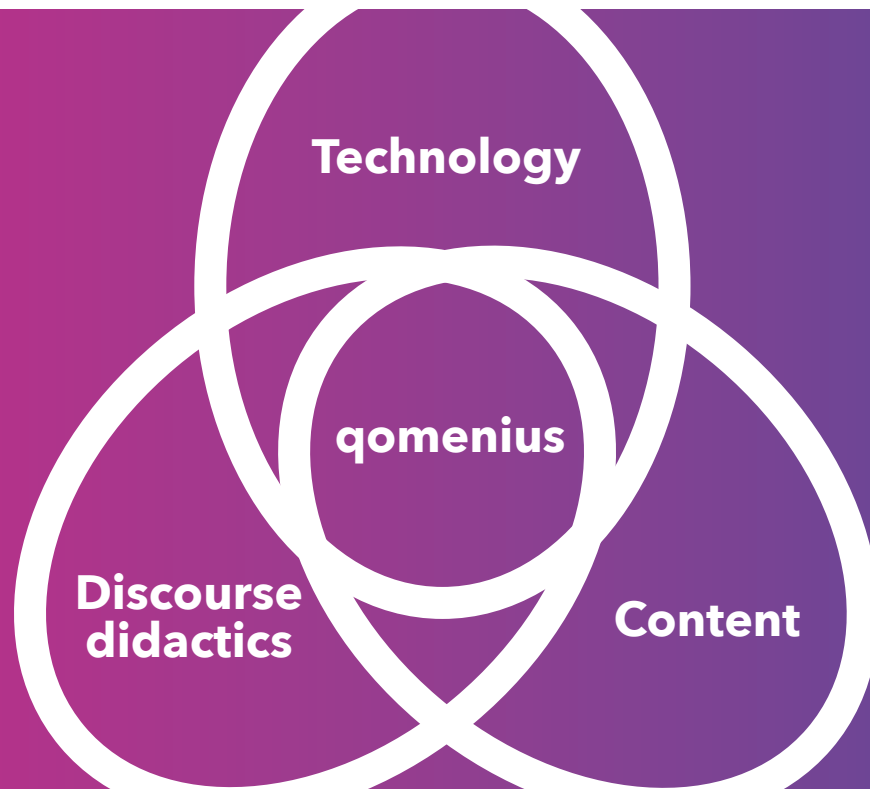


Technology, didactics, content: The triad of discourse learning



A wide variety of learning formats, methods and technologies exists. And they all have their usefulness. An annual ranking compiled by EdTech expert [Jane Hart](#), for example, regularly ranks 300 of the [digital top tools for learning](#). In 2021, YouTube, Zoom, Google Search, Microsoft Teams and PowerPoint came out first in that ranking. What this small sample illustrates well is that not all so-called learning technologies are alike: These technologies offer rather diverse sets of benefits. Not all learning technologies are designed specifically for learning, either: Taking another look at the *top tools list*, for instance, one cannot help but noticing that the first 16 places are occupied by all sorts of general web and software products - from Canva to Wikipedia. It is only on the 17th place that the first pure-play learning application (Google Classroom) appears. Needless to say that not all great learning technology is digital in nature. But what makes learning technology, or method, *truly effective*, in the context of organizational learning?

The learning technology market is a remarkably technology-driven one. Most of the so-called *trends* in Learning & Development (L&D) are exclusively technology-driven: Video conferencing or virtual reality are just but two examples. The predominance of technology orientation in L&D is probably rooted in the fact that the learning technology (*EdTech*) market is still young and relatively immature. Which makes the focus on code, chips, bits and bytes somewhat understandable. But that fixation on technology also comes at a price. In markets like this, the old adage applies that *not all innovation is also progress*.

