Framework for the Inclusion of Social Media in Organizational Training

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1. Introduction

The six years between 1997 and 2003 marked a transformative evolution in global communication and learning, the birth of social media. Social media is a platform the enables users to create, share, comment on, and participate in user-generated content of all media types. The main focus of social media is for participants to connect and collaborate, called social networking. Previous to the launch of the first modern social networking site Six Degrees in 1997, the world had never seen a synchronous online communication platform intended for group collaboration [3]. During the six years leading up to the launch of the first social networking mega-site MySpace in 2003, the growth of social media gradually changed the way people thought about relationships. The distance between the east coast and west coast was no longer enough to keep people from connecting and collaborating freely. Further, people quickly began using social media as a tool for learning from one another. Aunt Debbie's lasagna recipe could be shared, added to, created, and photographed by people all over the world. This global trend has continued to grow ever since without any limitation of race, gender, or age. The Global Internet User Statistics Study reported that, in the United States, 78% of Americans use the Internet and 65% of those utilized social media regularly in 2011 [2]. The European Union reported in 2009 that 60%, of individuals ages 16 to 74 used the Internet at least once a week; 48% used it every day [4]. Further, 35% of those respondents utilized social media regularly. A year earlier, Nielsen Online estimated that, globally, 67% of Internet users accessed social networking sites or blogs [5].

Aside from personal popularity, one of the most organized expansions of social media since its creation has been its utilization by institutions of higher education. The adoption of social media applications for the purpose of engaging adult learners is growing more and more rapidly in our society. Despite the thriving expansion of social media at colleges and universities, few companies have adopted the same philosophy of social media's inclusion in their organizational training programs and, of those, some report an attempt that was largely unsuccessful. Although the amount of research around the use of social media in organizational training is significantly limited, this researcher feels that a lack of understanding and a phenomenon he calls "developmental displacement" (DD) are the leading reasons for the under-utilization of social media by organizational training professionals. With the rapid deployment of newer, innovative technologies and an increasing acceptance of social media across the age spectrum [2], the need for a solution could not be more evident.

2. Expanding social media

For most of the last decade, fear and concern over the corporate use of social media has been a common thread among organizations. Their mounting reluctance to accept the benefits of social media was driven by the potential for negative publicity, time mismanagement, and a lack of control. More recently, however, an increase in the personal use of social media has led some organizations to experiment with social networking as a marketing and communication strategy, with great results. Comscore released a study in early 2011 concluding that business who consistently utilize social media to interact with users connect with 22% of that audience each week on average [6]. Li and Bernoff state that, "the Internet is not some sandbox that can be walled off anymore – it is fully integrated into all elements of business and society" [7]. Despite the growing saturation of social media in corporate communication, its use for the purpose of organizational training and development (OTD) remained unexplored. As the virtual landscape of social media grew, however, so did educational theories on the cognition of learning. Theory has traditionally viewed learning as filling a bucket, emphasizing the knowledge capture between participants and the material as foundational to the learning process. OTD however, has long subscribed to learning as a social interaction where learners build their understanding of the material through the construction of applied experiences with peers, often referred to as social constructivism. Despite OTD's early adoption of social learning theories, traditional institutions of higher education remain the front-runners in utilizing social networks in the educational setting [8]. A recent Pearson study surveying a national sample of professors in higher education found that over 90% of all participating faculty were "using social media in courses they were teaching or for their professional careers outside the classroom," [9].

As research shows, the implementation of social media into learning programs has a positive effect on learner engagement, as well as implications for enhancing the quality of adult learning and support structures [10]. OTD has a unique opportunity to benefit from social learning theory as OTD shares the same core principles. The foundation of social learning and OTD both require learners to engage in social interactions that are specifically relevant to the way learned concepts will be applied and evaluated [11]. This focus on relevance in social media mirrors more traditional theories in andragogy, only in a virtual landscape. On a higher level, the use of social learning develops into a

"cognitive apprenticeship" where participants learn experientially through scaffolded projects in which the learning outcomes are modeled and cultivated through peer interaction [12]. Using social learning theory as a guide, social media's expansion into OTD is nothing more than a change in venue, one that brings a multitude of benefits.

