

Social Media for Informal Learning (Dec 12)

What Is Social Media?

Social media is typically defined as web-based tools that enable users to easily share information, collaborate, and communicate with one another. According to Patti Shank (2008), social media provide one or more of the following capabilities:

- read/write web, which enables people to both read and provide content
- micro-content, which focuses on providing small pieces of content rather than providing an entire webpage
- web as a platform, in which one [application](#) is provided inside of another, such as the weather being provided on the home page of a newspaper or a Google map loading to the Directions page of a hotel's website.

Several people, including ASTD President Tony Bingham and author Jane Bozarth among others, have proposed a link between social media and informal learning. But which social [media tool](#) can you specifically use—and what roles do they play in informal learning?

Part 1: Five Social Tools You Are Probably Already Using

For most people the term *social media* usually brings to mind Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. But how can you use these for learning? Here are several [classes](#) of common social media tools and suggestions for how to use each with informal learning.

1. Blogs. Although originally conceived as a personal journal shared online, blogs (shortened form of *web log*) have evolved to become columns—or *posts*—as people call them—to which readers can post comments and the author(s) sometimes replies. These can range from topic-driven blogs, which focus on a single topic, or personality-driven blogs, which reflect the opinions of an individual. Training and development (T&D) professionals can create blogs using publicly available software, like Blogger and Wordpress, or with blogging tools that are built into other software used in their organizations.

In terms of informal learning, blogs provide learners with content and opinion-based perspective. Although these posts provide instructional material, the real discussion—and learning—often occurs in the comments that follow a blog entry. *Bloggers* (people who post to blogs) can determine whether people can provide comments anonymously or whether commenters must identify themselves (as is increasingly the custom).

2. Social networking refers to websites that enable users to publish content for others to view. Most social networks encourage users to publish information about their current activities. These networks also let users restrict who can view information to those allowed access to their personal *networks*, which consists of people the user has contacted and specifically invited to see their information (or

who has received such an invitation from another user). Members included in [a network](#) can see one another's profiles, which contains information about who they are, where they live, what type of work they do, what interests they have, and so forth. In addition, social networks let users create "groups," which can allow people from outside a network share information with others who also share similar interests.

Training and development can use publicly available software like Facebook (typically associated with personal, private networking) and LinkedIn (typically associated with business networking) to form social networks. Another option is to create networks on proprietary software, such as software embedded in proprietary applications, like Lotus [groupware](#). Many organizations prefer that employees use such private networks to prevent the leak of sensitive information.

In terms of informal learning, training and development professionals use social networks in ways similar to the discussion boards and lists that existed online before social networking evolved into what it is today. T&D can also use it as a means of sending announcements and similar types of communication, and to bring together people who might not otherwise meet. Organizations can also allow workers to set up their own networks, without the direct involvement (much less approval) of managers.

3. Microblogging refers to the 140-character messages that people post using Twitter, and status updates on social networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. Because Twitter popularized microblogging and each posting is called a *tweet*, many people refer to the act of microblogging as *tweeting*.

Regardless of the service used, each provides a place to easily post updates. For example, Facebook asks users to post "What's on your mind?"

In terms of informal learning, training and development professionals use microblogging to direct users to longer articles and blog posts of possible interest, as well as to discuss an event with others, usually while the event occurs.

4. Virtual worlds refers to software that provides a three-dimensional (3D) online environment that users can enter and interact in unscripted ways with other users who are online at the same time (The Horizon Report, 2007). The 3D environments can be designed to resemble real environments (like museums and businesses) or imaginary ones, and they can be public or private.

T&D professionals create these worlds using publicly available software like SecondLife, or specialized animation and simulation software. Note: Even when T&D practitioners use publicly available software to create a virtual world that meets the needs of the organization, they still often require additional custom programming not necessarily needed to use the other three types of applications mentioned so far.

In terms of informal learning, training and development professionals use virtual worlds to simulate complex environments, conduct online lectures and chats, and to allow users to interact with one another.

5. Photo and video sharing services refer to services that enable people to publish photos and videos in a central location in order to make them widely available to others.

Training and development professionals create the photos, videos, and similar graphic images using the same types of software used to create podcasts and vodcasts. They share the materials on picture and video sharing sites. T&D professionals can, with permission, use the images from the other learning materials they produce. In terms of informal learning, shared videos provide instruction on a number of common concepts and procedures.