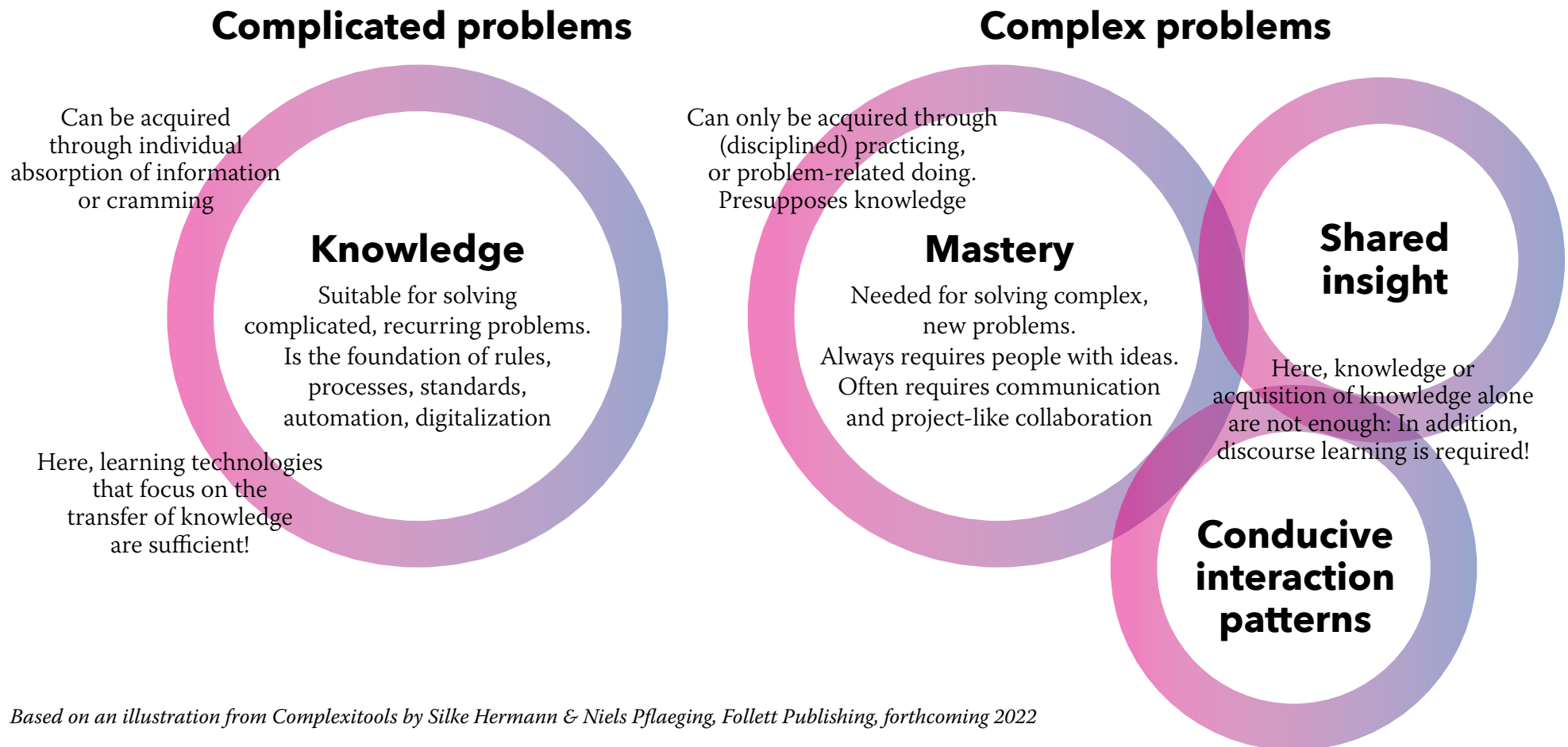
Most learning technologies target individual transmission of knowledge. That's like putting blinkers on

In learning and development within organizations, a particularly import-

ant place has been given to individual learning, or, more precisely, to the individual transmission or assimilation of knowledge. There are several reasons for this. Most of us are familiar with the concepts of transmission and acquisition of knowledge applied in school, during trainings or throughout our studies. In addition, individual knowledge has always mattered in organizations – and it will always do so. In fact, at least in complicated contexts, problem-solving requires knowledge, above all. When we talk about expertise and know-how in the context of organizations, this is usually what we are referring to: The acquisition of knowledge that enables the solution of *known and complicated problems*. Standards and processes, compliance matters or safety certifications are examples of domains in which knowledge works perfectly well.

In the context of *collaboration*, however, and especially when it comes

**The difference between knowledge and mastery,
the complicated and the complex**



Based on an illustration from Complexitools by Silke Hermann & Niels Pflaeging, Follett Publishing, forthcoming 2022

to value creation that requires the division of labor within organizations, *complex challenges* prevail. Here, it is necessary to provide learning opportunities and formats that go beyond the mere conveying of knowledge. In addition to the transmission of knowledge, learning offerings must enable the emergence of a shared understanding of complex challenges and their solutions, and foster collaborative patterns. Such effects on team constellations and organizations can only be produced by learning formats based on *social interaction*. Through the discourse between actors, such formats allow the development of shared vision and new models of actions. In other words, in complex contexts, not only *knowledge*, but also *mastery* is needed (see illustration on the previous page).