3. Benefits

Social media's inclusion into a training program comes with both intrinsic and tangible benefits. Social media facilitates the transparency and efficiency by which information is shared. Once shared, the information can be distributed across a wide network of learners and facilitators across projects, departments, and even diverse locations. As involvement and interaction increase, learning retention and synthesis increase. This is, in part, due to growth in motivation, personalization, and engagement [10]. The use of social media also builds digital competence in simulations and problem solving, a trait found to directly correlate with learning achievement [13]. Trainers may benefit from social media as their pedagogical strategy changes from lecture to guided facilitation, creating and directing self-regulated learning processes that allow trainers more flexibility. This supports learning retention by allowing learners to take more ownership in the application of the material. In addition, organizations on the whole may benefit from the use of social media as it creates additional opportunities for all departments to play a role in the training process, strengthening the expertise. Also, learning experiences can be documented for future use, increasing the content available for refreshing on timed intervals.

Despite social media's advantages however, there are several hurdles that organizations can face introducing social media into a training program. The use of social networking raises potential issues with privacy, identity, and security of information [14]. In addition, although growth in digital competence can be a successful outcome of the use of social media in training, it could also be a hurdle if the users do not have enough knowledge to navigate successfully online beforehand. Lastly, depending on how social media is structured in the program, uncertainty could arise around when, why, and how it is used. Organizations who have attempted to use social media in training and have been unsuccessful have cited uncertainty and confusion in the process as the largest challenges [15].

4. Developmental displacement

The key to the successful inclusion of social media in any OTD program is a constant refocusing of its purpose to the learner. As we previously discussed, social networking should be used for learners to engage in social interactions that are specifically relevant to the way learned concepts would be applied and evaluated in their environment. In short, learners need to have interaction that, with supportive material, helps their performance outside the classroom.

The largest mistake that organizations make when beginning to utilize social media is to forget its purpose and succumb to developmental displacement. Developmental displacement occurs when an object is taken out of the environmental context in which it was developed and deployed virtually without a regard to differences in the learning process; content that is seemingly displaced. One of the most common ways organizations do this is by seeing social media as academic textbook. Although creation of a blog containing all the learning content may be a handy tool, it lacks in both social interaction and relevance to the application of the material. Without collaboration, participants will quickly disregard the blog as an inefficient means to absorb information as it takes less work to search for information by keyword or ask the instructor. Without relevance, the blog does little to facilitate applied learning. It creates more work than value to the process.

