

The Power of Peers:

A Framework to Promote
Social Learning at Work

Case Examples by Slack and Udemy

 Udemy for Business



I.

The power of social learning: The collective brain

At its core, social learning is about learning from others in the workplace. Augmented by social media tools, social learning today has become a collective approach to problem-solving that fits our fast-paced world. By quickly connecting with peers for answers to problems that arise on the job, this virtual community serves as a “collective brain” that can overcome complex problems together.¹ Instead of physically tapping your coworker’s shoulder, you can now virtually tap into a whole network of people and ideas.

In today’s rapidly changing world, what employees need to learn next moves faster than what learning & development (L&D) can create. Empowering peer-to-peer learning in your organization can accelerate knowledge sharing and acquisition.

1. Tony Bingham and Marcia Connor, *The New Social Learning: A Guide to Transforming Organizations Through Social Media*, ASTD & Berrett-Koehler, 2010.

While informal peer-to-peer learning is known to drive 70% of learning at work,² how can L&D leaders facilitate this social learning in a more structured way?

In this ebook, you'll discover:

2. Training Industry, "The 70-20-10 Learning and Development Model," January 28, 2014.

A 3-stage approach and framework to help design effective social learning programs at your organization

Case example: How Slack promotes collective peer-to-peer learning

Case example: How Udemy leverages social learning for manager training

Tips to implement social learning successfully

II.

Slack's 3-stage approach to social learning design

How can L&D teams design their programs to help peers collaborate and learn from one another? Here's how the L&D team at Slack—an online workplace collaboration tool—integrates social learning in their employee development programs.

3 stages of social learning

Since collaboration is at the heart of social learning, Slack's L&D team strategically designs their training programs to include 3 key stages.

1

Community Building

The L&D team first focuses on building community to get people to collaborate and learn from one another

2

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Slack's L&D programs focus on a problem for the group to collectively work through

3

Collective Accountability

As the final stage, their programs end with employees committing to change or implementing a solution together

3 main modalities of social learning

At Slack, the L&D team also uses 3 main modalities to foster collaborative peer-to-peer learning. These in-person and online channels offer opportunities for people to interact and learn from one another.



In-person workshops



Virtual video



Social media channels

III.

How Slack promotes collective peer-to-peer learning at work

A CASE EXAMPLE



Ariel Hunsberger

Head of Learning
& Development at Slack

At Slack, we define social learning as any learning opportunity, in any format, where the goal is to learn from one another. Employees are sometimes struggling with the same thing in isolation. How can we create a collaborative environment to enable them to help each other? Building a community of knowledge sharing is a powerful way to facilitate peer-to-peer learning.

We have designed our learning & development programs to incorporate specific techniques for employees to build community and learn from one another. Here's how we create our social learning programs at Slack.





Build trust and relationships through in-person sessions

As a first step, in order to collaborate, we need to get to know each other and **build trust through in-person sessions**. Our company is global with 2000+ employees and we're growing rapidly. Our in-person sessions help employees develop strong relationships and empathy for one another—which are key building blocks to effective peer-to-peer learning. In fact, because the bulk of our interactions are digital in the modern workplace, people increasingly crave face-to-face and personal interactions. Once you lay the foundations for trust, you can then continue to nurture these relationships through other modalities like virtual video conferencing and social media channels.

Slack's 3-stage approach to collaborative social learning

Our social learning programs are designed to promote peer-to-peer collaborative learning using 3 key stages—community building, collaborative problem-solving, and collective accountability via in-person workshops, virtual video, and social media.

1

Community building

2

Collaborative problem-solving

3

Collective accountability



1

Community building

Building a strong community is a key foundation to collaborative problem-solving and learning from one another. Throughout the training program, we weave in building trust and relationships both offline and online. Social learning is built on a culture of sharing and collaboration, but you have to create a safe environment for sharing. Giving and receiving feedback is an integral part of effective peer-to-peer learning. All of our trainings start with teaching and modeling this essential skill. People have to be able to give feedback to their peers effectively as well as be open to hearing other ideas or suggestions on how to do their job. To create a culture of sharing, we build strong relationships and trust in our in-person workshops. We always start with shared agreements to help moderate the space, and run through a quick series of fun intro questions that get people moving around the room and meeting as many new people as possible. Our goal is to get everyone's voices heard in the room, and help people start to open up and realize they are facing similar challenges.