You can check the Appendix out now to review the five social tools you are probably already using.

Part 2: Six Social Media Tools that Have Specific Uses

This installment of the article series “Social Media for Informal Learning” identifies six classes of specialized social media that have specific applications training and development practitioners can use to support their informal learning efforts.

1. Wikis and collaborative applications

Wiki refers to a document that is jointly created by several users. When readers view the document, they do not see who contributed to each part, although some do provide a service for viewing who contributed. The best known document created with a wiki is the Wikipedia, named after the [authoring tool](#) (and, itself, a terrific informal learning resource—researchers have suggested that its content is usually as credible as the more traditional encyclopedias).

Collaborative applications are a variation on wikis. These work similarly to wikis in that all users work from a centralized file and can contribute to it, but differ from wikis in that users can also create spreadsheets, presentations, and other resources. Google Docs, Google Sheets, and the web-based versions of [Microsoft applications](#) are examples of such collaborative applications.

Training and development (T&D) professionals use specialized software to create wikis—usually to perform work associated with a project.

In terms of informal learning, T&D practitioners can use wikis to create references and similar documents in which the expertise needed to write different parts is distributed throughout an organization, and make it available to all in the organization. Similarly, the process of creating such a shared document—even for purposes other than training—also provides a valuable learning experience within the context of a specific project and job.

2. [Electronic portfolios \(e-portfolios\)](#)

E-portfolios refer to a collection of previous work presented on the web, as well as space for peers and advisors to comment. They also include reflections from the work’s creator that, at the least, describe how the work was created and, at the most, provide both a self-evaluation of the work.

As with traditional portfolios, e-portfolios “let people showcase their work and skills in ways that aren’t possible through the mere listings of credentials permitted by résumés and curricula vitae” (Carliner 2005, p. 71). Although most workers use *showcase* portfolios as a tool in the job search process,

process portfolios, which contain reflections on the learning process, provide a means for workers to solicit feedback on their work.

The process portfolios—in which learners receive feedback on their work—provide some of the most powerful informal learning opportunities. T&D professionals encourage learners to create e-portfolios using a variety of [web development software](#) and online templates, including Google Sites and the [European Union's Europass](#) curriculum vitae (which includes options for portfolios).

Showcase and process portfolios also prove to be valuable resources in evaluating and recognizing informal learning, as they provide a means of evaluating competence acquired through informal learning efforts.

3. Mentor matching

This category of **software** links potential mentors to protégés. Mentor matching software works much like online [dating software](#); mentors and protégés complete profiles, and the system matches those who have similar interests. The software also provides a means for possible matches to interact with one another. One of the primary benefits of mentor matching software is that it promotes mentoring across geographic boundaries; traditional approaches to mentoring often focus on face-to-face relationships. Also, mentor matching can be a useful tool for facilitating relationships for protégés who might not find a suitable mentor in the location where they work.

Most mentor matching services are provided through proprietary software that organizations must purchase. Training and development professionals use this specialized software to determine specific matches, as well as to provide advice on how to manage the mentor-protégé relationship, including related expectations.

4. Ratings or ranking systems

Simply stated, rating systems allows participants to provide comments about, and rankings of, material presented on a website. Some popular websites that let participants provide rankings include eBay, Amazon, and TripAdvisor. Visitors use these opinions and ratings to learn more about the subject as well as determine whether or not to use an item.

Some enterprise learning software (learning and talent management systems) lets users provide opinions and rankings of learning resources—not only formal courses, but also e-courseware and other e-learning experiences. Rating systems provide value by enabling learners to determine for themselves which resources might best meet their needs.

5. Bookmarking and image-linking software

These types of applications allow users to identify a web-based resource of potential interest to others. Furthermore, these applications have users categorize links, which aids other users in finding them. Pinterest is a popular bookmarking, image-linking tool. The former software Delicious served a similar purpose, though it only catalogued web addresses, not images.

T&D professionals can use these tools to create recommended reading lists on topics of interest to workers so that these workers have a well-defined starting point in their learning journey.

6. Personalized learning environments (PLE)

PLEs are comprehensive examples of social media for informal learning and are portals—or virtual gateways—that provide workers with links to a variety of informal learning resources, many of which involve social media, that workers may find helpful in their ongoing development.