An improvement would be to require users to comment weekly to the original post by finding a key concept in the learning content and addressing it with an entry on how they managed to apply this concept successfully or unsuccessfully. Individual contributions that are viewable to the entire network add an element of excitement to discussing the posts and engaging with others, creating a higher level of interaction between participants. In addition, reading other participants experiences of applying learned concepts increases synthesis of the material, as well as the likelihood of successful retention.
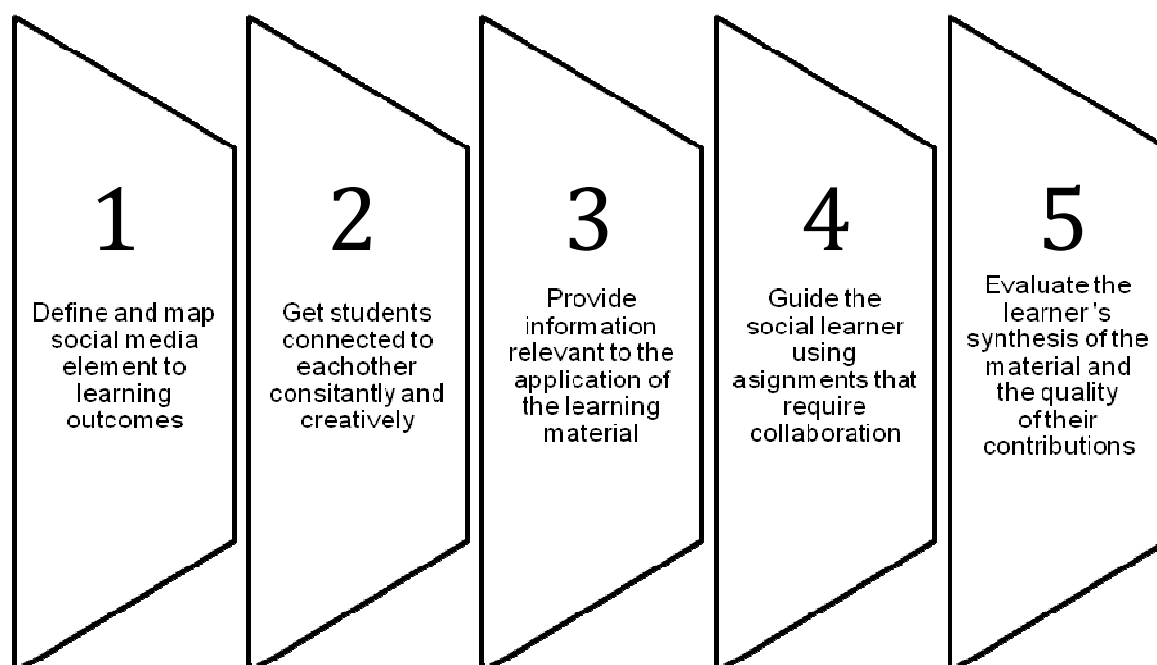
5. Framework

The spectrum of activities that fall under the umbrella of social networking is extremely broad. Whether you are micro-blogging on Twitter, sharing pictures and stories on Flickr, or role-playing in World of Warcraft's virtual world, the successful inclusion of any social media requires the same methodology [Figure 1]. First, no learning experience, traditional or virtual, can be successful without mapping its purpose to predefined learning outcomes. Creating a social network without purpose is like gathering in a classroom without knowing what to teach. As each minute in a training class means utilizing an organization's resources and facilities, it will be important to evaluate the use of social media in terms of how well it met its purpose in facilitating learners achieving the learning outcomes. Second, introduce social learning by getting people connected. Social media began as an enjoyable opportunity to interact; therefore, it has a greater probability of being successful if it is used for the same purpose within the training program. Participants should be encouraged, if not required, to be both consistent and creative in their interactions with others.

As they become comfortable in the virtual space, they will begin to take ownership of their contributions. Third, the instructor should build, or give access to, an informative knowledge base that should draw the learners to use the social network. This could exist as a collection of pictures, exemplar videos, presentations, blog FAQs, or trainer responses to posted questions. This knowledge base will provide the necessary backbone for discussions or creative contributions about the material. Fourth, learners should be guided through the learning process with specific social activities or assignments utilizing the social network. Lastly, learners should be evaluated on their synthesis of the material and the quality of their social contributions. Aside from simple knowledge assessments, social media provides an opportunity to evaluate complex concepts through "social interactions in situated contexts, which allows them to see how the various parts of the process fit together," [14]. One-way social media facilitates effective evaluation is through the documentation of performing specific competencies, like sharing a role-play video or journaling a real-life experience.

Figure 1 Framework for the successful inclusion of social media in organizational training

6. Conclusion

Despite social media's rapid growth and saturation into business and society, few companies have adopted the inclusion of social media in their organizational training programs. However, if used in the context of a framework that focuses on proper definition, design, and follow-through, social media can be successfully implemented and significantly valuable in the learning process. Also, as evidenced by a lack of OTD literature in this area, the researcher identifies the inclusion of social media in organizational training as a topic deserving of further study.

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