2

Collaborative problem-solving

The power of social learning is tapping into collaborative problem-solving to help employees solve common problems they face in their day-to-day roles. At Slack, we are all always working on improving our ability to communicate clearly, so we run many different workshops around communication skills. For example, a training program might begin with introductions and pre-work background materials like articles, online videos, or courses are shared in advance in the Slack channel. In the channel before the workshop, we invite participants to introduce themselves and the challenges they are working on, so we can incorporate these shared problems into the training.

The in-person workshops focus on role-playing communication skills like practicing scenarios selling to customers or responding to a customer incident. Participants are assigned to small groups to solve a common problem that might arise on the job like communicating organizational changes or supporting customers. We deliberately assign employees to play roles that are not their functional jobs, so they can think outside their role. We provide a challenge to each group as well as frameworks to approach solving the problem. We then turn them loose to work collectively to address the real-world problem. At the end of the workshop, each group shares their approach to solving the problem. This debrief offers an opportunity for discussion and reflection on how they might apply what they learned to their jobs. Post-workshop, we create “live online discussions threads” on different challenges on our Slack channel to provide continuous opportunities for collaborative problem-solving.





3

Collective accountability

Finally, creating collective accountability as an organization or cohort is the final stage of what makes social learning so powerful. At the end of our training workshop, cohort participants commit together on how they will implement the new knowledge or skills on the job. For example, the group might agree to check in with each other, report back on how the new feedback norms are working out, or test out a communication plan with each other. This can be done through accountability partners on social media to give positive recognition publicly when peers practice their new skill or step up to the challenge they didn't know how to face. For example, seeing others both giving and exchanging feedback or tackling hard conversations and then receiving praise helps motivate other employees to imitate this desired behavior.

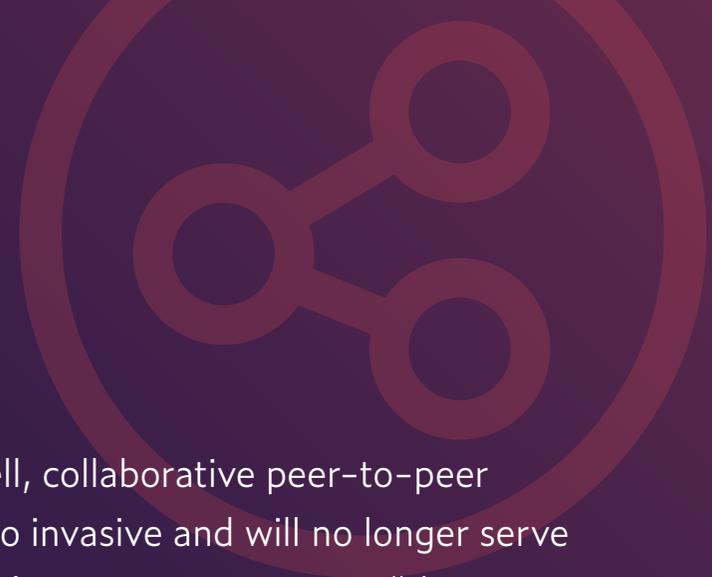
Our L&D team also provides continuous posts on the dedicated Slack channel with top takeaways to reinforce knowledge retention and share relevant articles or videos on the topic. We might provide a new activity to practice new skills and check in every week to see how employees are implementing what they learned on the job.

It's not group therapy:

Avoiding the common pitfalls of a sharing culture

While sharing plays an important role in social learning, it can't be sharing just for the sake of sharing. There should always be a thoughtfully crafted purpose for sharing. You don't want it to feel like group therapy. Every offline and online space for sharing has to have a facilitator and moderator. Our L&D team crafts our prompts carefully and provides parameters to keep the discussion on track and to create healthy boundaries of vulnerability.

If we don't do it well, collaborative peer-to-peer learning can feel too invasive and will no longer serve its purpose. We can't put participants in a "threat state" because then they aren't open to learning or able to be reflective. People won't come back. Our role as L&D professionals is to create an environment where learners can build self-awareness, challenge themselves to achieve goals, learn from failure, have fun, and meet their coworkers while doing it!



