

15 YEARS FORWARD... 15 YEARS BACK

Charles Gould divines the learning trends of the future by evaluating the past.

Predicting the future is a mug's game. Nobody gets it right and most of us get it so badly wrong we just look stupid. Given that a scan back over some of my 'new year predictions' for the following year usually make for embarrassing reading, the idea that I could look 15 years ahead in a field as fast-moving as learning technologies seems delusional.

But, if I were to take a stab at it, I might be well-advised to start by looking back. So what's changed in the last 15 years?

What's happened that we might have expected and what did we definitely not see coming?

The term 'e-learning' began to gain currency in 1999. It would be a couple of years before I founded Brightwave, one of the first companies to specialise in corporate e-learning. Most computer-based training was delivered by CD-ROM but just before the turn of the millennium all that started to change.

It was clear that the internet was going to

redefine the way people learn for work. The next 15 years saw this play out with the learning and development profession all too often taking a spectator role. Here are five big areas of change that happened during that time:

LAUNCHING AND TRACKING

The most significant early development in e-learning was the use of online connectivity to increase the ease and ability to publish content and track its usage. In 1999 the first Learning



2015

2014

2000

Management Systems were emerging so this wasn't exactly new. But the ability to record who had completed a course and passed a test then became the big appeal of the LMS – as a means of demonstrating legal and regulatory compliance – and, arguably, the biggest driver behind the adoption of e-learning by the corporate sector.

MOBILE

In 1999 we were still several years away from the first smartphones. The idea that SMS could be used to provide reminders and short pieces of learning was just starting to be discussed but with 3G not launching commercially until October 2001, few people would have anticipated the remarkable improvements in functionality that would follow.

Now, we move between devices with ease. Second screens have become second nature, and this kind of access has gone a long way towards breaking down traditional barriers between publisher and consumer. From smartphones to tablets and, next, wearable devices like Google Glass – how much longer will we consider



'mobile' learning to be a distinct form of e-learning, rather than the norm.

VIDEO AND GAMES

This is a funny one. Some of the first computer-based training products in the early-90s were heavily based on video. Physical media delivery such as CD-i and CD-ROM meant that bandwidth wasn't an issue. Rapidly improved processing power and dedicated players meant that high quality interactive video was widely adopted by training departments in many large organisations. John Cleese's Video Arts was in its heyday.

In the following decade or so, the appetite to put training online was not matched by the capacity to deliver video, and so its popularity waned. It's only in the past two or three years that video has caught up and there's been a welcome return to high quality dramatic- and documentary-style video learning.

Smart new technology allows for augmented video viewing and the ability to incorporate hotspots into moving objects. 3D environments for learning are



advancing rapidly, and the acquisition by Facebook of Oculus Rift promises to open up new dimensions of immersive learning experiences when it becomes widely available in 2015.

At the other end of the quality/high production value spectrum, of course, is the revolution of instant video production. It wasn't until 2005 that YouTube was let loose on the world. Now, less is more: videos that are 15 seconds or shorter are shared 37% more often than those that last between 30 seconds and 1 minute.

We've yet to see this trend fully harnessed for learning but it's a form of user-generated content that could and should be exploited by next generation learning systems.

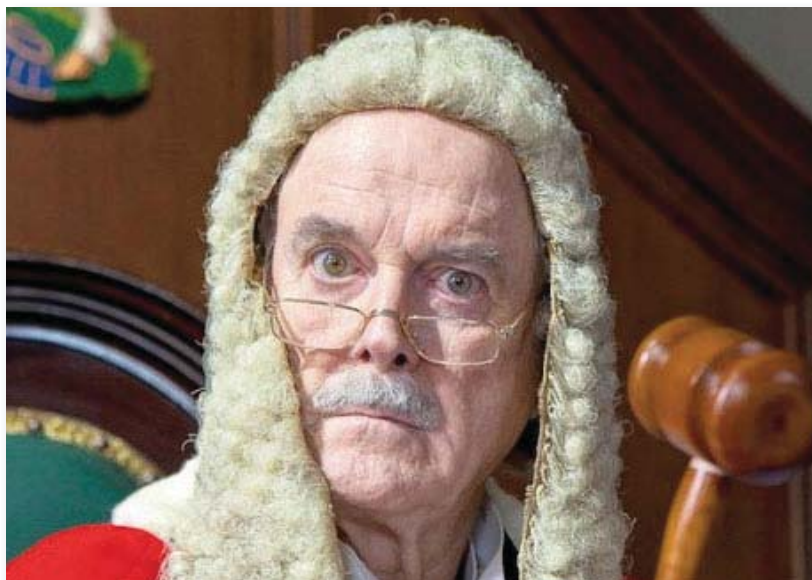
ONLINE SOCIAL LEARNING

The phenomenal rise of social media has transformed the way most people communicate, share experiences and find out what they need to know. This was something I don't think many saw coming in 1999. Although nascent communities like Geocities and chat rooms began in the mid-90s it wasn't until the launch of Facebook in 2004 that we saw what social media could become. To be fair, sharing learning online was always one of the drivers behind the emergence of the web, so, technically online social learning has been around for a while.

However, even today, there are few established examples of social media used for learning at work. The concept of online social learning is a far cry from the 'course registration' function of the past and it will be fascinating to see how collaborative learning communities are fostered successfully in large organisations in years to come.

USER-GENERATED/CURATED CONTENT

Closely connected to the growth of social learning is the emergence of user-generated content as a valuable source of work-based learning. Experts inside



organisations represent enormous knowledge capital which is often untapped. Blogs and wikis were initially clunky ways of capturing and sharing expertise but, again, the technology barriers are falling away.

Armed with the content capturing capability of a smartphone, curation tools and emerging standards for codifying informal learning experiences like Tin Can, there's no reason why the vast reserves of tacit knowledge and expertise can't be unlocked and shared within today's learning organisation.

WHAT NEXT?

Given that so much has changed in technology and digital media, it's a bit disappointing that so little of it has been applied productively to corporate e-learning. When I compare what we produced over ten years ago to what organisations buy from us and other suppliers today, arguably there's little difference.

Yes, the media is faster and slicker, valuable standards have emerged that make it easier to get started with e-learning. But



mostly, they take the form of what most would still describe as a 'course'. I think this will change.

There will still be a place for formal, structured, professionally produced e-learning but the appetite for that medium alone is diminishing. With new technology such as Tin Can, there's an opportunity to boost the effectiveness of formal learning content with informal interactions and experiences, achieving the Holy Grail for L&D – truly engaged learners, working smartly and effectively.

With many new technologies, there's a lag between early adopters and mainstream adoption and, let's face it, corporates can be the most notorious laggards. But I do think we'll see a change led by innovators who specialise in how new technology can be harnessed for learning at work.

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