

How to Create a Dynamic Social Learning Space with High Engagement (Nov 12)

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November 19, 2012



There's a lot involved in building a community: you can put up houses, roads, bus stops and shops, a village green, town hall, and school, but until people move in and start talking to the neighbors, you just have an infrastructure. You need people to make a community, but here's the funny thing: you probably don't need the infrastructure to do it. People and the conversations are what counts.

Social learning is a term that describes the semi-formal layers of dialogue that surround the formal. It's a term to describe conversations: conversations between individual learners, conversations within groups and conversations back to the organization. If we get it right, it's a dynamic and engaging way of building and embedding learning, but if we get it wrong, we build a ghost town.

So how do we create engaging social learning spaces? What can we do to make them work?

Focus on the essentials

Let's think about four key areas: technology, conversations, engagement, and legacy.

Agility rules

First, technology. It may sound counterintuitive, but our key message here is that it's not about the technology! Technology may facilitate the formation of community, but it won't guarantee it, and, if we get it wrong, it will certainly actively inhibit it. The first step for many organizations that want to implement social learning is to try to procure a solution, to buy a system that will deliver what they want. This desire to purchase and own technology is outdated: firstly because the old days of dinosaur systems that tried to do everything is gone, and secondly because there are already so many great spaces out there that you can squat in. In social learning, we don't try to bring the conversations to us: we have to go where the conversations are.

Why did the dinosaurs die? Because it cost a fortune to implement them, it took forever and always overran, and they never really delivered what was promised anyway: how many organizations invested heavily in a learning management system that failed to actually deliver a change in the quality of learning? The risk with making your social learning venture a project about procuring technology is that you may just end up hitting technical challenges. I'm sure you're not afraid of a challenge, but let's at least make it a challenge about engagement, not systems.

Today, it's about agility: agile systems and agile learners. Sometimes that agility means we don't own the systems at all. It's okay for us to walk over to where the conversations are rather than try to bring

them to us. The value of a social learning community is in the interactions, not the hardware or software they take place upon and within. Certainly at the planning and pilot stage, as the organization finds its way with social, it makes sense to be very light of foot: creating groups on LinkedIn or similar and learning some lessons before investing.

So, while technology is important, it's not the be-all and end-all of social. The conversations are what counts, so let's think a little more about conversation.

Relevant, specific, and real—but not yours

In formal learning spaces, we are looking to convey a message to the group: we usually know what the meaning is, and we are looking for them to understand it. Social is different: it's the conversation around the edge, and we expect the group to be constructing the meaning. It's an emergent reality.

For example, in formal learning, within a classroom or piece of eLearning, we may demonstrate key behaviors and skills. In the social learning space, we are discussing how we may implement them, providing support and challenge to each other as we do so and building a shared understanding of what the key messages are and what we can do with them.

Taking footsteps out of formal learning and back into the workplace is where we have the highest level of attrition. By using the social space to make the meaning more immediate, relevant to your or my everyday reality and role, that's how we make the message stick. Of course, it might not be our exact message: the point of social learning is that the group takes our formal message and makes it relevant, specific to them, grounded in their reality. After all, they live their lives all the time; we are only visiting.

The key thing to remember is that within the formal learning space, we can own the conversations. Within the social spaces, we can participate, but not own them. Not even with moderation: if we moderate too heavily, if we try to steer it too far, we simply make the informal formal. We kill the dialogue and make it a lecture.

What have we learnt so far? That technology is important, but it won't deliver the answer, and that we have to go and visit the conversations, take part in them, but not own them.

Now, let's think about that most elusive of qualities: engagement.

Why do people engage—or not?

Engagement is something that we can see all around us: some people are engaged with their town gardening club, some with their local pub quiz, some with shopping at Ikea, and just about everyone is engaged with Facebook. It's easy to spot engagement: one of the main things to look out for is investment of time and investment of energy. If people are spending both of these valuable items in your social learning space, you're winning. If they're not, you're losing.

So how do you win? Relevance: the conversation needs to be relevant to a person's role and needs, and this is a conversation that may change over time. Two reasons why people fail to engage in social spaces are because they think the content is irrelevant and they don't see the value from investing their time and energy in this area. And, of course, if the content is not relevant to them, they are probably right.

We avoid this by giving ownership of the subject to the group: pulling instead of pushing. Whatever the topic, there's no harm in asking what the group wants to talk about, and recognizing that the needs of the group may not align perfectly with the needs of the organization. For example, we may be trying to get people to have better sales conversations, but they may want to talk about how poor the CRM (customer relationship management) system is. How do you deal with that? Simple: by engaging in the conversation ... but with structure. It's okay to talk about the negatives as long as the group is willing to construct a story about what can be done to improve it. You have to be open to the

conversation. At the very least, by engaging in this conversation you gain permission to have the other one, the one you want.

Engagement can be driven by providing access to expertise. People engage in social learning spaces for various reasons: some to demonstrate expertise, some to learn, some to challenge, some to lead. These roles are not static; they can flex between projects and over time. Providing space and resource for subject matter expert conversation can resonate with many people. For example, when working in pharmaceuticals, getting experts on hand to answer questions can really help.

And an important thing to think about is how we reward engagement: how is taking part reflected in your annual performance review? What gets rewarded gets done: the worst situation is when on the one hand we are asking people to participate, but on the other we are heavily rewarding other activities. Why would a sales team take time out for conversation if they are only rewarded for meetings? In that case, disengagement is not their fault: we are actively rewarding them not to engage.

Passing it on with moderation

Finally, let's think about legacy: how do we narrate stories out of the learning, and what are the benefits of doing this? I'm very keen on narration of social learning stories, community-generated memories, something with a purpose and legacy within the organization. Often, with discussions in these spaces, they run their course: there is a point at which the conversation becomes so long that it's hard for new people to join it, or it goes off-topic. There is a lot to be said for time-limiting conversations and actively drawing all the threads together and tying them off. This is part of the role of the moderator.

View the moderator's role at this stage as a journalist and newspaper editor rolled into one: they are writing the stories based upon the learning of the group, narrating the conversations, and writing up the articles, as well as curating the messages. It's a key role.

Application

To summarize, a healthy social learning community needs to be nurtured and actively managed. We have considered four dimensions: technology, conversations, engagement, and legacy. The best way to be successful is to be open to learning: create a small space and try your hand at curating the dialogue. To build community takes time and effort. Technology alone will not do it.

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