Knowledge combined with mastery is good. But in an organizational context, even that is not enough

Individual mastery, or the *ability to solve new problems through supply of ideas* is not quite enough, though. In order to solve complex problems at work, it is often necessary to perform together, in project-like ways of working: Intense communication and collaboration between experts and between people with mastery is needed. The kind of collaboration that is required for problem-solving in complexity is increasingly interdisciplinary, and requires diverse backgrounds, qualifications and masteries. Complex problems, thus, can usually only be solved in *earnest collaboration*.

However, it is precisely this type of collaboration and cooperation that is not highly practiced in most organizations. Where project approaches to work and the quality of communication are poorly developed, the focus is often on treating symptoms and on mere activism. What is needed here

are “alternative” learning offerings, beyond pure technology. An example of such offerings are the *large-group methods*, which were developed between the 1970s to 1990s, in particular [OpenSpace Technology](#), [WorldCafé](#) or [FutureSearch](#), made impressive contributions in this respect, and popularized revolutionary forms of discourse – practically without any need for digital technology. However, these formats are not easily applied regularly or continuously. And they are not easily scalable for very large, geographically distributed groups. In addition, the content dimension is all too easily sidelined in these methods, especially if the aspects of volunteerism, urgency on the side of participants, and precise choice of topics are not sufficiently taken into account when preparing such formats.

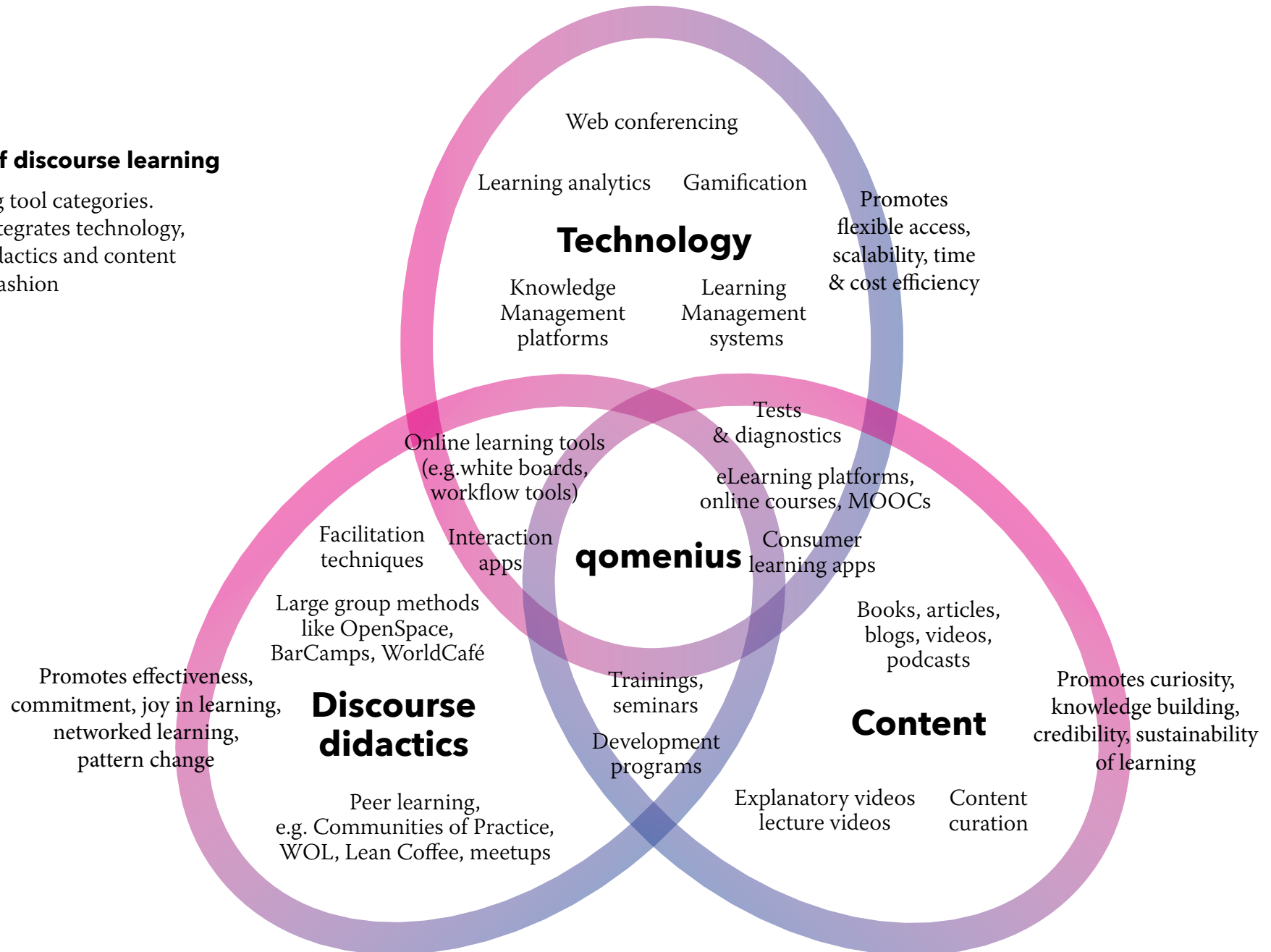
Learning opportunities in complex contexts should generally be based on *networked, dense social interaction* and *active debate*, as allowed by OpenSpace and WorldCafé formats. However, voluntary reflection and debate among peers needs to be practiced – just like everything else. Which means that one-off discussion events are not enough to achieve the goal: it takes repetition, rhythm, and iterative method in order to develop a shared understanding, as well as interaction patterns conducive to complex problem solving.