A typical PLE starts with a portal or home page, through which the worker links to other resources. These environments allow workers to choose the social media and other resources from which they would like access from their portal or home page. Currently, PLEs are still primarily prototypes or in early phases of testing, and most of the prototypes and test environments are intended for students in primary, secondary, or higher education, rather than adults in the workplace.

For now, training and development professionals should follow these developments to determine whether they could help workers in their organizations.

Part 3

How do you choose social learning tools that might be useful in your organization? How might you integrate them into existing learning? The final article in this series explores principles for using social media to promote informal learning.

Principles to Consider When Using *Any* Technology for Learning

When considering employing a particular technology to aid learning efforts, it is important for T&D practitioners to mull over the following issues:

- **Capabilities.** What does the technology do—and is that what you need it to do? Does the need match the functionality? If not, the technology is unlikely to improve or aid learning and, therefore, probably isn't worth another look.
- **Costs.** What does it cost to not only acquire the technology and support it, but also to prepare learning and informal experiences that use that technology?
- **Time requirements.** How much time is needed to design, develop, and deliver materials using that technology? Some technologies are inexpensive to acquire (especially with so many free services available online), but they can also use up a lot of time (ask social networking addicts).

Bottom line: Be sure to keep in mind practical issues when choosing any technology to use with informal learning, including social media.

“Pluses” of Social Media

Social media offer many advantages, which are widely communicated in the trade press:

Social media can reduce content development costs. Specifically, social media can reduce costs in [software acquisition](#) and content development.

- Software acquisition: If it's possible to use widely available tools like LinkedIn and Facebook, they're generally free to use. Keep security issues in mind, though, if you're using social media internally. Free software rarely offers the type of security needed to protect proprietary and personnel [information](#).
- Content development. "Volunteers" within the community who have topic-specific knowledge typically contribute to the creation of resources that members of that community use to strengthen their own knowledge. These volunteers—staff members, suppliers, and customers—might answer questions posed to a group, supply an article for an internal [online encyclopedia](#), or informally share insights.

Social media supports learning among peers—without geographic limits. In many organizations, casual spaces like [water coolers](#), lounges, cafeterias, and coffee shops lead to informal sharing of information—and some serious learning. But geography limits who can share information to people who work in the same place. Social media breaks down these barriers by providing a virtual casual space where people can have informal conversations that lead to serious learning.

Sometimes social media teaches; other times it leads workers to enlightening content. Different types of social media facilitate different types of social interactions—some emphasize short interactions, others emphasize longer ones.

For example, the primary means of communicating in microblogging (Twitter), social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn), and social bookmarking (Pinterest) is brief, either a link or a limited number of characters. As a result, they're great for linking people to content rather than communicating complete lessons.

In contrast, blogs, wikis, and shared applications promote interactive work and the creation of longer documents that, in turn, can provide complete lessons.

People already use social media for personal purposes. An increasing number of workers have personal social media accounts. For many, social media is how they interact with the world. Training and development professionals can leverage this connectedness and familiarity with the technology for learning purposes.

"Minuses" of Social Media

Receiving less attention by the trade press—and users—are some of the questions and concerns about using social media and informal learning.

Technology is still developing. Most uses of social media for learning are still in the early stages. There is much conflicting evidence about its use as learning tools as its use in other spheres. For example, although some T&D professionals believe that social media is the future of learning,

research shows that its use is not as widespread among younger adults as assumed (Freeman 2010)—much less among learning professionals (Rossett & Marshall 2010).

Furthermore, many trials using Twitter, Facebook, and blogs for learning have had mixed results. One issue that arose in many studies is the notion of sustaining interest. Students would tweet or blog at first, but did not sustain the practice. In one study, the number of tweets dropped by 75 percent between the beginning and end of a course. In another study, students were busy tweeting but, as one noted, they had no idea what they were tweeting about.

There is confusion regarding terminology. On a more basic level, much confusion exists around basic terminology for social media, just as it does for informal learning in general. For example, one common confusion is understanding the differences between blogs and wikis. Blogs are individually written pieces that clearly identify the author and individual comments. In contrast, a wiki is a collaboratively written document; the identity of individual authors is not always provided.

If the people advocating the use of a particular social medium don't really know what it is, how can they effectively promote its use for formal learning purposes, much less informal learning?

Not all software is appropriate for business. In general, people use Facebook for their personal and social lives, while they use LinkedIn for their professional lives. (However, many organizations want to use Facebook to reach consumers and potential members.)

