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Published August 2009

When the Bird Tweets, Does Anyone Learn?

Bill Sherman

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Many social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter continue to experience growth and garner media attention. Now, many CLOs and other learning professionals have begun to explore the viability and application of social media tools within learning programs.

There have been some early successes. Speakers and conference presenters now often use Twitter for question-and-answer sessions. Questions arrive in a clear and orderly fashion, without missing any raised hands. In this context, one could imagine Twitter as a useful classroom tool. Indeed, post-lecture Q&A might be more lively and productive when learners ask questions anonymously.

Yet, even if social media becomes the next great training tool, we must consider the needs of a highly diverse workforce. Some learners may have limited access to home computers and smart phones. Even those people who have computer access often choose not to engage in social media within their personal and professional lives. Let's look at one current social media tool: Twitter.

The National Business Review reports that Twitter is currently gaining an amazing 10 million users per month, but ReadWriteWeb reports that 40 percent of Twitter users have not "tweeted" since their first day on Twitter. Essentially, "Hello, World!" also became their goodbye.

In April 2009, Nielsen reported a meager 30 percent retention rate for the 12 months prior to Oprah Winfrey's entrance into the Twitter universe, and they, too, confirmed the 40 percent retention rate post-Oprah. Twitter may be today's media darling, but there will always be learners who will resist social media. You can lead people to Twitter, but you cannot make them tweet.

Social Media: Not Exactly Plug and Play

For social media to serve as another valid learning delivery tool, it must at minimum meet the following criteria:

- The use of social media must organically fit with the program's overall instructional design, rather than be thrown in as an afterthought. □
- The organization's technology strategy must support social media to fully leverage the just-in-time learning capabilities the platform offers.
- The organization's culture must intelligently embrace and practice the use of social media.
- Learners must be receptive to social media, and alternatives must be available for those who feel uncomfortable with social media.

Social media can boost productivity, but just like Web surfing, it can provide a strong non-work temptation. Do you remember the video of the text-messaging bus driver who crashed into another vehicle? In some environments, social media can produce productivity, safety and liability concerns.

A New Instructional Model for Social Media

Until now, most learning programs have relied on one of two models: the first-generation objectivism model and the second-generation cognitive-constructivism model. □

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First-generation instructional design (objectivism) places a learner in a passive role. Learners absorb information identified through prior analysis, much like sponges waiting to soak up knowledge. The instructor teaches, lectures and provides information. Learners commit concepts to memory and practice proficiency.

Second-generation instructional design (cognitive constructivism) encourages action and interaction between instructor-learner and learner-learner. Within this model, an instructor encourages and facilitates interactions designed to motivate learners to research, explore, experience and apply their newly acquired knowledge. Learners may be paired with other learners to work together toward problem resolution through teams and project groups.

Third-generation instructional design (also referred to as social constructivism) focuses on the psychology of the learner. This approach provides social interaction comprised of rich communications between instructors, other learners, mentors, peers, colleagues and other subject matter experts. Learners can access a wide and diverse array of individuals with varying perspectives on a subject. These experts provide a multifaceted and comprehensive body of knowledge to the learner. Here are a few possibilities:

- Multiple online Q&A sessions hosted by different experts.
- Twitter conversations with subject matter experts.
- Real-time keyword searches of expert blogs.
- Shared-world digital simulation training.

If the learner is accustomed to learning from a wide spectrum of subject matter experts in real time, then social media may offer an effective delivery method.

Next-Gen Training for Next-Gen Workers

Many late Gen Xers and millennials were raised as digital natives — naturally acclimated to PCs, smart phones, gaming consoles and social media tools. In many ways, third-generation instructional design methodologies reflect the needs and learning styles of this new generation. As more digital natives enter the workforce, training and development programs must adapt their practices to fully engage these learners and effectively train them.

Here are key factors to weigh when incorporating social media into any learning program:

- Are learners accustomed to gathering information from multiple sources in real time?
- Will social media accelerate the program's ability to meet its learning objectives?
- Will social media increase learning retention or promote long-term behavior change?
- Can the course design accommodate the necessary groundwork for social interaction among learners, instructors and subject matter experts?

Social constructivist learning methodologies require a healthy learning ecosystem that closely aligns with the company's organizational values and goals. The interactive aspects of third-generation design require higher emphasis on learner needs, current knowledge, skills and abilities, program objectives and workplace culture. As a result, companies will need to conduct a more rigorous initial needs analysis.

New Mindsets and Skill Sets

Companies will need socially adept instructors and subject matter experts who can create environments that encourage interaction. Instructors and subject matter experts must be able to build and nurture the sense of community and trust required for lively digital discourse. Third-generation training models demand highly interactive training professionals who can provide prompt feedback, advice and fresh challenges to learners. They must be able to draw on their own knowledge as well as knowledge from books, articles, the Web and other outside sources.

