



“WE TELL  
OURSELVES  
STORIES IN  
ORDER TO LIVE.”

— HARUKI MARUKAMI

## THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONS

**J**erome Bruner is one of the greatest educational psychologists the world has ever produced, having spent his lifetime studying learning and the human mind. Bruner has long realized the value of conversations and storytelling as vital learning tools. His research has led him to point out that “our world is others” and that we need to always take this into account in our approach to learning and development.

Of course Bruner is absolutely correct. We rarely, if ever, work and learn alone. We reach our goals and contribute to our organisations’ objectives in a social context. In the maelstrom of our digital communications age, the need to think ‘socially’ is more important than ever.

I have pointed out previously (*Training Industry Quarterly – Summer 2009*) that there are four basic ways in which we learn to do our jobs:

- Through the **experiences** to which we are exposed.
- Through the opportunities we have to **practice**.
- Through our **conversations** with our colleagues and managers.
- Through having the opportunity for **reflection** on what has worked and what would work better.

Each of these is an important factor in the learning process. As such it’s a good practice for every training and development professional to hold their learning solutions up against them and ask, “Is our solution design providing opportunities in all four?”

### Incorporating Conversation Into Design

The power of conversations is often forgotten as a powerful tool for improvement. Everything from informal water-cooler conversations and informal mentoring by colleagues and managers to structured exchanges through formal coaching and expert knowledge-sharing sessions exploit this power. Trainers and learning professionals should continually be thinking about ways to do this.

The effective use of conversations is part of one of the most important challenges in developing effective solutions to business problems. This is to move the focus from designing learning solutions around knowledge acquisition toward those that aim to help develop “real” learning and understanding. These are two very different things.

Any solution needs to fully engage workers in the process of development and provide opportunities for them to “*think about the different outcomes that could have resulted from a set of circumstances*” (Bruner’s words) if they are to demonstrate usability of knowledge. Conversations are a great way to facilitate this process.

*Charles Jennings is the director of Duntroon Associates, a training & development and human capital consultancy company ([www.duntroon.com](http://www.duntroon.com)). He is also a member of the Internet Time Alliance, a leading think-tank focused on working smarter. Charles is the former chief learning officer for Thomson Reuters, where he was responsible for developing 55,000 professionals. E-mail [Charles](mailto:Charles).*