

Social Learning Arrives: Is Your Organization Ready?

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Social computing — the application of computer technology to facilitate collaboration — has been around for decades. Now with the emergence of social communities, collaboration and sharing is as easy as sharing photographs on www.flickr.com or sharing social networks on www.linkedin.com. Perhaps the most innovative example of collaboration on the Web is del.icio.us, a social bookmarking service allowing users to tag, save, manage and share Web pages from a centralized source.

Social computing has led to social learning as the millennium generation enters the workforce. They carry with them an arsenal of electronic devices and the more portable the better. These “Net Geners” are accustomed to juggling several instant messaging conversations, surfing the Web, talking on the phone and listening to music on their iPods. They are quite adept at seamlessly mixing networking, communicating, learning and playing. When these Net Geners enter our organizations, they will demand we adapt to their way of communicating, learning and collaborating. This means they will want to learn as easily and effortlessly as they share photos, find new restaurants or locate friends. And when they are working on a document together, they’ll want the chat application that runs alongside the content so they can help one another. This is social learning in action, and it will dominate enterprise learning over the next decade.

So what steps can chief learning officers take now to prepare their organizations for social learning? As more learning happens through interaction with peers and application on the job, it will increasingly become multi-threaded, searchable and personalized to each learner. Here are four questions you should ask yourself and your team:

Are you creating “opportunities” to allow users to generate content? Consumers have a greater voice in everything from creating their own personalized online radio station to providing their user experiences as input to advertising campaigns. This focus on users-as-experts can carry over to the world of learning. Perhaps chats between the online learners and their instructor can be re-formatted to provide a best-practices segment for a course. Or the questions and answers posted in a community of practice can be summarized and sent back to learners. Your learners will want to get involved in generating content and your job will be to give them the “space” to do this. We can all take a lesson from “The Sims,” one of the best-selling games of all time, where much of the continuing content is created by members.

Is your content available across multiple channels? A learner-centric model allows learning assets to be accessible across several channels — instructor, audio, video, phone, Web — with learners selecting the mode that best suits them. Consider the ubiquity of MP3 players, now the fastest-growing electronic

consumer product of all time, with more than 140 million units forecast to be sold by 2009. Net Geners will demand that learning be integrated not only into their day-to-day jobs but into their lives so they can access it when and where they want.

Are you creating “cohort groups” that learn together? Universities have discovered the power of cohort groups to motivate and reinforce learning. Actually cohort-group learning has been entrenched in academia for years where it is widely known that learning in small, intact groups increases one’s motivation to learn. Why then is so much of corporate learning been focused on individuals learning in isolation? My prediction is that this will change over the coming years as more organizations focus on creating cohorts and communities of practice to improve collaboration.

Have your metrics been expanded to include “learner engagement” levels? The needle on the CLO dashboard is now pointed on tracking how a learner “learns online.” That means tracking their online behavior including how they navigate through a learning program, the number of downloads they generate, the number of e-mail pass-alongs they create for their peers, the number and type of questions they have with their peers and instructor, and their contributions to knowledge-sharing forums.

Increasingly, chief learning officers will want to know how learners contribute their learning to the organization and socialize their learning throughout the ecosystem, rather than how much learning they consume.

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