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‘2.0 what? Are organisations ready for the social LMS’

By Toby Harris

Like the branches on an evolutionary tree, social media are evolving into ever more diverse and specialised breeds. We continue to see heavyweights such as Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter expand and grow. Over 70 million professionals have swarmed onto the more specialised LinkedIn.com, and custom Moodles have taken the education sector by storm. Now, if you’re a mum (or a politician) you log on to Mumsnet.com. If you’re a traveller you can browse for a place to stay on Couchsurfing.com. Lawyers, CEOs and e-learning professionals can all log onto their exclusive, invite only, social networks.

In fact, I don’t doubt that by the time I’ve finished this article several new and stranger-looking social media will have appeared: social networks for men who ride around exclusively on motorised lawn-mowers and e-churches for believers in religions that exist only on the internet. So where does corporate e-learning fit into this increasingly complex and chaotic ecosystem?

In “Vive la Revolution” (Advance 22) , Laura discussed the development of Web 2.0 and the possibilities for “e-Learning 2.0”. Our interactive and increasingly user generated web allows trainers to establish and maintain a “community of learners” who are able to contribute their own content. The Moodle learning environment was designed with this kind of social constructivist pedagogical model in mind. Not only do Moodles offer forums, wikis, chatrooms and user profiles as standard, but creating and customising new content is very easy.

It's perfect for the often lofty goals and objectives of educational institutions – perhaps for the simple reason that networking and creating your own content is fun - but whether taking the teaching reins out of the hands of subject matter experts (SMEs) and putting them into those of learners in this way is always a good idea for enterprises is another question.

Laura points out that having learners share outlandish theories on health and safety requirements wouldn't be such a good idea, and once a course has become fully "social" how do SMEs ensure that the course objectives are met? Out of chaos measurable learning outcomes rarely come.

“all enterprises want a specialised Moodle with some limited areas for giving feedback”

The result is that nearly all enterprises want a specialised Moodle with some limited areas for giving feedback and most of the social features cut out. But perhaps they are missing the point; and misusing their Moodles.

Brian Sutton in “Learning’s Environmental Crisis” (Advance 17) distinguishes between formal learning, and informal learning. Informal learning consists of things that cannot easily be written down and quantified; “it is tacit rather than explicit; it is rooted in the acquisition and sharing of tacit knowledge and this is fundamentally a social process – it needs prolonged and deep engagement with other expert practitioners.” (p. 3)

Sutton’s most important point is that it is this kind of knowledge which transforms an employee who is simply proficient into one who may be regarded as an “expert”. He then joyfully slaps instructional designers with this sentence:

“Research shows that around 75% of what we know, the stuff that really makes a difference to how we perform are learned through serendipitous interactions in the workplace rather than being a result of formal, designed efforts to train people.” (p. 2)

So, instructional designers need to face up to the fact

that the new revolutionary slogan is “all power to the learners!” The reality is that within an organisation, the learners are better at socially teaching each other expertise than instructional designers are at didactically teaching them.

Sutton’s new model e-learning professional is now a learning architect, someone who actually designs the physical and virtual environments that successfully facilitate the informal learning of the future. Cue grim visions of instructional designers scrabbling for lumps of discarded panini on the trendy streets of world cities whilst the new breed of learning architects laugh it up in their glittering offices, munching on paradigms for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

What is more likely than this apocalyptic scenario is that instructional designers will continue to produce the formal e-learning needed to start with and then put on their learning architect hats when building a custom learning management system (LMS) that incorporates social elements. Beginning with workshops on building custom Moodles, instructional designers are already adapting to the mantra of the future.

“LMS will allow enterprises to foster expertise across national boundaries”

The truly social LMS will allow enterprises to foster expertise across national boundaries. Once the entire workforce is mobilised through a social e-learning environment the tacit knowledge that really drives exceptional performance will begin to spread in wider and wider circles. What is the point of a social revolution? To unleash the creativity of the people.

But let’s take a step back. The question is not whether the best instructional designers are ready to create these learning environments, but whether their clients, the enterprises, will allow the social constructivist learning model that is hammering at the door inside.

Most powerful brands are used to managing social

¹ <http://www.saffroninteractive.com/vive-la-revolution-e-learning-2-0/>

² <http://www.saffroninteractive.com/learnings-environmental-crisis/>

media to their own advantage. It is almost obligatory to affiliate an advertising campaign with Facebook and to use irreverent humour in viral marketing campaigns that draw upon the online social activity of the public to deepen brand awareness. More nefarious techniques include creating and managing consumer feedback websites for your own brands in order to filter out damaging criticism, and even buying up negative domain names to prevent their usage by potential online insurgents.

“allow the freedom to produce that content and commentary with relatively little censorship”

But in general, the benefits of a social network for its users are similar to the benefits of a democracy for its citizens: social networks not only entail more access to more diverse content and commentary, they also allow the freedom to produce that content and commentary with relatively little censorship. Facebook generally only shuts down controversial fan pages and groups after extensive user criticism. Plenty of radical perspectives – anti government groups, anti capitalist groups or even anti Facebook groups - are all fair game. If this wasn't the case the public would stop using it, in the same way that governments that suppress free speech tend to run into problems sooner or later.

So if enterprises want the full communicatory and pedagogical benefits of an organisation or division wide social LMS, perhaps they need to enact a cultural shift to a more open and democratic managerial model first. It may be that as local operations managers from Newcastle to Naples share insights about improving efficiency, it repeatedly crops up that a disastrous policy imposed from above is causing more problems than it is solving. Sales executives sharing tips on prospecting and closing deals may well produce content that conflicts with an organisation's stated values and ethical principles.

