

# The CLO as Auteur

*Ben Warden*



By taking a filmmaker's perspective, CLOs can build effective learning programs that articulate their personal vision while also creating innovative, adaptive learning that satisfies executives and keeps the audience coming back for more.

The CLO's job is similar to a movie director's. Both have an end result — either to finish a movie or develop an employee. Along the way, each makes thousands of choices that are invisible to nearly everyone without an understanding of the process.

Filmmakers make movies that are wholly original and effectively capture their vision by changing lighting and camera angles. Similarly, a CLO or learning executive can tweak and change methodologies and delivery methods to make their learning program as valuable as possible. However, CLOs and directors are judged by their results, not their procedures. A CEO or studio executive is more interested in the finished product — the productive employee or finished movie — than the details of how he or she arrived there.

This kind of freedom can invite a host of methods and theories revolving around the best way to accomplish each goal. In the 1950s, a young group of French critics-turned-filmmakers embraced what they called the "auteur theory." The idea was that a movie should be the personal creative vision of the director exclusively.

In their thinking, the director is the person entrusted with deciding what works best for the picture. So why should financiers or a studio handcuff them?

Like filmmakers, CLOs have budgets that are closely watched by executives, so communication and compromise are essential to each job's success. But like the auteur filmmaker, a CLO must have the ability to quickly and decisively make changes to better the overall program. Just like if the footage of a horror movie isn't

scary enough, a director can add shadows, fog, more sound effects or creepier music, a CLO should implement the tools he needs to maximize the effectiveness of his learning program.

Pete Thedinga, senior vice president and learning and leadership development executive at Bank of America Card Services, agreed that developing a learning program, like making a movie, is a fluid process that must be agile. Because many of the employees his organization trains will be face-to-face with customers, Thedinga has worked during the past few years to add as much to the program as he can to prepare them for that.

"I try to look at it not only as how do you create and maintain a program, but how do you constantly reintroduce different modules, different media and different modalities of learning," Thedinga said. "In order to improve and reduce the classroom time and increase the practical time, there's a lot of scenario-based training, role-play, modeling and simulations I've put in place."

As a learning leader, Thedinga takes the initiative to implement a learning method better suited for the actual tasks of his employees. Like an auteur, he's using the tools around him to hone in on a style fitting to the final product. And like a fortunate auteur, he has the blessing of his superiors to make changes to the learning program as he deems necessary.

"I think the beauty of the Bank [of America] is that we have very strong values, a very clear leadership model and we expect our leaders to act in the best interest of the company," Thedinga said. "If I say to my superiors, 'Hey, we

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## in practice:

## Xerox: Creating a Learning Masterpiece

When independent-minded directors put the auteur theory to work on a certain genre, the results can often be transcendent. A pulpy, dime-store gangster novel became "The Godfather" in hands of Francis Ford Coppola. Another perceived dime-store novel, this one about a killer shark, became "Jaws" in the hands of Steven Spielberg. Similarly, corporate learning has its own "genres" that are influenced by the content involved.

For Tim Conlon, corporate director of learning and talent acquisition at Xerox, flexibility and fluidness are priorities in employee development programs. When designing learning offerings, he considers their shelf life in relation to the investment involved.

"You end up wanting these programs to last forever when, in fact, they're probably outdated in 18 to 24 months," Conlon said. Because of these circumstances, Conlon and other learning leaders frequently have to make shrewd decisions to better serve the "big picture," just as big-name directors do.

For example, when Spielberg was shooting "Jaws," the plan was to show the shark early and often. However, technical trouble and malfunctions caused him to abandon this. Using point-of-view shots, Spielberg got away with not showing the shark until the last third of the movie, effectively throwing away the millions spent to create a working, omnipresent shark. He also knew the clunky-looking shark would look outdated very quickly, thus he quickly reorganized his efforts. The changes he made help to cement the timeless effectiveness of "Jaws."

Conlon had a similar experience to Spielberg in a leadership development program he developed, complete with budgetary pressure and abandoned plans.

"I've actually been in programs before where, on Wednesday, we decided to change the rest of the class because it wasn't working as effectively for a particular audience as it was the previous one," Conlon said. "We modified the rest of the week and delivered something entirely different than what was intended, to make sure that it was just as successful but customized to that particular audience. If you're fluid and flexible, you can do things like that. Also, we make sure it's really tied to the most important elements of our strategy and, as the strategy gets modified and new things are worked on, to change what was needed from last year to this year and make sure that's reflected in the content."

One of the challenges Conlon faced in designing Xerox's leadership development was designing content specific for a broad range of experience and needs. Mid-level management has the most extensive population of managers, and a host of different backgrounds and goals precedes each one. This presented a problem because much of leadership development is customizing needs and content for those going through the program. He said that while there was no way one program could meet all the needs of his audience, he had to act quickly to find a way to anchor it somehow.

"I just decided I would take three critical business issues," he said. "One is strategic alignment, understanding the business strategy deeply, the second is business acumen and the third is the leadership attribute. We built a weeklong program that focuses just on those three things, and in doing so, I wrapped a significant number of senior managers into the program to help support it. Since I couldn't meet every individual's needs, I tailored it to the company's."

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should try this,' I absolutely have that leeway depending on how many lines of businesses are involved."

