale, that is, the one thing most digital solutions just can't work around when they try to reach a global audience.

And both the "collaborative" aspect and the "semi-synchronous" aspect of this model are central to its effectiveness, too. The collaborative aspect is key for developing soft skills: these deeply social leadership capabilities demand learning that's deeply social, too. And a cohort-based Academy that puts learners in conversation with each other provides the best of in-person leadership learning without the prohibitive cost.

Meanwhile, the semi-synchronous aspect is essential for learning that will truly break down silos and barriers. Any solution that requires synchronous lessons or tasks is inevitably going to create inequities, challenges, and inconsistencies as it scales across globally distributed teams. Managers in Taipei should be sharing ideas and insights with their colleagues in Chicago, but they shouldn't have to wait for an instructor in London to log on to do so. Meanwhile, for the organization that does attempt to offer more convenient learning schedules, training hundreds of facilitators from different time zones presents its own challenges when it comes to consistency and quality control.

Instructorless learning removes these systemic inequities and logistical headaches. Semi-synchronicity solves scheduling issues. Well-curated universal content means there are no inconsistencies among facilitators who may put their own spin on learning topics. And translation and a multimedia approach to content creation—video, written stories, audio, and more—offer a straightforward way to account for different language proficiencies, learning styles, and accessibility needs.

Learning, not teaching: changing the conversation

The instructorless experience is simpler, more inclusive, and better for learning. It also just feels *different*. Learners notice, and their organizations notice the impact. **One member of our HR Academy, Martina Pumpat—a truly enthusiastic learner—told us she valued the diverse voices and peer interaction in our Academy so much that if we ever introduced instructors, she'd quit.** On the organizational side, one CHRO, after poring through learner discussions and observing the wealth of qualitative data, called our Academy an "insights machine."

And all this with no Masterclass masters, no celebrity faculty, no sages on stages, no Zoom-box instructors.

It's time to flip the conversation on its head. **We're not here to talk about teaching. We're here to reimagine learning.** Putting the learner at the center of the experience not only makes learning more impactful, it also opens new possibilities for how our organizations tackle uncertainty, how we innovate, and how we grow.

It's a small shift, but it leads to big possibilities. Who's coming with us?

What's your business transformation challenge?

Get in touch today and let's explore how L&D

can be at the center of driving real results.