Measuring the impact of our social learning programs

The greatest indicator of success in a social learning experience is whether or not people come back, and whether or not they recommend the workshop to their peers and team members. We are also experimenting with behavioral impact surveys to measure self-reported changes in behaviors and skills before and after participating in a social learning program. This tool is starting to provide valuable insights into how people apply their new knowledge on the job.



IV.

Albert Bandura's framework for promoting social learning in the workplace

Social learning theory, pioneered by [Albert Bandura](#), says people learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling. Think of how children learn how to behave in society through watching their parents, teachers, and other children. They often imitate behavior they observe—whether it's good or bad. If they receive praise for this behavior, they will continue to be motivated to behave in this way.



The neuroscience behind social learning

In the mid-1990s, [neuroscience research](#) discovered that neurons in the brain fire up when monkeys watch others doing a particular behavior like breaking open a peanut. These “mirror neurons” regulate the part of the brain that then imitates this same behavior and form the basis of social learning in both monkeys and humans. This natural desire of the brain to observe and imitate starts in babies and continues to influence behavior throughout adult life. Because the human brain is wired to copy those around us, **learning from peers can be a powerful way to acquire new skills and behavior.**

According to Albert Bandura, social learning can be broken down into four key phases

Learning from one another—through attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation—also applies to peers in the workplace. First, the learner must be paying attention to the peer that is modeling the desired behavior. For example, a person of authority or someone who is widely respected is more likely to get the learner's attention. Learners must recall or remember this behavior and then practice imitating the behavior. Finally, employees must have the motivation to apply this new behavior in the workplace—whether it's through performance reviews, bonuses, or other ways to hold them accountable.

1

Attention

Paying attention to the peer or model and the behavior he/she exhibits

2

Retention

Recalling the new knowledge or behavior

3

Reproduction

Modeling or imitating this new skill or behavior

4

Motivation

Having a good reason to imitate this new skill or behavior



When designing social learning programs, learning & development teams can integrate Bandura's key phases of how people learn from one another. In the next section, Udemy's Head of L&D, Shelley Osborne, and John O'Neill, L&D Partner at Udemy, share how their team applies these 4 phases to harness the power of collaborative peer-to-peer learning for manager & leadership training.



V.