But being a CLO auteur isn't only about looking down the road to new technology and developing new programs. An auteur, either in filmmaking or learning, has to be equally prepared to look at forgotten methods that may be fitting for a current program or project. In their movies, directors often throw in references, homages or a particular plot or technical device from the past that influenced their style. Thedinga was similarly drawn to the past when he resurrected a holistic business analyst program for high-potential candidates.

"We stopped that program for a variety of reasons, but we got a lot of feedback on it and were constantly being asked when we were going to start it up again," Thedinga said. "Because it created an opportunity for folks to be able to go from one line of business to another other, we're going to dust it off, reprogram and repackage it a little."

Just as the auteur filmmaker is defined and studied by academics in the field, so are learning executives and CLOs.

George Siemens is a corporate learning research specialist and associate director of research and development at Canada's University of Manitoba's Learning Technologies Centre. He also is founder and president of Complexive, a learning lab focused on helping organizations develop integrated learning structures.

Siemens is researching how learning leaders choose tools to fit the distinct needs of the organization. Film scholars study cinematic techniques that increase the subjectivity of a character and how an audience identifies with that character. Comparatively, Siemens takes a similar approach with modern tools and how they impact learning.

"The question becomes how we take some of these tools that have shown such a significant impact in other spheres and make them available for learners to use for learning," Siemens said. "Blogs, wikis, podcasts, virtual worlds, immersive environments, simulations and crowd sourcing — these types of ideas become front and center when we look at these emerging technologies. My focus specifically is on evaluating the impact of these tools and their suitability for the learning process."

To be able to evaluate and choose tools for a learning program, it's essential that CLOs have an understanding of where the organization is, financially and otherwise. Akin to a filmmaker — who knows that since the studio is in bad need of a box office hit, he may not get his grand three-hour Edwardian period piece green-lit — a CLO must be smart about when to push through new and ambitious learning projects.

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and strengths that exist can be amplified," Siemens said.

Unlike other C-level executives, the CLO has no distinct playbook or roadmap, which leaves the door open for experimentation. A cinema auteur likewise can try things a number of different ways before reaching his or her vision. Stanley Kubrick was infamous for making his actors do hundreds of takes before he was satisfied. On the opposite end, Woody Allen is known for telling an actor what he wants out of a scene, shooting it once and then moving on. No matter what style a CLO chooses to adopt, Siemens sees experimentation in one form or another as a route to an impactful program.

"Continual experimentation and different approaches help to embrace different mindsets," Siemens said. "Regardless of what industry you're in, if you have a cycle of perpetual experimentation, with that kind of approach, you'll be able to at least gain a sense of what works best within your organization."

Experimentation can come with a price: failure. To try and fail is a noble course of action, but in the business world, it can seal your doom. Ideally, CLOs have the freedom to try and fail on a few times before their superiors throw a red flag.

Tim Conlon, Xerox corporate director of learning and talent acquisition, sees the learning leader's relationship with superiors as similar to a filmmaker's relationship with a studio head: If you show the capacity to make one project a hit, you'll be given free rein for the next.

"If you do it well, you earn the right to continue to do it well," Conlon said. "If you screw it up, then it will require a lot more inspection. We've been given an allocation of resources that is what the corporation intends to spend, and as long as I demonstrate the right stewardship with that, we get the right programs."

Staunch auteur theorists would shudder at a filmmaker bouncing ideas off a studio head, but the reality is it's often necessary to get a project to the next step quickly. In the corporate world, communication with senior management is important in order to secure subsequent opportunities. If the CEO or upper management is behind an idea from the beginning, there are fewer hurdles in designing or choosing a learning application or method.

More important than the executive liking it at the beginning is the trainees or audience finding it effective. Conlon said that even though the filmmaker auteur can't initially be concerned with what an audience likes or dislikes, the CLO auteur must be.

"I'm not afraid to try new things, but that requires you to take risks in order to keep the content fresh," Conlon said. "If you keep senior management connected and involved in the process, they become part of it and enjoy it. The participants like training based on what works for them, and based on what doesn't work, we modify it without any reservation. Anything else than a great experience learning needs to be changed."

However, flops do happen to both filmmakers and CLOs. It's a reality because of the creative freedom that can come with each role. The upside is that, in either career, you can't deliver a flop without having delivered a successful project first. In filmmaking, there's some history of auteur directors getting free rein over a large budget after proving themselves with a smaller one.

Director Michael Cimino is a prime example. The follow-up to his Oscar-winning movie "The Deer Hunter" was the massively over-budget box office bomb "Heaven's Gate." Cimino's career never fully recovered and is considered a cautionary tale. Luckily for CLOs, learning applications that don't work can be changed quickly if necessary, and learning from what doesn't work often is just as helpful as finding something that does.

"Flops come in different flavors," Conlon said. "It's rarely binary, where you have a home run and then you strike out, that makes a difference. You have to embrace the notion that if you want to be innovative, you've got to take risks and understand that your very best folks that will be taking risks are not always going to have successful experiences. It's what you learn from it and how you adapt it that matters."

By being agile and quickly adapting to unforeseen situations, CLOs can create programs that have their personal stamp and also fit their organization's context. While an auteur filmmaker's goal is to put his stamp on a project, the decisions he makes still are designed to bring the most out of the film's characters and plot. The personal stamp is a by-product of constantly reacting to the environment in either role.

"The minute momentum in one of your learning programs starts to wane, you have to shift it quickly," Conlon said. "Just because the program works really well, you don't let it stay static. If you do, you'll risk having the program be at best only adequate and at worst totally ineffective." ■

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