

# Learning Face-off with Facebook (Jan 11)

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Wikipedia reports that there are over 500 million users now on the social networking giant, Facebook. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg told TechCrunch at the World Economic Forum in 2010 that 175 million people log into Facebook every day. Facebook Mobile exceeded 100 million users in early 2010 according to the Facebook Blog. These numbers make it seem that global saturation is inevitable. The U.S. is already there, and trends in Latin America and Europe seem to be following suit.

This appears to be great news for Mark Zuckerberg and his army of investors. But what does that mean to the learning professional? The numbers should at least have your attention. Learning professionals should see these numbers and trends as an opportunity. Most, if not all, of our learners are within this virtual community. The combination of community participation and developer flexibility results in the metamorphosis of Facebook from CMS (Content Management System) to LMS (Learning Management System).

## It's all in the context

Let's get some definitions out of the way to establish a consistent context for this thesis. Following are Wikipedia's definitions of CMS and LMS.

- A **content management system (CMS)** is the collection of procedures used to manage workflow in a collaborative environment.
- A **learning management system** (commonly abbreviated as **LMS**) is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, and reporting of training programs, classroom and online events, e-Learning programs, and training content.

Many social media sites fall into the CMS category. These include YouTube, Myspace, Wordpress, Blogger, Slideshare, Justin.TV, Flickr, and many others. Essentially, these sites allow users to upload content and share it with their networks. Content may even be categorized, and often there are commenting options and polling (like/dislike) that adds a little bit of collaboration and learning feedback. However, it is probably safe to argue that most learning professionals would still classify these as CMSs.

A LMS provides a higher level of administration because it enables you to measure the effects of your learning initiatives. These tools come in all shapes and sizes including the good, the bad and the ugly. Some of the basic functions we look for in a LMS are testing data, completion reports, learner feedback, workplace usage data, and a slew of other data points to keep the ROI gurus happy. In its typical user packaging, Facebook looks like a CMS and not a LMS. However, when you peel back its surface, there

exists the construct to alter its CMS DNA to convert Facebook to a LMS. The Facebook API (Application Programming Interface) is the enabling factor.

### **Bending Facebook to your will**

Facebook's Developer API is the platform that allows you to create dynamic Facebook content. The API accepts FBML (Facebook Markup Language), but at some time in 2011, the API will phase FBML out and substitute iFrames and Facebook Javascript SDK. Facebook via their Developer Blog recommends that new developers use iFrames and the Facebook Javascript SDK moving forward, but FBML will be supported for existing Apps and Static pages. Despite the programming language, this type of development flexibility is not common amongst social media sites. Most sites allow you to customize the look of your profile, not the way you interface with your network. Facebook is allowing you to create a dynamic individualized environment within its Fan Page infrastructure. You can use forms, rich media, objects, and essentially most tools you would see in Web-based content. Simply, it is a Website within your Facebook Fan Page.

The Facebook Developer API is the element that converts Facebook to a LMS. A learning professional can create content and upload it. Using the API, you could create forms that act as tests to help you evaluate the success of your learning. The data would then be sent to your aggregate for reporting. Additionally, you can connect your learners with social tools. There are whiteboard apps as well that you can add to the page dynamic for synchronous learning. You can stream live video. One e-Learning authoring tool (Udutu) has actually created an app that allows you to develop and exhibit eCourses and tracks the learning experience within Facebook. If budgets are a problem, Google Docs/Forms offers you a very cost effective option to track feedback.

When combining Google Docs/Forms with the Facebook API, you can essentially create your level 1, 2, and 3 evaluations. Google Docs/Forms allows you to create multiple choice questions, fill in the blank, and other options. You would have to get a little creative to automate feedback but all the applications are free. When you create your form on Google Docs, you have the option of copying the embed code which allows you to insert the form into many applications including the Facebook API. When the learner inputs data, the application automatically sends it to your Google account and uploads it to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet, viewable by all those given the appropriate permissions, is then pooled into a report with graphs that Google automatically compiles. If you need more than that, some simple spreadsheet formulas should get you there.

### **Does this really work?**

I conducted two workshops recently, during which I tested this theory. I often infuse social media tools into my instructor-led courses. I am a huge advocate for this blended approach. In one situation, I used the Photos feature on the Fan page to enhance the flip chart experience one would typically get in a traditional course. Learners provided feedback on the photos by using the content section under each of the photos. As the facilitator, I was able to see who was participating, and also whether the learner was achieving the intent of the exercise.

In the second workshop Facebook learning exercise, I incorporated Google Docs/Forms. I created a form in Google's application, copied the code and then embedded it in an FBML page. (Remember, FBML will be grandfathered, but it will not likely be supported for new app development once the transition to iFrames and Facebook Javascript SDK occurs. You will have to convert the code to other programming languages supported by Facebook.) You will have to edit the code from Google to make this work. (There are many YouTube videos that give you directions on this procedure.) At the appropriate point in the workshop, I directed the learners to the relevant tabs, and had them process the exercise by answering the survey as individuals. Google instantly aggregated the feedback and we discussed the exercise as a group. We used the Google report to help facilitate the discussion.

## **What's this mean for learning professionals?**

The Facebook Developer API separates Facebook from other social media sites. I won't go so far as to say it makes Facebook better or worse than the other sites. It simply gives the learning professional an opportunity that few other sites offer. That being said, every (or at least most) social media tool has a value. Following are reasons I believe the learning professional should consider Facebook as a learning companion in CMS or LMS form:

1. There's a quick adaptation curve because most Learners are familiar with it. Those that aren't can easily be helped by any number of experts amongst the group.
2. Learners already have an emotional connection (typically positive) to Facebook.
3. Much of the Learner's network exists on this tool, enabling "backchannel" support as needed.
4. The learning interface can become totally customizable to suit your needs.
5. Feedback and data become permanent and are usable as a reference tool in the future. It could even be used as an EPSS (Electronic Performance Support System).

All of this is not to say that Facebook is the end-all and that you should abandon your LMS. There are privacy concerns with proprietary information that you need to consider. This learning option should not be considered in every situation. However, there are great opportunities for Facebook to be a great learning catalyst that keeps everyone from the learner to the bean counter happy.

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