



From Training to Twitter

The social evolution of e-learning

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Social learning theory

Studies have proved that the majority of workplace learning takes place on the job. Role-specific and industry intelligence has traditionally been acquired by sharing information directly with colleagues or peers.

The impact of this social learning ecosystem can be illustrated by Lombardo/Eichinger's 70:20:10 model (2000). This research has revealed that 70% of learning is derived from on the job experiences and assessments, 20% is created through the use of feedback forums and networks, and only 10% is through formal training processes:-



Today, much learning is acquired socially / informally by searching the internet for topic-specific content that can be applied to individual job roles. Social content is being increasingly used to reinforce subject awareness and embed knowledge in a practical and appealing way. Learners are trying to stay at the cutting edge of their industry specialism by following an increasing range of websites, blogs and social networks - but the quality and quantity of knowledge that's retained by browsing these emergent information sources is difficult to assess.

The answer to virtually any question can be found online. However this mass proliferation and consumption of online content can create significant business risks. Online information is often irrelevant, inaccurate or worse still, plain factually wrong. In the absence of 'content policing', the individual is expected to assess and validate every item of information found online. Is the information correct? Is the person who produced it a subject expert? Is there a better answer out there?

The emergence of content curation

The concept of content curation has become a hot topic for HR and workplace learning professionals in 2012. With content increasingly becoming a commodity, the thing that sets one learning platform or service apart from the other is the ability to build context around the content.

In the education sector, high quality learning resources can be accessed from a single learning content 'hub' e.g. from organisations such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) open courseware and the Khan Academy. Another good example is that of Lore, the social network website for education where 'elegant course management meets social networking'. Lore provides context for content via an online learning community and in doing so, introduces a new training tool to facilitate discussion and manage the class. The online community starts with the instructor and the students of a particular course but need not end there. As with popular social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), students have the ability to talk to and interact with each other outside of their course or school.

For business learners, such authoritative information hubs are not yet as established. Information must be collected by searching and/or aggregating content from services such as Google Reader, which provide automated search and retrieval of resources based on keyword searches. Clearly this is not ideal, as human intervention by subject experts is also required to filter, evaluate, validate and add context to information.

This has led to the rapid emergence of content 'curators', who exist to signpost the most relevant and useful material online - saving time and effort for busy people who require the right answer quickly, and on the fly.

Creating a curation destination

Having a site or web page that is the recipient of curated content is the essential first step to drive learner engagement. An effective online destination enables curators to add context and meaning to topics and posts on chosen subjects.

This can be achieved using a networking site (e.g. Google+, Salesforce Chatter), a social media dashboard (Hootsuite) or a dedicated curated web site (blog or microsite).

Linking to the LMS - push/pull learning

A challenge for many organisations is how to link social websites with their existing training programs to maximise subject matter knowledge and achieve centralised training objectives. This can be achieved by integrating social learning strategies with a central learning platform, or learning management system (LMS).

Learning management systems 'push' training courses to individual or company learners. They provide managers with a centralised means to provide access, manage and report on course programs in defined subject areas that are required for training and CPD.

As social platforms or websites are increasingly used to 'pull' learners towards curated 'hot pick' content areas, the development and implementation of training programs must accelerate to offer learners in-depth subject knowledge or accreditation in new areas (e.g. to comply with fast-changing regulatory requirements).

In order to push this new learning to students, the learning platform within organisations must be capable of responding to these new challenges and complexity. The challenge lies in adding new users, courses and reporting functionality to the LMS without

- Incurring significant per-user licence fees
- Losing centralised control or
- Missing opportunities to monetise emerging training course subjects.

Case Study

A client in the marketing training industry has recently launched an innovative 'push/pull' learning model that perhaps points the way forward for integrating social learning with e-learning. Depending on the learner's needs, the model incorporates curated social content with a traditional learning management system (LMS):-



- Content freely available on the web is collected and curated centrally.
- The curated content is published to a destination website.
- Learners subscribe to this website in order to quickly find and access information of the most relevance to their learning topic, and to maintain their competitive edge.
- Should the learner require then wish to learn more about a particular subject, he/she can be directed to an alternative destination website and register for a wealth of paid-for training courses and resources covering a range of subject areas.
- These courses (foundation, intermediate and advanced) and resources (including videos, downloadable PDFs, webinars and in-depth market reports) are identified, accessed and managed using the comprehensive course assessment tools within a 'traditional' Totara Learning Management System.

Using innovative learning systems in this way allows businesses to get more for less at a time when budgets are stretched, headcounts reduced, and a highly skilled, well informed, agile workforce more essential than ever before.

Evolving the LMS

Sweating the asset with multi-tenant architecture

A multi-tenancy learning management system enables clients to achieve economies of scale by using the same instance of the infrastructure to serve multiple clients. With the increasing demand to get more for less, learning and development professionals can use a multi-tenant LMS configuration to repurpose training content for multiple organisations who are facing the same challenges.

This approach creates a 'Win, Win, Win':

- The internal training costs are reduced through blended learning
- The learning and development team increase their budget by selling external content
- The benefits to the wider organisation are increased as content is continually developed.

When integrating a multi-tenant architecture with other systems, open source software can play a significant role in achieving integration with other systems, and operational cost containment.

For example, using Moodle 2 as the core learning technology eliminates

ongoing licence fees, as the code base and software is freely available. Totara LMS, a custom development of Moodle for enterprise users, shares this capability with the addition of business-specific functionality.

Case Study

A client in the pharmaceutical sector has created a training platform which is based on the Totara LMS solution. The company hosts a wide number of high-street brand organisations as customer tenants on its multi-tenant LMS platform. Each customer instance of the infrastructure delivers online product training content to its healthcare professionals, meeting their professional development training needs.

The LMS allows users to access the required course content and track learners' performance. The platform enables customers to invest in CPD at lower cost than traditional classroom training.



Challenges for social learning

Of course, changing to a social learning model creates a number of new challenges for workplace learning. Corporate concerns about social media include potential risks from distraction from the day job, inappropriate activity causing damage to corporate reputation, and a perceived/real lack of information security. Rather than exploring mitigating actions, many organisations still prefer not to embed a social media learning strategy within the business training and development environment.

Social learning is here to stay, and with the arrival of more secure enterprise networking platforms such as Salesforce Chatter, workplace learning managers are becoming aware that social technologies can deliver the reassurance of centralised security, moderation and control.

The more advanced social media platforms include reporting functions that enables business leaders to monitor peer interactions and intervene in learning strategy. Information can also be acquired by analysing knowledge sharing pools (forums, etc) and tag clouds within the social ecosystem.

An ongoing challenge for blended workplace learning programmes is how to engender active, engaged users, and ensure universal uptake across the organisation. Large organisations are increasingly using learning incentives such as 'top contributor' rewards and ring fenced learning time to achieve these goals.

Is your organisation - and your learning model - ready for the social challenge?



The future of course management

Webanywhere specialises in learning technologies that enable the concepts described in this paper, and stretch the learning potential of an organisation's most important asset - its people. To discuss social learning, multi tenancy or the effective implementation of a learning management system in your organisation, contact our workplace learning team on 01535 358 177, or email workplace@webanywhere.co.uk.

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