Discourse learning requires no less than a triad of technology, didactics and content

In this white paper, we explain why a high impact of organizational learning on organizational action and development can only be expected if the technology, the learning method (*didactics*) and the content (*subject matter*) are combined. The aim of this triptych is to bridge the gaps between knowledge, mastery, intuition and application by coupling them

The triad of discourse learning

with learning tool categories.
qomenius integrates technology,
discourse didactics and content
in a unique fashion



very closely. Thus allowing organizational learning to develop much higher impact, and to develop impact much faster (see illustration on page 5).

We define *didactics* as science and practice of learning, which includes theories of learning and the methodological approaches to support it. As such, didactics are not preoccupied with problems of teachers alone, but with the context of learning and the internal processes of learners. Didactics are concerned with the content of learning (the *what*), the method of learning (the *how*) and the context of learning, which includes its historical, cultural and social justifications (the *why*).

One-sided focus on technology as a problem in organizational learning

We already spoke at the beginning about the prevailing focus on technology, even the love of technology in the *EdTech* market. The dangers of a one-sided technological orientation in the field of Learning and Development are obvious: Without a coherent didactic concept, the effect even of the best technology, the most refined hardware or software solution will always remain a dead letter. The impact of technology will be restricted to the level of entertainment or of single events. Corresponding tools will quickly lose their credibility and their appeal to learners. The promise of efficiency that digital technology (however powerful) brings, can never be fulfilled without marrying the tech to coherent didactics.

To illustrate this problem, let's consider the example of browser-based *Learning Management Systems (LMS)* for a moment. Although the corresponding web-based technologies have been pretty widespread since the late 1990s and even though LMS today make up the largest share of

the learning technology market, the effectiveness of these systems is still a matter of some controversial debate. The distinction between technology, didactics, and content allows to shed light on the problem: Learner profiling, learner gap analysis, training and course management, certification and badges do not by themselves make for an attractive and welcoming learning environment. To date, typical LMS seem to be more steeped in the idea of learner control and tracking than in the idea of maximizing learning and impact. Their design appear to cater less to the needs of learners than to those of learning managers, sadly.

The blind spots of digital learning technologies are not limited to didactics, or learning method. Without consistent *content*, even attractive technology often leads to user frustration and, consequently, to a lack of credibility among tech customers and learners alike. A good example are on-line interaction tools like [Kahoot](#) or [Mentimeter](#). Both are designed to spice up encounters on-line and off-line, and to potentially add fun and educational value to events, ranging from workshops and keynotes. And while the use of these applications is as intuitive as one might wish for, producing a link between such gamification tools and the desired learning content and outcome is far from trivial.

Moreover, the overemphasis on technologies such as *gamification* (often misunderstood as a didactic tool) assumes that learners must be constantly stimulated, teased and motivated to engage in learning. Gamification technique employs stimuli that have nothing to do with the content: Such approaches wrongly assume that learners are not interested in either learning or content, for their own sake. At the same time, stimulus-based technology attempts to condition learners. All of which is a far cry from notion of self-determination, human motivation and development.

One-sided focus on didactics as a problem in organizational learning

As we have discussed, *didactics* refers to pedagogical or learning concepts and methods. But not any question at the end of a long list of bullet points deserves to be called didactics. Almost all didactic elements used in corporate learning today have been borrowed from the didactics of classical educational institutions – i.e. school and university. This explains the predominance of formats such as seminars, trainings and leadership programs, right up to the madness of today's MBAs and ongoing professional education, which are highly influenced by the pedagogy of schooling.

More often than not, these traditional learning formats are characterized by a strong emphasis on classroom instruction, sometimes supplemented by testing, grading, and assessment. An example from the education system illustrates the problem: the school concept of the *class year*, supplanted to professional environments, means that similar people from the same field, backgrounds, or hierarchical levels should always be grouped together to learn.