Manager Lab: How Udemy leverages social learning for manager training

A CASE EXAMPLE



Shelley Osborne

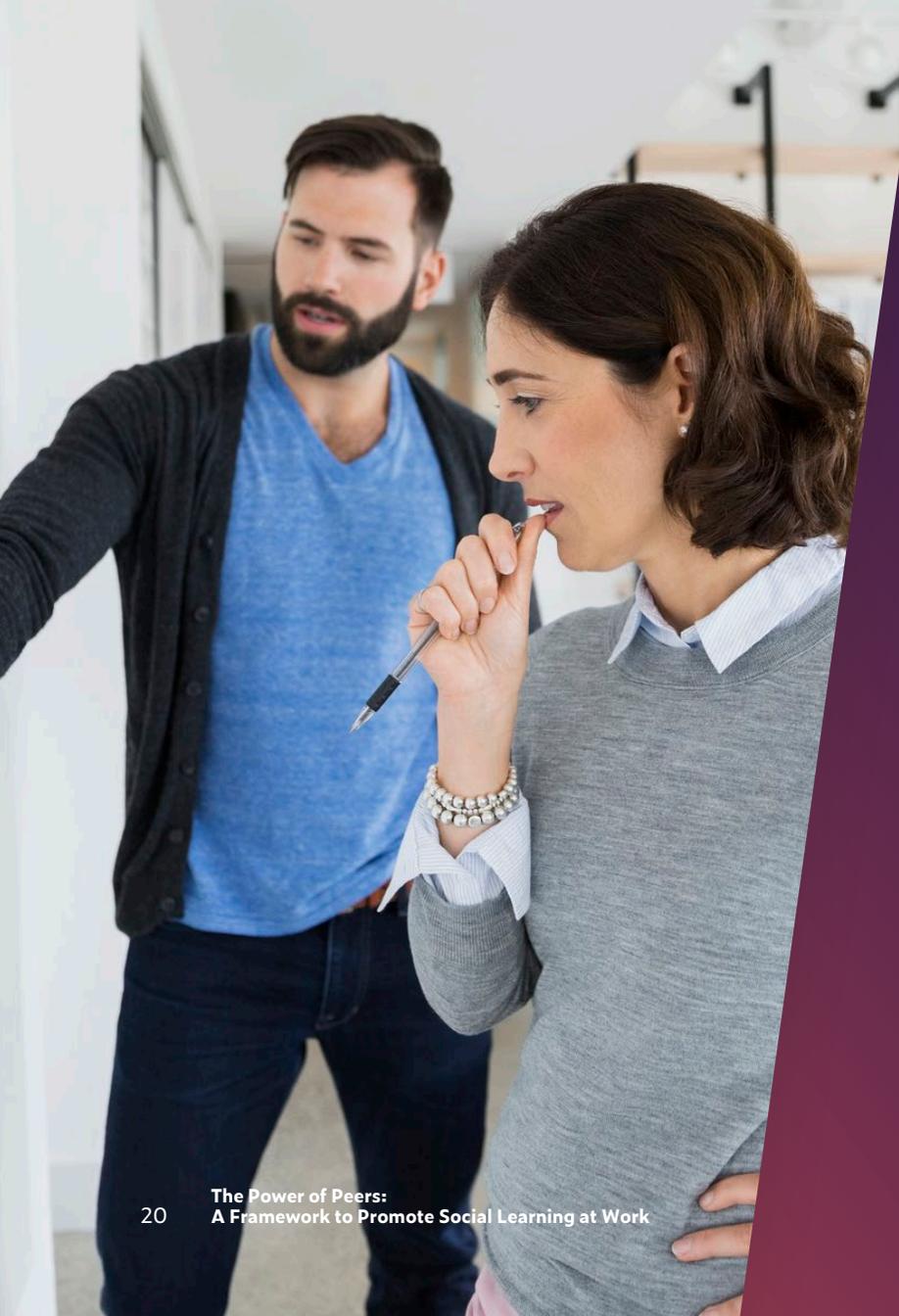
Head of Learning
& Development at Udemy



John O'Neill

Learning & Development
Partner at Udemy





How Manager Lab was born

The Learning team at Udemy first offered **Manager Untraining**—a series of social learning workshops including peer-to-peer sharing, fireside chats with leaders, and group-selected topics. We created the Manager Untraining because people at Udemy wanted to learn from their peers. While informal peer-to-peer learning was occurring in an ad hoc way in the hallway and one on one, we wanted to create a facilitated and structured way for Udemy managers to leverage the expertise of their peers. Manager Untraining was built around the belief that “knowledge is best when shared.”

The agenda for Manager Untraining was created by the attendees at the beginning of the workshop using suggestions previously submitted on a digital dashboard. Suggested topics included managing up, retention strategies, and communicating with leaders. Using a short slide deck, a facilitator provided structure and guidelines but gave the majority of the time to attendees for small group discussion. For some of these sessions, peers found themselves on the giving side, others on the receiving—that’s the magic of social learning.

Feedback is fuel:

Revamping our peer manager training

At Udemy, we believe feedback is fuel and paid close attention to evaluations from managers. Feedback clearly showed managers enjoyed learning from one another. Group sourced topics, shared experiences, collaborative discussion, and simple structure were the most noted highlights. There were also clear areas for improvement. Managers sought better ways to apply what they learned through action items. They felt group discussion was often aimless when the topic determination was up to attendees.

While Manager Untraining was effective in normalizing management challenges and facilitating peer learning, we updated the program based on the above feedback. To address these concerns, Manager Untraining was updated to Manager Lab, which utilized Albert Bandura's social learning framework to provide structure and action-oriented learning.





The Udemy Manager Lab

Manager Labs are social learning experiences at Udemy—peers come together to share management insights and expertise. Sessions are self-led to enable peers to experiment with questions, test ideas, and discover solutions.

Our Manager Labs focus on different topics throughout the manager lifecycle—ensuring peer learning sessions have an objective and immediate practical application. For example, our first Manager Lab is scheduled around our Performance Review Cycle to offer peer-to-peer learning on giving verbal and written feedback effectively. This just-in-time approach to learning will ensure we get managers' attention, while also motivating them to apply the newly acquired skills on the job right away.



Our Manager Labs are designed around Albert Bandura's social learning framework:

1

Attention

Collective brainstorming

The facilitator kicks off the session with training objectives and then models a specific behavior that's the focus of the training, e.g. how to give feedback. Following the demonstration, participants brainstorm questions and experiences related to the topic and example.