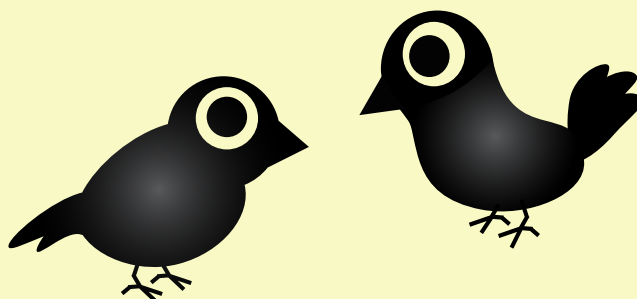
If it is the case that the way an enterprise really works is far enough removed from the management line to actually undermine the authority of the boardroom, then maybe

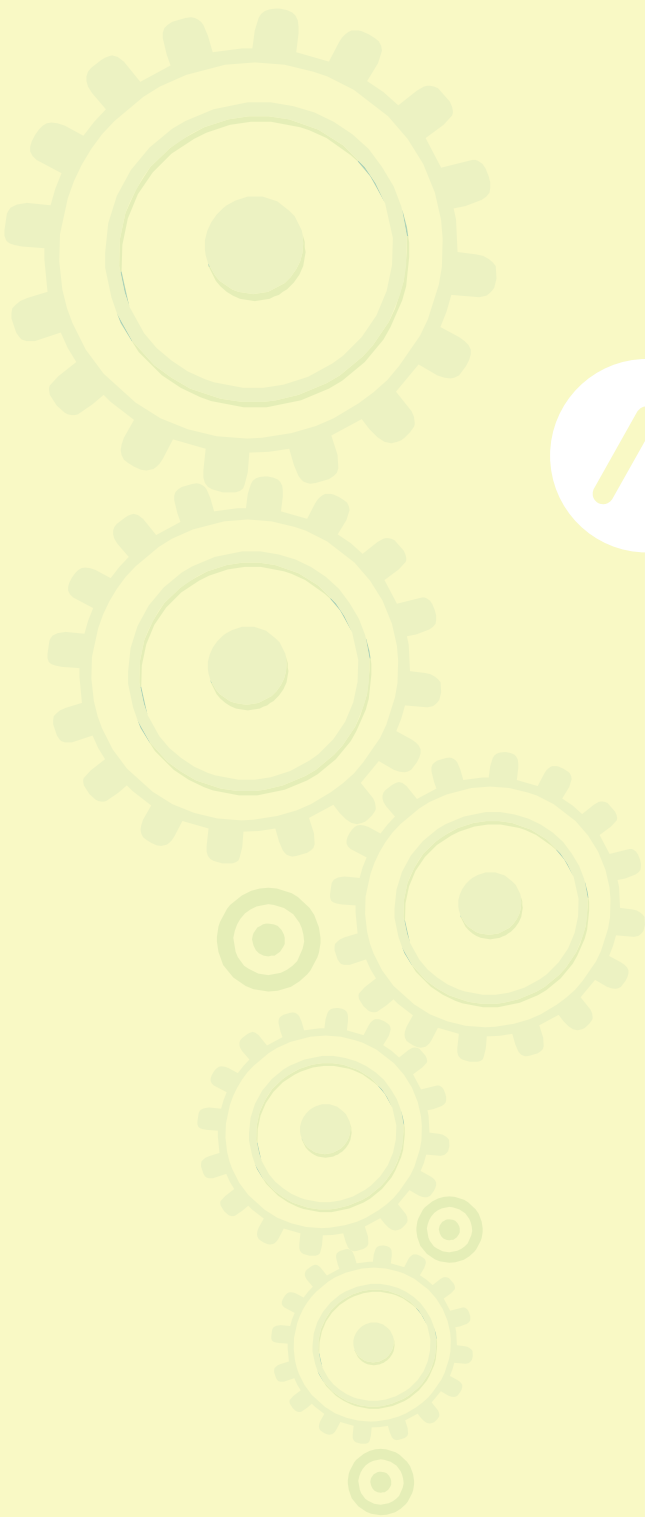
those sitting in the boardroom need to be replaced, and policy changed. Allowing freedom of expression on a social network of employees may result in unwelcome changes to the hierarchical power structures of large global brands.

There is also the question of the satire, flame wars and general pig headedness that are more common in anonymous online interactions than they are in face to face discussion. Moodle has a nifty solution to this problem in form of profiles with obligatory information fields. What Facebook doesn't advertise is the way it ceaselessly gathers information about users. In the same way, an enterprise Moodle could regularly scan forums and chats and report subversive or offensive content to moderators.

Perhaps it's also an issue of who uses the LMS. There doesn't seem much point in having supermarket shelf stackers grumbling and moaning to each other all over the world, as they simply need to be proficient at their job, not experts. Mid level managers and skilled professionals, on the other hand, have oodles to gain from a fully social Moodle, and are also less likely to challenge the authority of the boardroom.

The private social network as a means of facilitating informal learning has already arrived – all the technology is there and some enterprises are already using them. But the debate about the ethical and political issues that the social LMS may generate is far from over.





For more information on the issues discussed in this article, or to find out how Saffron Interactive could assist in your current learning initiatives, please get in touch using the contact details below:

Email: alex@saffroninteractive.com

Phone: 020 7092 8906

Gray's Inn House
127 Clerkenwell Road
London
EC1R 5DB
t: 020 7092 8900
f: 020 7242 2757
e: info@saffroninteractive.com

Illustration by Karthik Subramanian

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