In such a conventional logic, forming more mixed, and therefore more diverse learning groups would not be advisable. On the contrary, the concepts of scientific, [Student-Centered Learning](#) or [Dialogic Learning](#) (promoted by education pioneers like [Montessori](#), [Dewey](#) and [Piaget](#)) have long advocated that the differences between learners are a valuable resource, and of direct use in the process of learning *with-each-other-for-each-other*: Here, *diversity* is considered into an integral component of didactics.

So far, the corresponding principles of such Student-Centered Learning and pedagogy have not yet made their way into corporate learning. Nor have the principles of such pedagogy been incorporated into the design of most EdTech products. Yet, cross-group, cross-functional and hierarchy-spanning learning interventions are pretty easy to achieve. You just have to want it. A rarely appreciated benefit of cross-hierarchical learning groups: The experience of the other (including managers) as '*someone normal who is also learning*.' If the learning process takes place together, then it is possible to witness each other's moments of understanding – to experience that moment when the other person *clicks*.

In the [Montessori Method](#), now a powerful international pedagogical movement in many countries, not only are mixed-age classrooms a standard, but also trans-disciplinary learning and *Learning through Teaching*. Modern approaches to discourse learning, such as Qomenius, make use of the same didactic concepts. Moreover, if one takes the principle of *learning-with-each-other-for-each-other* to its logical conclusion, one inevitably stumbles upon learning formats in which intense, discourse-based peer learning renders teaching by experts and coaching by teachers completely superfluous. We will discuss the related approaches in more detail, later in this paper.

The art of establishing *peer-to-peer, social learning* is first and foremost to make carefully prepared and welcoming learning environments available to learners. Such learning environments should not only open up a space of resonance between learners temporarily (as achieved in Open-Space meetings, for example). They should also combine temporary spaces for dialog in a more permanent fashion, as well as employ technologies and contents in a way that, on the one hand, potentially sustains learning

and, on the other hand, integrates it as closely as possible to the learners' professional reality and daily work.

In order to achieve this, most organizations will have to overcome a few practical obstacles. For example, access to learning opportunities is often seen as an integral part of *career* mechanisms. In these cases, learning formats are thus by no means used exclusively for producing learning itself – they are also a means to career development. This greatly reduces the options to create high-impact didactics, learning formats and content design.

One-sided focus on content as a problem in organizational learning

Organizational learning today focuses on classic concepts of initial and continuing education – and is often strongly inclined towards the ideal of *knowledge transfer*. The corresponding formats take up a lot of space. Additional content is often largely absent, and ignored, such as topics related to the development of the organization and of cooperation itself. Overall, “pure content” applied in the context of organizational learning lacks a *networking effect*, on the one hand, and a *link to its application*, on the other. Content that is not embedded in coherent didactics lacks the dimension of practical application, or at least potential application within one's own reality. Content that's decoupled of didactics will only in rare cases successfully bridge the void between knowledge and its application.

The original form of pure content, the *non-fiction, specialist book* features a unique characteristic: It is capable of reconciling high content density with a high degree of specialization. This may sound trivial. But it

is not. Because even after having read a hundred or so specialized books in a certain trade, fatigue does not necessarily set in – at least not among passionate readers. The effectiveness of newer content presentation formats wears off pretty quickly, by contrast. An example: Explanatory videos. Even well-produced series of explanatory clips lose their appeal, after a while. The surprise, or even bliss, that most of us felt when we first watched the RSA animation video based on [Dan Pink's talk about Drive](#) on Youtube, back in 2010, can never be repeated. At least by the third or fifth viewing of videos of the same kind, boredom, even rejection, set in. Afterwards, the content presented can neither be remembered, nor applied. That does not mean that explanatory videos or other *bite-sized formats* are bad. The problem is that they are merely *sideshow content*.

RSA-style animations or visualizations are a far cry from being didactic. Generally speaking, contents that are presented, heavily visualized, or curated in audio/video formats lack the mystery, and the element of discovery by the learners that is useful for lasting memorization or learning. Not enough effort is required by the learners to *decipher* meaning, while too much is *explained* to them. Only a combination of content and didactics allows *learning without explanation*. The expansion of didactics to *discourse didactics* allows for collegial decoding of the content in a discussion. This way, all learners can effectively become teachers.

Four concepts of discourse didactics – for highest impact, combined with minimal use of resources

The unique feature of Qomenius is the intimate combination of technology, didactics and content. The Qomenius approach to learning combines

conceptual reflection and dialogue, personal insight and thoughtful application to real-world, practical problems within groups of peer learners. This goes far beyond the individual imparting of knowledge.