2

Retention

Share Stories

In small groups, managers share stories of success and failure when delivering feedback for performance reviews. This provides positive tips and strategies for others to model and helps normalize failure.

3

Reproduction

Try

In this stage, participants role-play conversations to practice advice they have heard from peers. They might try writing or verbally giving feedback.

4

Motivation

Apply

At the end of the training, we motivate managers to apply learnings by committing to an action step and finding accountability partners.



Continuing the conversation on social media

Post-workshop, our Learning Team continues the conversation in our **Udemy Manager Slack channel** by posting some of the great ideas shared during the Manager Labs as well as follow-up questions, online courses, job aids, and articles. Our goal is to create a “manager community of practice” and enable peer managers to continue learning socially.

For example, our online learning platform [Udemy for Business](#) is integrated with Slack, a workplace social media tool—enabling employees to share and recommend online courses via Slack to their peers. Our manager community of practice can quickly share relevant courses to peers and spark organic conversations on Slack. These meaningful course recommendations by peers can help other managers upskill on the latest trends, solve a problem on the job, and drive learning engagement.

The screenshot shows the Udemy for Business course page for "Feedback is Fuel". The course title is "Feedback is Fuel" with a subtitle "Become better at giving and receiving feedback in the workplace". It has a 4.3 rating from 1,457 reviews and 5,052 students enrolled. The course is created by Shelley Osborne and last updated in 4/2018. It is available in English and French (Auto-generated). A "Share to Slack" button is visible. The "What you'll learn" section lists four key takeaways: establishing a framework for giving all kinds of feedback (SBI Model), developing a growth mindset, identifying where, when, and how to give feedback, and reducing fear and anxiety. The "Requirements" section states there are no prerequisites. The "Description" section starts with "Have you ever been part of a feedback conversation that didn't go as planned? One that seemed grounded in critique instead of...". A video preview is shown with a play button. The "Enroll now" button is prominent. A list of course contents includes 33 mins on-demand video, 7 articles, 4 downloadable resources, access on mobile, assignments, and a certificate of completion.

The screenshot shows a Slack sharing interface for the "Feedback is Fuel" course. The window title is "Share to Udem Slack" with a "Change" link and a close button. The "Channel or User" field contains "#udemy-manager" and a "Clear" button. The "Message" field contains a pre-formatted message: "Udemy for Business Feedback is Fuel Become better at giving and receiving feedback in the workplace". Below the text is a video thumbnail and a rating of 4.29 (1457 ratings). At the bottom right of the message field are "Close" and "Share to Slack" buttons.



Metrics:

Tracking the impact of our manager training

We will track the impact of our manager training through program evaluations measuring Net Promoter Score—how likely participants are to recommend the course to others. We will also measure the timeliness and applicability of the session topics to ensure the training is relevant to manager needs. In addition, our annual engagement survey includes questions designed to measure manager behavior change. We have several questions on the survey where employees rate their managers on giving feedback, creating a positive work environment, supporting their career, and so on. We plan to benchmark and compare this data pre- and post-training for all managers.



VI.

Conclusion

The power of peer learning can help employees acquire and apply new skills. New digital tools and frameworks can help L&D teams facilitate and structure social learning to accelerate how employees learn from one another.

See how [Udemy for Business](#) can help your organization fuel social learning.

[Request a demo](#)



About Udemy for Business

Udemy for Business helps global companies stay competitive in the digital transformation of the workplace by offering fresh, relevant, personalized on-demand learning content powered by a dynamic content marketplace. Our global network of 50K+ expert instructors continuously supplies the market with courses on trending, popular, in-demand topics. We then curate 3,500+ top-rated courses for organizations around the world to help their employees do whatever comes next—whether that’s tackling the next project, learning a new skill, or mastering a role.

We offer a learner-first approach that delivers an engaging experience personalized to an individual’s interests and needs. Our content covers key business and technical topics ranging from development and IT to leadership, marketing, design, stress management, and more. In addition to a curated content collection for professional and personal growth, organizations can host and distribute their own proprietary content on Udemy.

Leading organizations including Eventbrite, Adidas, Booking.com, Pinterest, and HSBC choose Udemy for Business as their strategic learning partner to upskill their workforce and move skills forward.

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