This has significant implications for informal learning. In terms of promoting informal learning related to work, LinkedIn might provide better access to the proper people when they need to consider work-related issues. Meanwhile, in terms of simply using the media, some organizations ban the use of Facebook for work-related purposes. Indeed, some schools have done so to prevent inappropriate contact between teachers and students.

The issue is not whether these bans are right or wrong. As long as they formally exist in an organization, training and development professionals cannot use the banned or limited medium to facilitate informal learning.

Content is often “buyer beware” (Shank, 2008). In many cases, content created and made available to others via social media has not been reviewed by others for accuracy, completeness, and readability. Indeed, sometimes the content hasn't even been spellchecked. In other cases, people who post to social media provide their thoughts and opinions about issues, but may not be basing them on facts—or may simply choose to ignore the facts.

As a result, informal learners must be able to not only assess the appropriateness of content to their needs, but also need to assess the quality of the content they're reading.

For some socially created content, like Wikipedia, the community of contributors usually (and eventually) ensures that the content eventually is accurate. For example, studies have shown that entries on Wikipedia have a similar level of accuracy to those in the well-regarded *Encyclopedia Britannica*. But wikis are the only social medium that lets users correct the original content. When

errors appear on blogs, Facebook updates, and other social media sites, the only way to point out the errors is to post a comment or make an update—and hope that others read it.

Participants often need etiquette lessons. Research suggests that people tend to exhibit less inhibited behavior online than in person, a tendency often reflected in online comments. These, in turn, anger other users, who respond with inflammatory comments of their own.

Some users are extremely polite—but see every group member as a prospective customer and try to steer every group conversation to a sale for themselves—even in conversations that have nothing to do with sales. In addition to annoying and offending many of the participants in the community and hampering the likelihood that informal learning might occur during discussions, these perpetual marketers defeat their own purposes. Most usually lose the sales they hoped to gain.

In the belief that anonymous comments led to this behavior, many online news and information sites now require that users register themselves with the site before they can make comments and refuse anonymous comments. Similarly, some discussion groups within social networking sites have guidelines to keep the focus on learning and networking—and off of a lot of other things. Consider the guidelines from the Technical Writer Forum on LinkedIn (see Figure 1).

Users must consider privacy of others. Although social networking connects people across departments, organizations, and other geographic boundaries, the extent of information they collect and share, as well as the encouragement to share all sorts of personal information, raises concerns about privacy.

Facebook privacy settings and guidelines for selecting who to “safely” friend on Facebook and connect with on LinkedIn have received much attention from the popular press. Similarly, the information collected and sold about users on these systems without the knowledge of those users has received much attention.

Receiving less attention, however, are the more fundamental issues of privacy—like sharing company secrets, private personnel information, and other types of internal information. Although most organizations have policies regarding these disclosures, employees often violate them—and the casual atmosphere of social media often leaves workers with their guards down.

To prevent such leaks, some organizations have adopted proprietary social networking software for use within the organization. Although these tools raise costs (organizations need to acquire the software, as well as install and support it), they provide safety and privacy. But they’re less familiar and less likely to receive the attention from workers as public sites—unless the organization makes a concerted effort to drive people to the proprietary social networking software.

Bottom Line

Social media—like all technologies—are just one set of tools in a complete repertoire of instruction and performance improvement solutions that training and development professionals can offer to their clients. The challenge is to use it effectively, making sure that the situation benefits from the use of

social media and that the issues that could derail its success are addressed as part of the plan for using these media.