We do not understand the word *problem* as hinting at something negative, though. We define the term problem merely as *a phenomenon that cannot be ignored*. Problems matter. They need to be tackled. There is usually a lot of talk in organizations. But not always with each other. Or around specific content or actually problems. Often, we do not talk about problems, but about symptoms of problems. It is not the quantity of conversation that is the lacking, but its quality. Because, for ambiguous interrelations and complexity to be understood, more than just talk is needed. What is necessary is *focused, disciplined conversation*: Without this, nothing works in complexity! Without enduring actual conflict and discussion, new and collective insight or knowledge will rarely emerge, if not by chance. But without actively *building shared understanding*, no relevant action, no intentional action for change will ever result.

Discourse learning promotes exchange that is focused on topics, or real-world problems, in a way that the production of insight and new knowledge is quick and effortless. Even within larger teams or large groups. Qomenius is designed to encourage positive and meaningful application of conceptual insight, or practical theory in one's own domain and organization. Always in a constructive way. While preserving the most precious resource that organizations possess: Our time.

In the following sections, we will discuss key concepts of discourse learning that are particularly characteristic of Qomenius. Each of the four concepts, taken in isolation, would not be very effective. It is their combination, and the coherence between them, that makes the difference.

Concept 1. Small-group-based - in diverse groups of four, five or six

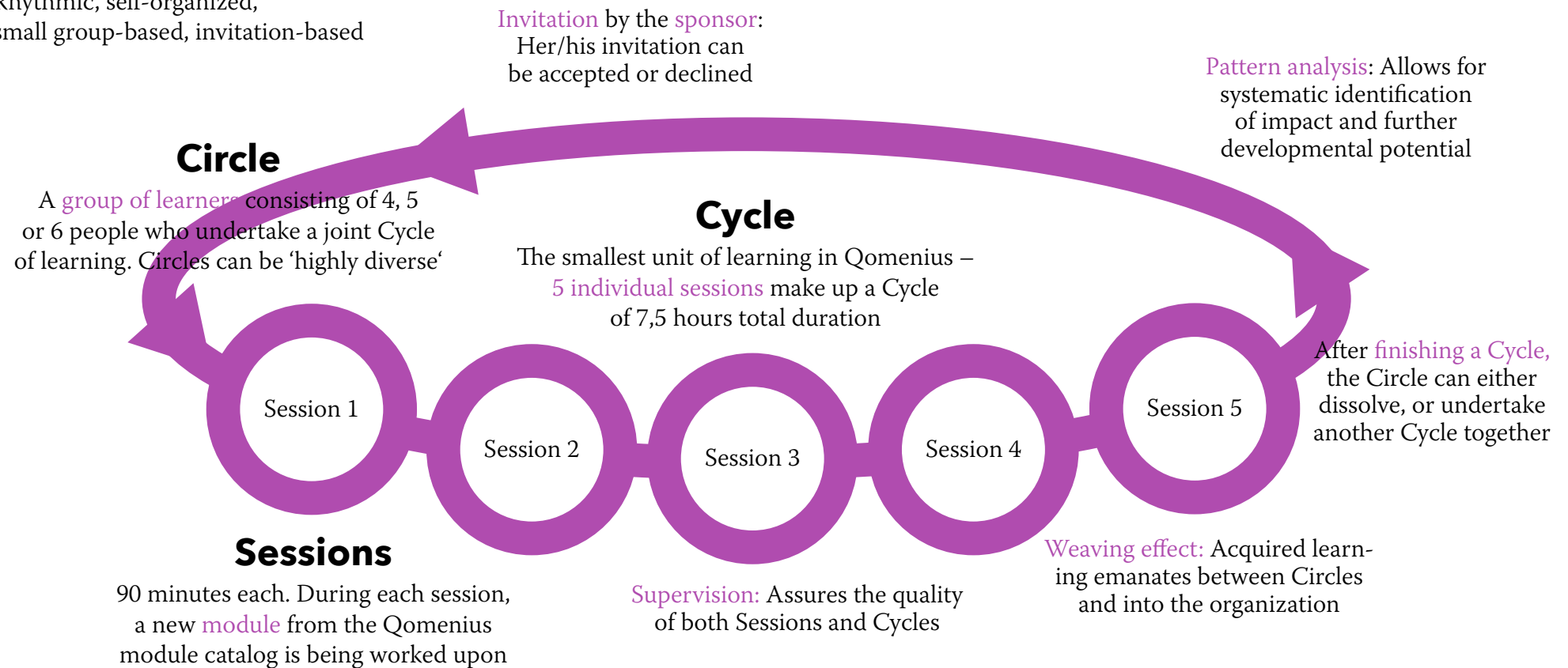
If the didactic framework is sound, then self-organized, social learning in small groups can do without seminar rooms, without experts or knowledgeable facilitators. Dialog and critical discussion are best exercised in the protected space of the small, intimate group. Ideally, small group learning requires something that is abundantly available in organizations: colleagues. And enough of them, so that many different points of view can meet. Enough to allow everyone to express themselves regularly, or to speak up. For it is also by speaking up for oneself that one can acquire new insight.

