Is the LMS Dead?

BY ED COHEN

Web-based learning and collaboration tools are driving a new breed of learning management.

Social networking, Web 2.0 tools, online collaboration — these are all concepts that have forever changed the technology world and the way we interact with each other online. These solutions also represent a significant milestone in the evolution of learning management. As a result, the learning management system (LMS) has been reborn to include social networking and collaboration tools that capture informal learning and foster internal collaboration.

Learning management has evolved in both of these areas to drive workforce productivity and innovation; facilitate information sharing and employee collaboration; and extend formal, informal and just-in-time learning initiatives across the enterprise.

Social Networking and Collaboration for the Workplace

By breaking out of the traditional "formal" and "informal" learning silos — and embracing the synergy that exists between these two areas — organizations open themselves up to potentially greater results, including more productive employees, shorter time to competency for new employees and partners, and more engaged employees.

To do this, LMS solutions have been "reinvented" to incorporate the best social networking, Web 2.0 and collaboration tools alongside powerful LMS capabilities. Social networking and collaboration tools provide organizations with an easy way to connect employees to each other, direct access to information and an environment for them to contribute to the content. These types of tools can help bridge the gaps between traditional or formal learning and less tangible, user-driven, informal learning.

In today's "new" LMS, user-driven content should be able to be shared, enhanced, commented on and rated, with the goal of increasing workforce efficiency and productivity. Learners should be able to post questions, documents and best practices and also be able to locate subject-matter experts and information quickly and easily. These shifts in functionality serve to not only make learning more social, but also complement the formal learning capabilities found in traditional LMS solutions.

Delivering Learning Using Web 2.0 Technologies

Beyond using Web 2.0 and social networking solutions to foster collaboration and capture informal learning, organizations are starting to think about the suitability of learning delivery platforms. For example, just because various types of learning can be delivered via podcast doesn't mean that podcasts are the right format for every learner or topic. Similarly, just because a learner could find the answer to every question on a blog doesn't mean that he or she will.
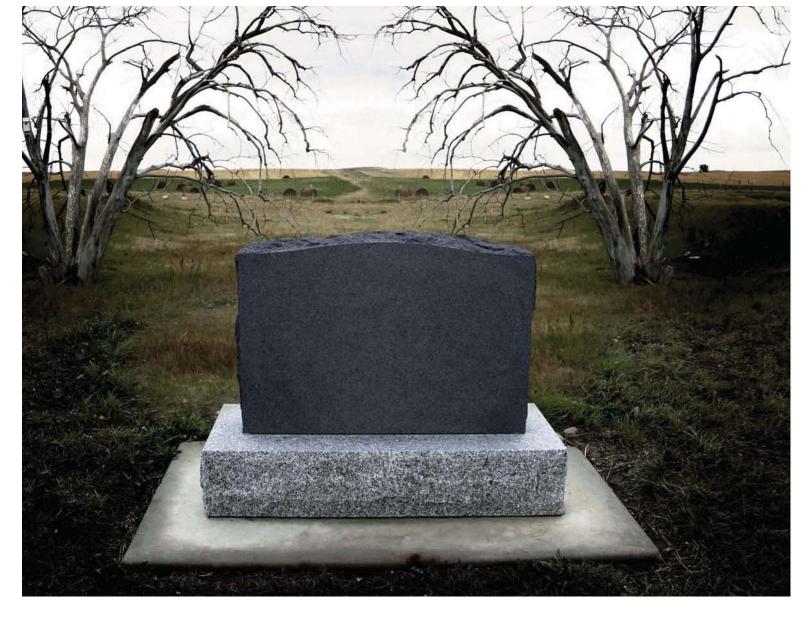
New technologies primarily fall into two categories: Either they replace something we already have, or they add new capabilities. For example, in the 1970s, e-learning took place on mainframe computers. In the 1980s, the transition to the first PCs took place. PCs were cheaper, had better graphics and were more accessible to more training departments, so they became the replacement platform. Next, interactive video via videodisc was introduced into computer-based training (CBT). Although the videodisc died very quickly, the idea of using video in e-learning grew and eventually became an additional capability.

A similar type of phenomenon has occurred on the instructional design and learning management side of e-learning. The question we need to answer now is how do all of these new technologies and innovations impact learning, and how do we best use them? In order to do this, we should take a look at how a couple of these technologies evolved and why.

How Did We Get Here?

In the 1980s, before networks, corporations kept track of training either in books or in a training management system (TMS). Students would actually log into the content itself, and at the end of the course, someone would print out the student record and manually add it to the TMS as part of the learner's record.

During the 1990s, companies realized that having all student records in one place along with the ability to launch and track content was important. This

was the basis for the modern-day LMS. Over the next decade, the LMS industry took several questionable turns based on what people believed should be included in terms of functionality. Some of these decisions included content authoring and Web conferencing capability. In both cases, the industry was trying to solve a compatibility problem by forcing two different software applications to be part of one. Although some companies sold these combined products successfully, the stand-alone tools were always more powerful and more effective than the combined applications. Eventually, the industry accepted that authoring and conferencing were not really part of the learning management process — although the resulting content produced from these activities needed to be managed within an LMS.

In 2000, the e-learning industry began a new era with the introduction of the Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM). SCORM was promoted as the interoperability solution between content and LMSs. Although the Aviation Industry Computer-Based Training Committee (AICC) standards and other e-learning standards had existed for years, none of them had ever proposed an instructional design strategy or had been as quickly adopted as SCORM. The SCORM book described how you could design content in small, reusable pieces of instruction that could be shared between companies and in multiple courses.