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If the organization does not have the skills in-house to design, build or deliver social media learning programs, then the CLO must locate resources to fill that gap. They can hire new personnel with third-generation skills or outsource the project to providers or consultants. Outsourced learning providers can also augment in-house staff with professional trainers who are skilled in delivery that leverages social media platforms.

The Team That Plays Together, Learns Together

Many Gen Xers and millennials spend more time with interactive media such as social media, texting and video games than they do watching passive media, such as television and films. These people are accustomed to instant feedback that helps them quickly adjust their performance toward success (winning). Furthermore, millennials have been raised on the Internet with information and interaction just a click away; therefore, they have little tolerance for delay.

The world of collaborative computer games suggests ways that individuals from these generations learn together and solve problems. There are many team-based games on the Web, ranging from four-person squad-based military simulations to massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG).

In "World of Warcraft," a fantasy world MMORPG, experienced players form teams to raid highly challenging dungeons that offer special rewards. Typically, a raid leader choreographs the actions of 16 to 40 players, assigning roles, cueing specific actions and providing feedback on team effectiveness. Players communicate through headsets and chat programs. If the whole team does not work efficiently together, everyone fails. In addition to real-time coordination and feedback, teams often conduct after-action analyses, including:

- Who performed well based on detailed metrics supplied by the game server?
- What strategies succeeded based on outcomes?
- Strategic analysis of how to improve their odds next time.

3-D simulation training provides instant feedback, something that the Net Generation craves. Throughout this decade, the U.S. Army has used the America's Army game engine to prepare soldiers for deployment, as well as educate the public on the Army's actual roles. These interactive, simulated worlds can teach both specific processes and decision-making skills without putting people or expensive hardware at risk. □

Third-generation instructional programs can leverage the obvious advantages of the drillwork, as well as the valuable principles of overlearning, the testing effect and error-exposure learning.

From Waging War Games to Telling War Stories

It's worth commenting on error-exposure training for dynamic situations where best-case scenarios rarely occur. Australian researchers Wendy Joung, Beryl Hesketh and Andrew Neal explored the value of training firefighters through war stories. In this study, published in Applied Psychology in 2006, one group of firefighters was taught best practices, while the other group learned through a carefully designed set of stories from veteran firefighters who explained how errors in practices led to significant property damage, escalation of fire, injury and even death.

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Firefighters who learned through error-exposure were able to generate better next steps, think more adaptively and apply critical analysis more effectively than their counterparts trained by best practices. An instructional curriculum that leverages social media to deliver error-exposure training to learners may be especially powerful for nonrepetitive actions, such as teaching complex relational sales skills, risk analysis and process-driven field repairs and operations.

Social Media Platforms for Just-In-Time Learning
CLOs will also need to coordinate with the CIO to ensure the organization has the hardware and software to fully utilize social media for training and development. □ Issues of platform compatibility, data security and corporate firewalls must be addressed.

Many companies struggle to provide a platform for just-in-time learning. Companies provide shared drives and knowledge management applications. However, many of these applications remain under-utilized because the people who know the information don't record the knowledge and the people who need the knowledge don't know where to look.

Social media company RawSugar has created a discovery engine that facilitates on-the-job learning through a Web 2.0 interface that blends a knowledge management system, a wiki and Twitter-like RSS functions. Instead of forcing content into pre-defined categories, trusted users can create their own folksonomies (user-generated categories).

For example, a company launching new product training for salespeople might select a few facilitators and several dedicated subject matter experts (SMEs) in engineering or marketing. On Monday morning, a marketer spots a relevant news article on the Web that discusses a competitor's product. With just a few keystrokes, the marketing SME tags the article and explains ways salespeople can overcome a prospect's objections.

Later that afternoon, an engineer receives two □ separate calls from salespeople about a product specification. The engineering SME tags a relevant file from a drive on the engineering department's server and makes it accessible to the salespeople. Google has also announced Wave, an integrated platform for instant messaging, e-mail and social networking. At this point, social media platforms are still evolving. However, trends indicate movement toward an organically integrated model that incorporates feeds from many different sources.

Whichever platform a company chooses, it cannot just launch a technology platform with a "Field of Dreams" mindset that assumes that users will come if you build it. Companies must plan and execute an organizational change strategy. Otherwise, the tool will remain unused.

A Bauble or a Boon?
Today's CLO will be challenged with adapting his or her company's learning strategy to one that meets the preferred learning styles of incoming millennials and leverages just-in-time or real-time learning strategies of a socially connected digital world.

Social media creates another potential workforce distraction for employees. So, some CLOs may initially encounter a tough sell to the CEO, CIO or CFO. However, restricting social media may prove even more difficult than restricting Internet access. After all, many employees already access social media through their smart phones.

Social media connects groups of individuals, it gathers and shares information rapidly and it provides an excellent platform for just-in-time learning, multiperspective learning and error-exposure learning. When woven organically into the company's learning programs and culture, it provides a powerful addition to the learning tool kit.

Bill Sherman is co-founder and managing partner of Intulogy, a provider of outsourced training programs.

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