A New Role for Trainers - Learning Content Curator (Feb 12)

Effective delivery of curated learning content will require new tools, strategies, and technologies.

By Chris Frederick Willis

In the June 21, 2011, edition of *Learning Solutions* magazine, Rick Wilson threw down the gauntlet and admonishes e-learning designers and developers, saying *Learning Content Is Not Your Job Any More*. Wilson states that until recently, "As learning professionals we fostered the belief that content prepared for learning environments stands apart from other content…and, we managed to get away with this concept about the significance of learning content because adult education bestowed a particular credence on the content's worth [by labeling it a] 'course.'"

However, in today's world where rapid learning and multimedia development tools are inexpensive and readily available, and informal and social learning opportunities are being widely adopted, the notion that only a degreed instructional designer or learning technologist can develop effective online learning is quickly evaporating. In a cost/benefit analysis, rapid and informal user-generated learning content is becoming recognized as "good enough" to meet many corporate learning needs, and opportunities for developing large-scale, professional e-learning initiatives are diminishing. In an ironic twist, formal e-learning initiatives suddenly are facing the same rationalization and downsizing instructor-led training experienced in the early 2000s when Web-based training hit the scene and was predicted to replace traditional classroom learning within the decade.

Enter Content Curation

If the role of today's e-learning professional is significantly less focused on developing new courses (content), then where exactly do we continue to provide value? As Wilson puts it, "Your biggest new role and responsibility is harnessing and cultivating the content inputs and their uses. You become the 'content curator,' choosing how content sources make inputs, how the inputs of content mix and move into some cohesive collection of knowledge assets." In other words, we are tasked with providing the proper learning context (and filters)around all the informal assets our learners develop and publish. We are being called to actively participate in the next step in the evolution from the "sage on the stage" and beyond the "sage on the (online) page" to developing a new incarnation of interactive online learning that breaks through the traditional boundaries we've imposed on learning content.

Unlike aggregation (the automated gathering of links) or search, which relies on mathematical formulas, content curation calls on human editors to enhance the work of mechanical search by gathering, organizing, reviewing, and filtering content. "Curation comes up when search stops working," says author and NYU Professor Clay Shirky, as quoted by the king of content curation, Stephen Rosenbaum. Rosenbaum detailed the concept of content curation and its role in the information age at a June 2011 Grand Rapids TedXevent. After seeing Rosenbaum's presentation, it isn't hard to make the leap to support Wilson's premise that there is a role for human-powered information context and filtering in today's learning organizations.

But it goes beyond getting the right content to the right people at the right time. As Shirky elaborates in the same post, "… it isn't just about information seeking, it's also about synchronizing a community." Competent content curators—and the communities and portals they support—become sought out as trusted sources of information.

Content Curation in Corporate Learning

Imagine a time when we no longer push all learning content through an impersonal Learning Management System (LMS) to reluctant learners, but rather they actively come to a learning community we have built and nurtured, and pull exactly the learning they need at the time and place they need it. Content curation as it is playing out on the Internet is a first step in that direction, but that

really isn't a whole lot better than the learning portals we tried to implement in the late '90s and beyond, which quickly degraded into unruly mass data dumps. As an example, check out the hyperlink "bag" I created at content curation site Bag the Web to house all the links referenced in this post. As a repository for a limited number of links around a specific topic, it works very well. However, a simple curation site falls short of providing context and workflow around all the assets required for a large, complex corporate curriculum.

Effective delivery of curated learning content will require new tools, strategies, and technologies that force us to think outside of the boundaries of the e-learning course and the corporate LMS and go far beyond the link-sharing tools used on the Web. We would do well to continue to look to the distance learning models used for years by institutions of higher education, and then apply powerful new content management, workflow, and collaborative tools to bring our new corporate learning vision to life.

Summary

in the Context vs. Content debate, Context is indeed King—at least as it pertains to e-learning. However, learning content—formal or otherwise—is your Kingdom. You, in your new role as Learning Content Curator, are charged with providing context over your content domain.

Content Curation Strategies for Corporate Learning

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Above, I underscored the need for corporate learning professionals to begin to let go of content creation and start nurturing a content curation mindset. According to global marketing strategy guru Rohit Bhargava, a content curator is someone who continually finds, groups, organizes, and shares the best and most relevant content on a specific issue online. As content curators for corporate learning, we are tasked with providing context and filters for learning content that not only guide learners to the appropriate formal learning opportunities, but also furnish timely informal assets their peers and managers develop and publish.