The heart of discourse learning is the intense discussion between learners in a small group, intensified by the setting, or the contextual framework. Each Qomenius session generates such socially dense conversation among learners. The Qomenius methodology provides both content and the setting for the discourse to happen. In each session, listening, questioning, and sharing are integral to the work of learning together – *with-each-other-for-each-other*.

For high-quality discussion within a group to emerge, reliably, a balance between the provision of *conceptual input* and the joint handling of *reflective tasks* is paramount. Within groups of learners, everyone gets along best when these groups are small enough (so that no one can lean back or isolate themselves), and also are large enough (so that different characters and masteries are sitting at the table). In short, a small, diverse and undisturbed group of four, five or six colleagues is the perfect learning accelerator, in pretty much every way imaginable.

The discourse didactics of qomenius

Rhythmic, self-organized,
small group-based, invitation-based



This illustration is inspired by LearningCircles by Red42, a free-to-use open source social technology by Silke Hermann & Niels Pflaeging, published under the CC-BY-SA-4.0 license from Creative Commons, which can be found here: www.redforty2.com/learningcircles

Concept 2. Rhythimized - through Sessions, Cycles and content design

Any discourse didactics requires rhythm – *it must groove*. In other words, it has to be iterative, ongoing, pacing, varied, energetic, motley, pulsing, cadenced, patterned, structured. In short: Discourse didactics is the exact opposite of large, costly, isolated learning events. For learners, the rhythmic of discourse learning create a sense of reliability, clarity and sustainability throughout the learning experience. In Qomenius, specifically, rhythmic are achieved through a variety of concepts: through iterative, time-controlled learning *sessions* and *cycles*, as well as through the design of flow within the individual learning sessions.

Perhaps the most striking concept of rhythm in Qomenius is the *time-boxing of the individual learning sessions*. Each session in Qomenius encompasses a specific unit of time: 90 minutes. Reliably. Learning in 90-minute units is familiar to all of us. For good reason, it is a time span that is common in school and elsewhere. On the one hand, a duration of 90 minutes is long enough to cover something new in sufficient depth. On the other hand, it is short enough for learners to be able to maintain focus and be concentrate continuously. 90 minutes also allows enough time in every session for a beginning, a middle and an end.

One level above that, there is another rhythmic concept: In Qomenius, *five sessions of learning form a Cycle*. A sequence of five sessions provides enough time for learners to establish and grow trusting relationships among them. The duration is short enough so that learners can make commitments to a Cycle, ahead of the first session, without much risk. Five sessions provide enough time for a beginning, a middle and an end.

The prepared learning environment provides for intensity to emerge in every session. Within the different Qomenius *modules*, additional rhythmic concepts are embedded. Conceptual information (or *practical theory*, as we often call it) is introduced in short sequences, comparable in length to scenes in a movie. This information is immediately reflected upon by learners, in the light of their work and shared problems. Then the next short input is presented, followed by yet another interaction. And so on. All “scenes” of a Qomenius session are time-boxed. Thus, pacing, pulse and iteration are produced within all sessions, too. Through the pacing, learning during sessions becomes intensified, time passes quickly, just like in a good movie, or during an intense conversation among friends.

Concept 3. Invitation-based - the prerequisite for voluntariness and engagement

Wanting to learn is a personal decision. Someone who does not wish to learn cannot be effectively forced by others to do so – and we should never even attempt to do any such thing. Indeed, any exercising of coercion will only hinder the desire to learn in others.

Put differently: A high level of commitment from people is always a result from their ability to *act freely*: to make decisions for themselves. Voluntary action is attractive – being commanded or coerced is not. For the reality of discourse didactics, this means that all corresponding learning formats must be 100% *invitation-based and voluntary* – instead of being imposed, as it is often the case with corporate development programs, seminars or trainings. In discourse didactics, therefore, the *participation of an individual person must never, ever be compulsory*: The invitation to participate in such formats can either be accepted or declined. Declining

the invitation must be possible without punishment and without negative consequences.

The invitation itself must be positive and attractive to all those invited. And only *authentic invitation* (one which provides the two options of accepting or declining it) can be perceived as such – without being mistaken for a hidden instruction. The invitation to practice joint organizational development with everyone, which Qomenius offers, additionally reinforces the relevance and attractiveness of such a learning offer.