Appendix

Table 1: Forms of Social Media Used for Informal Learning		
Form of Social Media	Costs and Development Time	Software and Examples of use
<i>Social Networking Applications in Common Use</i>		
Blogs	<p>\$-\$\$\$ (varies depending on whether you use a public service or privately host the blog, and whether you write the blog yourself or hire ghost writers)</p> <p>@-@@@ (varies depending on the extent of research and review involved, and whether you write the blog yourself or hire a ghost writer)</p>	<p>Software used to produce the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blogger • Wordpress <p>Examples of the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content-based blog, such as Tony Karrer's e-learning Technology blog (http://elearningtech.blogspot.com/) • Personality-based blog, which reflects the opinions and perspectives of an individual, such as Jay Cross's Internet Time blog (www.internettime.com)
Social networking	<p>\$-\$\$\$\$ (varies depending on whether public or private software is used, and the extent of planning and consideration given to the social networking strategy)</p> <p>@-@@@@ (varies depending on whether social networking is a diversion or a long-term strategy)</p>	<p>Software used to produce the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public social networking sites, like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Plaxo • Internal software that permits social networking in one form or another, such as Lotus Connections <p>Examples of the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LinkedIn group of the Rochester, New York chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, which publishes announcements through the group • A Facebook group with alumni of a master's program in human resource development at a major university
Microblogging	<p>\$-\$\$\$ (most people use public services so those costs are low; some people hire ghost writers to tweet for them, which raises the costs)</p> <p>@-@@@ (varies depending on the extent of time spent on the service)</p>	<p>Examples of the content:</p> <p>#Lrnchat, a weekly meeting of learning professionals on Twitter</p> <p>Status updates on the Facebook and LinkedIn social networks</p> <p>Status updates in proprietary social networks, such as internal social networks.</p>

Virtual worlds	<p>\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$ (even with the use of public software, requires extensive planning and monitoring; can also purchase private islands in Second Life to protect privacy)</p> <p>@@@-@@@@ (varies depending on the extent of labor involved in setting up and monitoring the virtual world)</p>	<p>Software used to share the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flickr (photo sharing service) • YouTube (video sharing service) <p>Examples of the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How-to videos, such as instructions on how to perform basic plumbing tasks • Conceptual videos, such as an overview of a new computerized parking meter system in San Francisco
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Social Networking Applications that Specifically Designed for Informal Learning Purposes

Wikis and collaborative applications	<p>\$\$-\$\$\$\$ (varies depending on extent of review, coordination, and production involved)</p> <p>@@@-@@@@ (varies depending on the extent of writing, review, coordination, and production, required)</p>	<p>Software used to produce the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wiki authoring tools: MediaWiki and TikiWiki • Collaborative applications: Google Docs, GoogleSheets, <p>Examples of the content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EduTech Wiki, a wiki about educational technology • An internal wiki with information about the components of complex computer software
Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios)	<p>\$-\$\$\$ (varies depending on extent of planning, production and feedback needed, and whether a public or custom portfolio service is used)</p> <p>@-@@@ (varies depending on the extent of planning, design, writing production, programming, and review required)</p>	<p>Example: the Europass Curriculum Vitae (http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/curriculum-vitae), which provides a format for preparing an e-portfolio and sharing it with others.</p>
Mentor matching	<p>\$\$-\$\$\$\$ (for a combination of software purchase and support for the mentor-protégé relationship)</p> <p>@@-@@@ (varies depending on the extent of support provided to the mentors and protégés)</p>	<p>Software used to produce the content, includes programs like MentorScout</p> <p>Examples of the content: Several mentor matching programs have appeared in the ASTD Awards of Excellence program</p>
Ratings or ranking systems	<p>\$\$-\$\$\$\$ (varies depending on extent of production and programming involved in setting up the system, and in monitoring the ratings on an ongoing basis)</p> <p>@@@-@@@@ (varies depending on the extent of production and programming, needed to start the system, and ongoing monitoring of the ratings)</p>	<p>Examples of the content:</p> <p>Ratings of learning objects deposited in MERLOT, the learning objects repository. Ratings of hotels that appear in TripAdvisor.com.</p>

<p>Bookmarking/ image-tagging sites</p>	<p>\$-\$\$\$ (varies depending on extent of monitoring and maintaining the links on an ongoing basis, as well as establishing the classification system for links)</p> <p>@-@@@@ (The time for setting up an individual link or “pin” is quick; the establishment of a system for cataloguing the content and conducting ongoing maintenance of it, however, takes increasing time as the number of items linked grows)</p>	<p>Examples of content: Links based on topics.</p> <p>Examples of software:</p> <p>Pinterst Delicious (no longer available)</p>
<p>Personalized Learning Environments (PLEs)</p>	<p>\$\$\$\$\$ (varies depending on extent of production and programming involved in setting up the system, and in monitoring the ratings on an ongoing basis)</p> <p>@@@-@@@@ (varies depending on the extent of production and programming, needed to start the system, and ongoing monitoring of the ratings)</p>	<p>Still in development.</p>

Key:

\$: Estimates of cost are relative in comparison to other items rather than pegged to a financial value

@: Estimates of cost are relative in comparison to other items on this list rather than pegged to a specific time range