By donning the content curator hat on top of a strong foundation in instructional design and performance consulting, we open doors to a new incarnation of interactive online learning. We begin to break through the traditional boundaries previously imposed on learning content. Content curation requires that we move away from delivering corporate learning as a loose collection of independent e-learning courses. It requires new learning strategies and technologies. But if cramming a corporate LMS full of new courses isn't the path to the future of learning, where do we start?

You're Probably Already Curating Content
If you actively use social media, you likely already have participated in content curation. Any time you share a link to content you have not created, you are a content curator. You are providing a filter, directing your readers to a specific target in a sea of information clutter. You also are providing context—that is, the understanding of why the link may be meaningful to your audience at that particular point in time, especially if you add a few words of explanation. Curation makes information mining much more efficient than unguided search and allows readers to focus on digesting the provided content under the assumption it already has been vetted as worthy of their time and attention. This is no more or less true if you are sending a link to an article by an industry guru or a fresh service bulletin to your internal business team…or forwarding that video of a cute Jack Russell Terrier to your fellow dog-loving Facebook friends.

If you have ever developed learning content, you are wired for content curation. Consider the types of links you have shared in the past. You may recognize that curation skills are similar to those we have used for years in supporting traditional classroom or online learning content:

- Notating a research paper
- Creating a recommended reading list
- Requiring a course reading assignment

- Establishing a resource "share drive" on the corporate intranet

These activities all exercise similar content curation muscles:

- Filter down to just the right content
- Provide appropriate context
- Share a link to the content

Content Curation in Corporate Learning

Now you're ready to put content curation into practice at your workplace. Where do you start? Here are a few content curation strategies we've implemented at Media 1 to give you inspiration:

Resource Page

A simple solution that can offer high value: Offer a curated Resource Page containing links to additional reading at the end of your next e-learning course, along with a few descriptive lines to provide context. If you are concerned about maintaining links within a course, provide a single link to a resource page on your intranet for easier updates. Be sure to consider internal or external blogs or podcasts that you know consistently provide helpful content, and while you have their attention, don't forget printable job aids or worksheets.

Course as a Portal

Blackboard or Moodle users, consider setting up a "course" that is a reference portal to organized, curated resource links for a department or job function. In essence, use the framework as a content management system for your curated content.

Smart Portal

To avoid unruly "data dump" portals, enlist SharePoint logic and workflows to help further filter large amounts of curated content by subject or relevance. For example:

- Guide new hires to instructions and resources for completing common tasks in the first weeks on the job
- Drive learners to a group of courses in your LMS that are most relevant based on their role, region, or self-selections from a drop-down menu
- Provide salespeople with the ability to sort and filter podcasts by managers on targeted selling or product announcements
- Assign curator(s) to periodically seek out new content links from within your organization and register them in the appropriate portal(s)

Moderated Learning Community

Develop a moderated Community of Practice, enlisting dedicated mentors or guides to curate content in their area of expertise. Consider the model of the moderated learning community Mahlo.com:

Mahlo is the world's first human-powered search engine powered by an enthusiastic and energetic group of Guides. Our Guides spend their days searching, filtering out spam, and hand-crafting the best search results possible. If they haven't yet built a search result, you can request that search result. You also can suggest links for any of our search results.

As a bonus, offer moderated discussion boards to encourage learners to share ideas around curated content. Or, scale back and set up a series of moderated wikis for a simplified approach.

Curated Blogging

Educate your blogging managers and subject matter experts (SMEs) on the art and value of high-quality content curation around a theme that is meaningful to them and valuable to the continuous growth of your learners. Targeted curation eases the burden of always having to work through completely new ideas and allows busy writers to scaffold on the foundational ideas set forth by others. At the same time, it builds organizational knowledge by personally directing learners to relevant content that is already available but may otherwise be overlooked.

Closing Thoughts

Throughout each of these strategies, the running theme is to enlist yourself and other knowledgeable and passionate SMEs to filter and provide context to the resource materials that they value the most—trusting that your knowledge also will provide value to others interested in the same subject. Over time, through competent content curation, the communities and portals we develop and support will become sought out as trusted sources of sustainable learning and performance in their own right—despite the learning content not being delivered as a formal course.

Chris Frederick Willis is CEO of Media 1, a consultancy specializing in integrating people, technology, and performance to drive Human Capital Improvement (HCI).