Concept 4. Authorized by a Sponsor - opening the space for learning & impact

The invitation to participate in Qomenius is always sent by a person to whom we refer to a *sponsor*. The invitation by the sponsor makes it clear who is authorizing the learning offer, and for whom. It is also made clear in the written invitation that the acceptance of this offer to get involved in discourse learning is *expressly desired*.

With the invitation to participate in discourse learning, another kind of authorization of learners is connected. Because by (voluntarily) accepting the invitation, learners are not only authorized to learn for their own personal gain, but also to draw conclusions from what they have learned and apply what it for value-creation with their own organization. This authorization of learners to act is by no means merely *nice to have*. It is essential, if the learning that is produced is to have an impact on the organization and *be effective*.

Consider this: Without this kind of authorization, learners would constantly have to wonder, throughout the learning process: *Am I actually*

allowed to apply this new insight or that piece of learning – or should I better ignore it in my daily work, continuing in the same way as before, even though I now know better? The authorization of learners by a sponsor with sufficient formal and legal authority to employ the learning is therefore a prerequisite for producing a resonating space between learning and development. It is required for spanning a bridge between discourse learning and organizational impact.

Discourse learning: Perfect for all problems where dynamics and social interaction matter

Organizational learning should focus on content that helps individuals, teams, and organizations to successfully organize the work of today and tomorrow. There are many good offerings around for building foundational knowledge of collaboration and communication. Discourse learning in Qomenius therefore targets challenges for which there have been few suitable offerings so far: It focuses on topics that imperatively require debate and discussion.

There are topics of knowledge that can easily be acquired alone, and even practiced alone. We are deliberately excluding such topics from Qomenius. The themes of Qomenius sessions, its learning materials, or modules are instead geared towards inviting argument and difference, that require classification, that contain a certain level of *ambiguity*, and that may provoke some *disagreement*. Topics, in short, that can only be turned actionable and relevant through *reflexion within a practical context*, or through contextualizing and practicing together. In other words: complex topics require learning formats that enable appropriately high levels of complex interaction.

But what exactly are *complex topics*? By this we mean all subject areas that matter in contexts of interaction and social dynamics. Qomenius modules are supposed to convey content that is intimately related to complexity in work and value creation, and that allows for reflective practice in dealing with complexity – while employing *practical theory*.

The topic of *self-organization* is a great example of this. Self-organization can only be appropriately and credibly classified, reflected upon and practiced within learning formats that also uphold self-organizing principles. In this sense, Qomenius offers a practical learning environment in which self-organization can be constructively understood, supported, consolidated and deepened. The self-organized way of learning during Qomenius sessions is reflected in the content of every single session, which in turn is always applicable to promote the highest levels of self-organization in the work environment.

Discourse learning: Can we bridge the gap between edtech innovation mania and actual L&D progress?

How else could we do this much, much better? – This question should be the primary concern of learning platforms designers. Instead of: *What cool, new digital technologies have we not yet used in our platform?* We firmly believe that organizational learning is not about implementing technologically new or flashy solutions. Rather, it is about promoting perceptible progress in social interactions and in the collaboration between people within organizations and work. As we have outlined in this white paper, such progress can only be achieved through a combination of technology, didactics and content. And not through any of these three elements alone.

Discourse learning, in particular, must always be geared towards promoting *social intelligence*. The technology we employ must, above all, serve to increase this social intelligence quickly and cheaply. Therefore, if possible, without causing additional travel activity; without requiring external experts; without laborious and costly design of learning spaces. All of this, in the shortest possible time and as much integrated into the learners' work context as possible. The Qomenius learning platform provides an ideal framework for achieving this.

Silke Hermann is a highly accomplished entrepreneur and leadership expert. She is founder of [Red42](#), and a founder/director at [qomenius](#), a cloud-based, B2B platform provider that enables enterprise-wide growth, learning and development for all. qomenius was founded in 2018 and is headquartered in Wiesbaden, Germany. Previously, Silke was a partner and managing director of Insights Group Germany. Together with Niels Pflaeging, she developed several organizational open source approaches, including [OpenSpace Beta](#) and *Cell Structure Design*. She is the author of several influential [business books](#). Contact: silke.hermann@qomenius.com

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*This white paper is dedicated to the memory of
[*Jay Cross \(*1944 – †2015\)*](#),
champion of the cause of informal learning in business settings,
a friend and “comrade-in-arms” during his later days.*



**Silke Hermann and Niels Pflaeging,
co-founders at qomenius**

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