

Chapter XII

Pedagogical Practice for Learning with Social Software

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes that social software can enable informal learning environments through collective learning networks and the fundamental social interactions embedded in those learning processes. Situated in the adult learning organisational context, the challenge for educators is how to reframe their pedagogical practices for the new technological developments and facilitate the design of online communication and information exchanges to empower the learners and create an enriched social learning landscape. The chapter presents a pedagogical framework, developed from practice and verified through doctoral research, which provides pathways through phases of development for facilitating informal learning processes and strategies that enable learners to overcome key issues that may inhibit the creation of informal learning environments. Examples from recent practice will be used to illustrate areas where educators need to be aware of both the inhibitors and their pedagogical strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In adult learning contexts, both corporate organisations and higher education institutions, the early implementations of e-learning products focused on delivery, accessibility, and distribution of content to learners anywhere, any time. While large investments of resources were spent on the technical infrastructure such as intranets,

learner management systems (LMSs), and on-line courses with the expectation of providing improved productivity, delivery, and workplace efficiencies. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that incorporating these technologies into existing learning environments has resulted in significant change in learning processes or outcomes (Zemsky & Massy, 2004). Learners lament the loss of communication and depersonalisation of

content (Sanders, 2006) and continue to attend scheduled classroom sessions even when offered alternative delivery methods, such as podcast lectures (Alexander, 2006). In these contexts, the role of the educator has become increasingly focused on dispensing, enforcing, and managing the distribution of learning through overly bureaucratic, inflexible systems that depersonalise and disconnect the learner from not only the context but also other learners within the organisation (Bartlett-Bragg, 2005).

Currently, organisations are turning their attention towards emerging technologies in an attempt to stimulate the capture of tacit knowledge from informal learning situations. Consequently, to reflect and question our underpinning pedagogical principles when creating a learning environment that fosters the development of informal learning is the potential presented by the integration of the emerging social software technologies into our teaching practices, rather than simply replicating or renovating traditional pedagogical strategies.

The aim of this chapter will be to present a pedagogical framework, developed from six years of practice and informed by doctoral research that provides pathways through phases of development for facilitating informal learning processes using social software. In particular, drawing upon specific examples from recent experiences in the organisational learning context, issues that inhibited learners when attempting to create informal learning environments with social software are identified. Also, strategies used to address these concerns will be examined.

INFORMAL LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONS

Recent organisational learning industry reports assert figures ranging from 58–80% of the learning that occurs in the workplace is informal (Chief Learning Officer, 2007; Harrison, 2006). The

Chief Learning Officer Business Intelligence Industry Report (2007) claims that although informal learning is hard to measure, 20% of organisations track informal learning, while 8% have a comprehensive strategy to manage informal learning, and 47% report ad hoc strategies.

Yet how these reports define informal learning becomes a significant issue in the interpretation of the cited figures. If informal learning is considered a core notion of adult learning principles, viewed as a subset of the social learning concepts, where the recognition that learning occurs in a social context through interactions with others and subsequent learning is influenced by observing and modeling the patterns of behaviour (Cornford, 1999), then this broad definition may provide some insight into how organisations may be challenged by measurement and management.

The Chief Learning Officer Report (2007) simply explains that informal learning tends to be unplanned and unstructured, while Harrison (2006, p. 2) describes events “that take place away from the world of organized formal training” and is deep and pervasive, uncontrolled, and powerful. Nonetheless, an unambiguous definition of informal learning remains a contested issue, particularly in the organisational learning context where informal learning is generally described in contrast to formal learning or by what it is not (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2002). Current debates focus on the comparisons between the degree of formality and informality; the description of specific learning situations; and intentional or unintentional learning outcomes (Beckett & Hager, 2002; Billett, 2001; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). In contrast, an expanded concept of formal vs. informal learning was outlined by the European Commission (2001, pp. 32-33) into three categories:

- **Formal learning:** Provided by an educational institution, structured, leading to a qualification, and intentional by the learner.

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