

Delivering on the Promise of Social Learning



BY CAROL L. COHEN

SOCIAL LEARNING IS THE NOTION THAT WHAT WE LEARN BEST, WE LEARN BY OBSERVING OTHERS



It has been only a little over a decade since the workplace PC was first connected to the Internet and since then the workplace has experienced successive waves of constructive changes; almost all of them impacting our work processes. Numerous junctures of technological innovation have generated disruption, often requiring learning organizations to rapidly respond with creativity and enthusiasm. With the proliferation of technology-enabled communication tools and online collaboration platforms, the corporate landscape con-

tinues to change dramatically. Embracing social learning will enable learning organizations to produce the precise training the workforce requires as it adapts to these changes.

If you have been part of a training organization for any time at all, you have likely experienced several of these junctures. The most recent and, considered by many, the most disruptive of all is the mobile device. Just about everyone has at least one, and it has changed the way people access information and each other. It changes our expecta-

tion for instant answers and rapid results. Combine that with the various social business platforms that provide user profiles, discussion boards and the opportunity to comment and question, and our world of instructor-led training and e-learning can surely be termed disrupted.

The role of social media is powerful. These technological advances have made “learning-on-the-fly” possible. Shifts in corporate culture, combined with the introduction of social media tools, enable continuous knowledge transfer. Corporations have begun to reorganize in a way that breaks down barriers between departments, often forming cross-business teams with coaches and mentors. Not so long ago all meetings were face-to-face. Now the conference call or “virtual” meeting is commonplace. Teams of people separated by thousands of miles work together and collaborate on a daily basis. The social networks that have emerged are bonded by new trust relationships that have been formed often across traditional organizational strata. Social learning programs should capitalize on these networks of communication.

Defining Social Learning

So what is social learning really? Albert Bandura is sometimes referred to as the father of social learning. His research into learning theory in the mid-1960s demonstrates the power of learning by observing and spawned a plethora of research experiments. At the core of social learning is the notion that what we learn best, we learn by observing others. Learners model the behaviors of those they respect, and

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they often learn from peers they trust to ask. Couple that with finger-tip access to a searchable online knowledge base and unified communications tools with video, desktop sharing, audio conferencing and chat; and find that the workplace itself has become a social learning environment.

Frequently, learning occurs in the classroom whether it is needed or not. There has always been plenty of “just-in-case” learning. How many teachers have told students that they might need what they are now learning someday in the future? The traditional instructor-led classroom environment (students silent at their desks, classrooms walled-off from each other) often impedes students from doing the very thing that Bandura recognized as an effective way to learn: observing and helping each other. This, of course, is contrary to the elementary concept in classic

social learning theory that people learn by interacting and observing the behavior of others.

Transforming Corporate Training

So, how does this change the way corporate training is designed and delivered? Think of learning itself as integrated throughout the work processes. People work a certain way, but also adjust their performance as they observe their own results compared to the way others do similar tasks. These continuous adjustments have become part of the workflow and form a lifecycle of over-all improvement for the corporation.

The work environment is further complicated, or some might even say enhanced, by ever-changing technical innovations to which the worker must respond with new skills. Workers often belong to user groups where they share best practices and tips. They develop a circle or community of like-minded people who discover new ways of doing things, by blending work and learning.

This is the new model for workers everywhere, whenever learning programs target them they should slide seamlessly into that working-learning environment. Imagine how an announcement to stop work and take a two-hour read-click-learning check e-learning module would feel to those workers. It breaks their working social networks and forces them to isolate themselves within the training module, as if it were the golden answer to some question they would never have asked, and worse, almost always seems alien to the task in which they were originally immersed.

Learning leaders must evaluate how peo-

The Table is Set

Modern classrooms designed for social learning often look to the untrained eye like a dining hall or maybe even a sports bar. The key here is that learners sit together in small groups around what you might think of as a kitchen table. They face each other so they are able to easily communicate. The

monitors for slides and other visuals are placed all around the room so the learners can see “the game” from their seats no matter which way they are facing. The instructor then can circulate among the tables for encouragement, keeping the focus of the learners on the conversations at their tables.

This very social set-up empowers the learner to participate and think out loud with others who are experiencing the same process of discovery. The bond of shared experience is strong and the expectation that the table of learners will stay connected long after the class ends is high.

ple are using this social media technology in both their professional and personal lives in order to design training that insinuates itself into the process flow. With mobile devices and the Internet, we no longer have to teach or memorize “nice to know, just-in-case” information. How many of you remember your friends’ phone numbers anymore? You don’t have to. They are in your phone. We are now free to focus learning solutions on what to do with knowledge and how to integrate new knowledge and skills into performance and behavior.

Peer-to-peer interaction, such as mentoring and observing, is critical in all this. That along with coaching and mentoring forms the foundation. Learners need the course materials to provide the back story and tie the learning to reality so they can easily discover new ways of doing things. Context is everything, as we need to choose wisely where to place our attention. Learning is accelerated when our emphasis is placed on selected people, groups or projects that energize us. In our instant-on corporate culture there is scarce time for learners to stop and figure out if what they are about to learn matters to them.

What to teach, reinforce and model in corporate training has been changed forever. Workers search for details online in real-time during a conference call with peers or a consultation with a client. Until recently researching required physically going to a library and hoping a specific book was available. Now it starts with a phrase in a search field. This practice has exploded with wireless mobile devices.

Consider this in terms of training content: Using a social learning approach, start where the learners are and provide a trail of discovery to get where they need to go. Create a shared experience among the learners that can remain after the formal class time. And be sure to take advantage of the social media available so that discussions and contact with coaches and mentors can also continue. Finally, do not forget to check-in to see how they are progressing.

Delivering on the Promise

All this sounds innovative and interesting but will senior executives actually see the value? The short answer is yes. Not only

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does social learning effectively improve workforce development and learning in general, it also saves money. Now, that almost sounds like a television commercial touting a product as a dessert and a floor wax, but it is true. A carefully planned social learning program leverages existing social media and unified communications technology, includes very short discovery lessons, is adaptable to include just-in-time-training; while also focusing on the spend in time and money on the coaches and personal trainers to work with the students. Meanwhile, learners who have

a context and an opportunity to observe and explore with their peers will appreciate the approach and feel confident to try out what they have learned in the real world.

People like to feel confident and empowered, especially in the workplace. The social part of social learning delivers that to them: talking to peers, observing others, and practicing, while easily accessing fingertip information can be empowering. Imagine a face-to-face training where the learners are facing each other in a kitchen table seating arrangement. Picture an e-learning where the independent learner creates a presentation or slide as a homework project and sends it to a coach for an online discussion. This personal interaction and engagement among peers is key to the social learning model.

For learning and development organizations this means, finally, we can deliver on the promise of social learning with access to peer/crowd knowledge and expertise, learning from modeled behavior, and just-in-time short learning modules with discovery-based activities.

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Guide on the Side

Incorporating social learning into your programs requires that you adjust the role of the instructor from Sage-on-the-Stage to a Guide-on-the-Side. This involves preparations in the course itself to include discovery activities: the set-up and grouping of the learners who must be prepared to work together in discovery, and, most importantly, the instructor who must shift from lecturing to planting seeds of food-for-thought and encouraging explo-

ration. A skilled student-centered instructor knows when to speak, when to listen, and when and how to offer personal encouragement to students as they learn. In this model, the instructor is no longer simply explaining something for the student to remember, but actually guiding the students as they incorporate what they are learning into their present behavior and galvanizing that learning so it stays with them once they leave the classroom.