

E-Learning Market Briefing (Mar 07)

What is happening out there?

No, it's not a posthumous release by Marvin Gaye – but rather one of the more interesting sessions from the E-learning Guild Annual Gathering. Steve Rayson was in the audience and files this report for this month's market update.

Dudes, what's happening?

One of the more interesting sessions we attended at E-learning Guild, in the excellent company of Clive Shepherd, was a session entitled "What Is Happening Out There?"

This was a panel discussion which included:

Stephen Downes (National Research Council Canada)
Tony O'Driscoll (IBM)
Brent Schenkler (Hospice of the Valley)
Tony Karrer (TechEmpower)

A number of key themes emerged from the debate.

User generated content

This was a theme which emerged a number of times during the conference. For some it was seen as a dangerous thing, given the potential for creating poor content. For others, user generated content offered a great opportunity. They argued that some users produce great content which is often more engaging than professionally generated content. It was pointed out that one person in IBM who set up a blog now gets more hits than IBM's home page. Similarly some BBC staff have claimed you can find out more about the operation of the BBC from Wikipedia than the BBC's own intranet -- someone in the BBC is feverishly writing a blog to explain that's a good thing, no doubt.

There was a lot of buzz about the potential for wikis and blogs to support user generated content. It was claimed that there was no problem in getting users to use wikis and blogs. Really? We're not so sure. In our experience, while there are early adopters who've embraced wikis and blogging, there are still a lot of lurkers out there. It may take some well designed support to engage users in this form of dialogue – and a few extra hours in the day. Who finds time to read all of these blogs anyway, even with a good RSS aggregator?

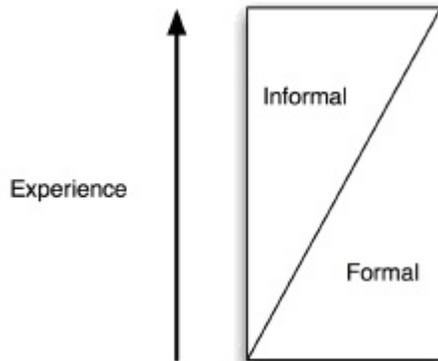
In terms of examples there were a couple of concrete case studies:

- One organisation uses a blog effectively as an interactive newsletter where people can comment on specific items
- Another organisation promoted the concept of wikis and encouraged people to contribute by setting up a wiki on the intranet about the history of the company. People contributed their own stories and built an engaging resource on the company – a smart alternative to a top-down induction programme.

Learning examples were more limited though. Our conclusion? While the potential of web 2.0 tools such as wikis and blogs clearly exists, how it can be best exploited in a learning context is still being worked out.

Informal learning

There was reference to the following diagram from Tony O'Driscoll's blog.



A simple picture that says a lot. In essence, as people become more experienced they increasingly adopt or create more informal ways of working. Thus while there has been great talk of informal learning, there has to be recognition that it is not appropriate in all circumstances. You wouldn't use it in the call centre for employee from day zero.

There were also the usual references to Google as a learning tool. Everyone, including all of us here at Kineo, continue to be amazed at the continued evolution of Google search tools and technologies. There was even a call to forget all meta-tagging and rely on search engines such as Google to find what you need. One poor man's seven-year study into meta-tagging was branded useless in the light of what Google could do. He was not available for comment.

Allied to informal learning was a discussion around workplace learning – variously referred to as performance support, contextual learning or just in time learning. There was a lot of discussion around the ability of rapid e-learning to provide short learning objects to help drive this development.

Open source and free content

The panel recognised the potential impact of open source software and free content. Stephen Downes (on the Kineo commentators A-list) made the point that open source is a very large movement and will be a 'big thing'.

In the LMS market, the open source Moodle LMS has taken more than 20% market share in the medium and small corporate market and 40% in the education market. Other open source tools such as Yugma for conferencing and webinars, Audacity for audio, etc., are all available to create learning solutions.

In addition to the open source software, there is a growing library of free content available, and specific mention was given to Open Courseware and Open Learn from the UK's Open University.

Kineo's view:

The three themes highlighted were:

- User generated content
- Informal learning
- Open source tools and content

It seems to us that the last two are already having a major impact on the learning market and can be expected to grow in profile in the next 12 months.

User generated content is less clear-cut. Sure, user generated content has great potential through the development of SME generated rapid e-learning, wikis, blogs, podcasting, vodcasting, and so on.

However, there needs to be more work to help organisations exploit the true potential of user generated content. There are still many barriers both technically and culturally. Technically some IT departments won't allow the use of many of the tools that are being regularly used by users at home. Culturally, many organisations are simply uncomfortable with the concept of user generated content without heavy moderation, which reduces its speed, relevance and impact. There's a certain corporate letting go that must come before user generated content becomes a real player in learning technologies. Less a question of 'what's happening' than 'what do we wish could happen, if only things were a little different'...