



ALL LEARNING IS SOCIAL IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

THE REAL POWER OF E-LEARNING IS SOCIAL

The use of social networking and other social media tools is more than a trend today ... it's the new way we get things done. e-Learning has made incredible inroads into the way organizations approach building workforce knowledge and skills over the past 15 years or so. Although technology has been used to support learning for much longer, the development of the Web and ubiquitous networks during the 1990s gave e-learning a tremendous step up and led to its widespread use.

However, despite its growth, e-learning is still viewed by many as the “poor cousin” of “real” training and development activities — and with some good reason. A great deal of the early e-learning tended to be mildly interactive at best, and “electronic page turning” at worst. There were some notable exceptions, but much of the early e-learning turned people off the whole idea. e-Learning modules were often linear, boring and used simply as a delivery mechanism that reduced cost and provided scale. The majority of early e-learning was also based on the worn-out “course” and “module” paradigms and, as such, was rightly held up as offering inferior experiences to those that could be provided by good flesh-and-blood facilitators and instructors in a classroom or workshop.

But all that is changing. The best e-learning solutions now are incorporating new and powerful social elements and reaching beyond the static content-centric models that were the dominant form until very recently. Many are using off-the-shelf or customized social business tools, rather than hand-crafted bespoke platforms. Today's best e-learning is providing rich digital learning and development environments far beyond those that can be offered within the confines of four walls.

The new, networked, pull versions of e-learning that are embedded into workflow and make use of the social tools and environments is crowding the old, isolated, push models out.

We know that a significant amount of learning has always been social. Throughout life we learn a great deal through and with others. Jerome Bruner, one of the most influential educational psychologists of the 20th century, once wrote “our world is others” — in other words, all learning is social in one way or another. Whether we believe this to be true or not, there is no doubt that effective learning often involves interaction with other people — validating the view that *it's who we know rather than what we know that helps deliver results.*

The importance of social learning is being reflected not only in the myriad of tools that are emerging or being adapted into the learning landscape, but also in new L&D approaches such as the 70:20:10 Framework, which is being adopted across the world by corporate organizations, not-for-profits and government departments.

We are also waking up to the fact that learning is primarily about behavior change rather than knowledge acquisition. This is providing another driver for e-learning to de-focus on content and re-focus on context and social interaction.

The socialization of e-learning brings with it a need for training and development professionals to grasp and implement new approaches and thinking. In turn, this means new skillsets and new mind-sets.

- It means letting go of old ideas about learning as content and “knowledge transfer” as the end result.
- It means thinking about e-learning in the context of tools, environments and systems that help people get their work done with, and through, others.
- It means being able to adapt social business ideas and social networking tools to improve learning.

The integration of social elements into e-learning can occur in a number of ways, including:

- Through the development of immersive interactive simulations and virtual worlds.
- Through the deployment of environments that facilitate and capture user-generated content (UGC), especially content from subject experts that can be shared across the organization.
- Through embedding sharing and performance support facilities into structured e-learning content.

Many other approaches are emerging that integrate social media with traditional e-learning, allowing people to share ideas, information and resources and to learn together in the workplace. These approaches are leading to the evolution of learning from self-paced formal learning towards truly integrated, flexible collaborative environments that are able to support the emerging “worksapes” that we all inhabit.

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