As a result of the industry creating all of these small pieces of instruction, the need for a new technology emerged in order to create and manage them. This was the beginning of the learning content management system (LCMS). The LCMS was designed to help create and manage all of these content objects and then reassemble them into new courses.

Where We Are Today
With the introduction of each new technology and methodology, our industry is trying to make things more efficient and more effective. However, we can't increase the rate at which a learner consumes information, so now the object is to make it more available.

This is where formal and informal learning and performance management enter the picture. It is important to acknowledge that every industry,

IN PRACTICE WEBJUNCTION BUILDS A SOCIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Supported by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, online community WebJunction is a unit of the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). Library staff and affiliated organizations can gather to solve problems, share knowledge and network with each other.

Since its launch in May 2003, WebJunction has provided its nearly 50,000 members with convenient and cost-effective access to online courses and continuing education certification. To date, WebJunction community members have used the site to take more than 30,000 courses.

"By blending social communication with marketing communication and competency-based learning content, we are filling a critical need for libraries — particularly small and rural libraries that may not have access to continuing education in other formats," said Linda Lewis, WebJunction's product manager.

In 2008, faced with a rapidly growing audience and expanding range of content, WebJunction recognized that it needed to make it easier for users to navigate its course catalog and improve scalability of the site to accommodate increased traffic and new audiences. In addition, WebJunction saw value in creating a centralized, interactive online community for members and users that would bring together the fragmented library field and allow them to engage in discussions, participate in groups, share content and partake in collaborative learning with colleagues and peers.

Selecting the LMS

"Our mission was to aggregate information to help libraries help each other," Lewis said. "We had some rudimentary social networking features and a basic LMS, but we wanted to have a scalable platform with more robust community features."

WebJunction executives recognized the need for a platform that integrated the features of social community sites and virtual meeting spaces with content and learning capabilities. The initiative required a system that would provide a community experience, including features that would allow for group spaces and a way for individuals to add content to the site. The solution also had to integrate with OCLC's e-commerce solution for payment processing, as well as with WebJunction's own social functionality and content management tools built using Liferay, an open-source enterprise portal solution. Ultimately, WebJunction chose Plateau Systems to be its LMS provider.

Since the launch of the new social learning community, WebJunction executives have found that the LMS has allowed them to respond to industry changes and to the breadth of content necessary for meeting the diverse requirements of public and academic libraries as well as state agencies; K-12, law, medical and corporate libraries; and international users. The system allows individual courses to be purchased or libraries to purchase bulk courses through the WebJunction catalog.

"Some customers open their catalog to all members; some have strict controls on who may enroll in their courses," Lewis said. "But while our partners can set access permissions the way they want, it's all still being managed by the LMS — and there's a global catalog."

Winning Buy-In

In one year, nearly 7,000 individuals have enrolled in WebJunction courses, and there are now more than 600 titles, which are mapped to library-specific competencies within the globalized catalog.

Lewis said the biggest advantage is that the entire process is seamless.

"The interface is always WebJunction. Members just click on courses or competencies and connect to the learning content," she said.

Further, once a member clicks on "My WebJunction," he or she can see updates on friends' activities and on relevant content. And by clicking on "My Account," the member can view all his or her courses, comments, activities and affiliations.

"It really blends social, learning and marketing content so that it works for the members, for us and for our partners," Lewis said.

Creating a Sustainable Platform

In addition to the flexibility to grow and evolve along with the needs of the WebJunction community, the LMS also has had measurable business impact. For example, the platform has allowed WebJunction to reduce its support time from 72 hours to two hours, and 100 percent of administrator training is now done with self-paced or instructor-led online learning rather than face to face, further adding to cost savings and resource optimization. CLO

— Ed Cohen

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subject and learner has a "best" way to convey whatever knowledge the learner must know. This best solution can range from access to a blog at one end of the spectrum to months in a simulator at the other end of the spectrum. No matter the delivery medium, you first must know who the learners are and what they need to know.

Learning management is about connecting the dots between what the learner already knows and what the learner needs to know in order to meet the requirements of his or her job. Learning management has nothing to do with the creation of raw media — though the data collected within an LMS often can help identify areas for new instruction content. The final link is with individual performance; a performance management system provides insight into how a learner performed on the job as well as how others perceive that person's performance.

The LMS Is Not Dead — Just Different

Regardless of the content and formats available, most jobs require not only that training be documented, but also that learners actually prove that they know the material via a test or simulation. This is what learning management is about.

Many companies are actively integrating podcasts, online forums, wikis, blogs and new hardware such as iPhones and BlackBerrys into both formal and informal training. The important thing to remember is that all of these new technologies are simply adding capability to existing practices that already occur within our daily lives. For example, while forums and blogs have often been compared to the informal conversations around a water cooler, neither will ever actually replace those water cooler discussions. They do, however, extend the conversation beyond the water cooler with the added benefit of being able to share it with others.

Unlike the early years where people were trying to combine learning management with authoring, the use of learning management to guide individuals toward appropriate sources of informal learning makes sense. For example, having an LMS allows a company to guide employees taking similar courses to the same location. Another example is the ability for an employee to find a blog or wiki written by someone with the same job position at his or her company.

The LMS has evolved to enhance social networking and collaboration on a broader scale. By embracing and encouraging adoption of these technologies, learning organizations have a significant opportunity not only to deliver learning in new ways, but also to pair informal learning with formal training, drive improved productivity and deliver increased value to learners. **CLO**

Ed Cohen is chief technology officer at Plateau Systems, a SaaS talent management solutions provider, and serves as chairman of the Aviation Industry CBT Committee's (AICC) Training Infrastructure Subcommittee. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.