The Evolution of Social Learning
Challenges in Leveraging Collaboration & Technology

Research Brief

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David Wentworth
June 2013
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Introduction

Social media has become a fixture in many of our lives. For proof, look no further than the more than 1 billion active Facebook users and 72 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every single minute. Even the more professional platform, LinkedIn, has 175 million members worldwide.

The challenge has been figuring out what this means to the enterprise and, more specifically, the learning function. Clearly, there is potential to harness the collaborative and interactive nature of these platforms for learning. But just how to execute has, until recently, been somewhat elusive.

As we enter a period where social media technologies are routinely integrated into learning platforms, this paper examines how we arrived here, what it means for learning, and how to best leverage the tools available. It will cover:

- The evolution of learning
- The difference between social learning and social media
- Why social is important
- Current trends in social learning technology
- Social learning challenges
- Social learning in action
Are We There Yet?

Learning is undergoing another fundamental shift and new technologies have a lot to do with it. We have moved from periods of a one-on-one model, a one-to-many model and a many-to-many model, and are now entering a new, relationship-centered period. Technology is allowing us to leverage the various relationships that exist within the learning ecosystem in ways that were not previously possible.

Figure 1: The Evolution of Learning

![Figure 1: The Evolution of Learning](source)

Source: Brandon Hall Group, 2013

Everything in the ecosystem – learners, instructors, content, technology, etc. – is connected. The advent of social media and mobile technology allows us to develop and facilitate each of those connections in ways that meet their specific needs. People have always collaborated when it comes to learning. Social learning is not social media. It is not a technology, and it is not something for younger generations. Instead, social media enables social learning to occur more frequently and on a larger scale.
What do we do now?

There are many reasons why social tools for learning are so important right now, but one of the most important can be summed up by Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: The 100% Learning Solution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>70% On-the-Job Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Idea Engine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Real-Time Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Groups &amp; Workspaces</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20% Feedback &amp; Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Groups Associated with Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expertise Location</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10% Courses &amp; Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Formal Learning/Catalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Certification &amp; Compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mobile Learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lombardo & Eichinger, Center for Creative Leadership

If most of our learning is occurring outside the traditional formal learning environment, how are we facilitating, managing, tracking and measuring that? Up until recently, we haven’t been doing very well. The items found in the middle 20%, such as groups associated with classes and expertise location, are tailor-made for social technologies. The same is true for the 70% of learning that takes place during real-time collaboration and in groups and workspaces.

Social technologies allow for learning interactions to occur before, after, and in-between more formal learning activities. These are the types of interactions learners naturally want to have, but often they are constrained by technology limitations. By having a social learning environment within organizations, these activities can take place and they can be facilitated and tracked by the platform.
Who is Using It?

Not all organizations have reached the state of Relationship Centered Learning (RCL) that we saw in Figure 1. But organizations that are RCL-focused share some important common traits. Their workforces have a proactive orientation to learning. They use technology to facilitate informal learning opportunities, and employees are typically presented with more personal, contextual development opportunities.

Research from Brandon Hall Group has also found that these organizations are clearly on the cutting edge when it comes to using social platforms for learning.

**Figure 3: Are Social Media Platforms Used for Learning in Your Organization?**

As we can see in Figure 3 above, those companies that do not exhibit the characteristics of a Relationship Centered Learning (RCL) organization are far less likely to have figured out how to incorporate social collaboration into their learning environment. Nearly three-quarters of RCL organizations, however, are using social platforms to some extent.
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Social Technology Challenges

Although social learning technologies have been around for many years, the learning function is only just beginning to realize their potential. In these early days, there are many challenges, real or imagined, that present themselves.

Wrong Tool, Wrong Time

Simply plugging a social tool into your LMS will not necessarily achieve results. For example, Twitter may not be the best forum for delivering your organization’s core product and services training. The key is to match the tool with the challenge at hand. If a program would benefit from more collaboration, then a micro-blogging tool may be beneficial. A YouTube-styled video channel may be the perfect solution for a company FAQ. The tool you use will be dictated by the material and the audience. Don’t try to make something work “just because.”

Information Overload

Once a robust social learning environment is in place, learners will be faced with more material and interactions than they may be used to. Now content is coming from multiple directions and activities are occurring with more frequency. It can easily become a challenge to manage the deluge of information. What is important here is not to stifle this amount of activity, but curate it. This may take some advance work in the form of administrators and moderators, but with proper guidance the environment should become relatively self-sustaining. Rely on the wisdom of your learners to recognize useful information and promote it while dismissing extraneous, irrelevant noise.

Getting the Social Edge

Social learning technologies have been successful for a global leader in the medical technology industry. This organization has more than 12,000 worldwide employees and more than $11 billion in annual revenue, and delivers a high volume of formal training with a focus on ongoing activities.

When it became apparent that a specific team within the organization was struggling with engagement (losing approximately two people per week), the company recognized a new approach was needed. This particular team skews a bit younger than the organization in general and it was determined a more social approach should be deployed.
The result is My Edge, built on the Saba People Platform. The platform allows the team to collaborate, share knowledge, and find experts much more easily. Communities were built around job roles and content areas and there was also integration with social media sites like YouTube, allowing learners to link to engaging material.

The amount of user-generated content being contributed skyrocketed. This level of interaction created a much more engaging experience, and turnover rates for the team soon declined.

**Figure 4: The Social LMS Environment**

![Image of My Edge platform](source:Saba, 2013)
Summary

While certain social media platforms may seem like fads, the collaborative nature of the technologies is not. At the same time, it is not a cure for all of learning’s challenges. There is clear and specific value and that value will vary from one organization to the next. The real key is to look at social technology less as a series of singular tools and technologies, but instead as the sum of all (or a combination of some) of these parts. The sum will always be greater than the parts when it comes to social technologies, because each of the pieces works together to create a unique learning environment.

To get started here are a few key considerations to keep in mind:

- If you build it, they will neither come nor participate. Develop incentives, communicate, and have leadership model the behavior. All participating parties need personal incentives.

- Don’t think technology first; think human interactions and building a shared understanding.

- Support work that is accomplished through collaboration and team interactions. It will drive social engagement.

- Create learning models and tools that support a culture of coaching, mentoring, feedback and interactions.

- Start small! Use free tools and small deployments to build success.

- Ensure employees have a clear perception of your vision of learning, talent management, and social interactions.
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About Brandon Hall Group

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 20 years of delivering world class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is the most established and well-known research organization in the performance improvement industry. We conduct research that drives performance and provides strategic insight for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

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