



Learning together

Mukta Raut answers six questions on incorporating social media into training

Information has had an interesting trajectory over the years. There was a time when information was scarce, had to be coaxed out of esoteric groups and was limited to a few people (who had the means to get this prized commodity). Then came a point at which information was so democratised and freely available that it created syndromes such as 'information overload'. Although we are still at this stage, social media has brought about a subtle, yet impactful, renaissance. It has put the 'I' back into information. In a sense, we have become the creators, as well as the consumers, of information.

Social media has shifted the flow of information. With social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Feeds and Tumblr, we don't need to go looking for information. The information *seeks us out*. In the context of learning, this means that we get to choose what we want to learn, when and how, as information pursues us.

This versatility, oddly, has not translated to the workspace. Outside our offices we leverage social media to share information and collaborate to learn from each other, but corporate training has yet to adopt social media's strengths. If we have to bring the power of social media into corporate training, we need to adapt our instructional design.

In order to illustrate the application of social media in instructional design, we can appeal to



References

1 Kaplan A, Haenlein M "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media" *Business Horizons* 53, 1 (January–February 2010) www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0007681309001232

2 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

an early precursor of social media – the Socratic Method. Here are six questions that can guide us on our path to using social media in training design.

Social media is...?

First things first. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content¹. Social media, in a sense, is built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0². The goal is the creation of web-based communities in which content is collaborated on, co-created, discussed and modified. This aspect of 'community' sharing is the key one to keep in mind while considering social media in training design.

For our purposes, we can think of social media as any application that enables communal thinking, whether they are popular ones like Facebook, YouTube or WordPress or ones used specifically for corporate social enterprise, such as Yammer.

Do you need it...yet?

Yes, social media is really important. And yes, you really cannot escape it. However, for social media to work in learning, it is important to consider the point at which it is introduced. If you use social media too early in training, let's say to teach fundamentals or hard facts, there is a chance that learners will explore options to the point of distraction. A more effective application of social media is for higher levels of learning such as evaluation and synthesis, especially for affective domains like leadership, customer service and communication skills.

Learners are best served when they are already well versed with basic concepts and can use social media to think or dissect a problem and share insights. This exploits the power of social media to co-create meaningful learning experiences.

Consider an infrastructure company that wants to train its staff in project management. Assume that most of the staff have little exposure to project management at the time. In this case, the company can use classroom and web-based training to teach the fundamentals of project



management. These could be basic topics like project planning, resource management, budgeting or business development and analysis. After the learners are clear about the basics, the training can bring in social media to help them apply and synthesise this information. The company could set up an online forum in which it presents a problem for learners to solve, such as developing a plan to use Big Data for future projects. Learners can come together, do their own research and offer their solutions.

Because of its inherent collaborative nature, social media is particularly effective in training in affective domains such as cultural sensitivity,

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customer service or leadership. This is when it can be used to draw in a variety of perspectives.

Let's say a company wants its managers to be more effective in their appraisal meetings with their subordinates. An option could be to show a series of video clips of recorded sessions and learners could be asked to evaluate each session within certain parameters such as openness, clarity, negotiation and so on. If this critique is shared on an open platform, learners have a good chance of understanding various points of view, seeing and reacting to a situation. What may have seemed like a hostile attitude to one learner may be perceived as an assertive one to another.

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This insight alone – that multiple viewpoints can exist for the same situation – is perhaps the biggest draw of social media.

What is it for and who is it for?

Social media can be somewhat of a rabbit warren. A learner could begin searching for a topic on YouTube, which could lead to him reading an article on Reddit, which could lead to him posting a comment on Facebook. It may not necessarily mean that he has learned more. It could just be that he spent more time looking at several options before realising that nothing 'out there' is really useful.

- One way around this issue is to carefully focus on how exactly you want to use social media.
Will it:
 - teach like an online university with a list of open courses that learners can take at their own pace?
 - foster knowledge-sharing or disseminate corporate values by creating communities like pages on Facebook or group blogs where likeminded people share their views?
 - be used for coaching on advanced skills like YouTube videos on troubleshooting specific types of equipment or techniques for good presentations?

In all likelihood, using social media in learning will do all of that. However, it is best to be clear about its primary role. We begin with a word about its user.

There is a certain type of person who uses social media. That type is growing, yes, but there is still a category of learners who will be wary of using it. So, it's imperative to study your target audience and understand their proficiency and responsiveness to social media.

Remember that participation is the cornerstone of the success of a social media intervention. Going back to the earlier categories of social media, each has a certain audience and also a certain purpose. Also, when studying the target audience, stay away from biases. While social



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media is one of the newer aspects of learning, it is not necessarily for the 'younger' audience at all. Studies indicate that the demographic of the largest users of social networking sites is in the late 40s and early 50s.

What kind of social media?

After identifying the primary purpose of social media, it's best to explore which type is best to use. Kaplan and Haenlein have created six categories of social media that fall in quadrants of social presence and media-richness, distinguished by self-presentation and self-disclosure. They are:

- avenues that foster collaborative projects, eg Wikipedia
- blogs and micro blogs that allow learners to create and share content, eg Blogger, Twitter and YouTube
- applications that allow users to curate the best of the web or information that is most meaningful to them and share it with a group, eg Reddit, Stumbl Upon, Facebook and LinkedIn
- virtual game worlds like World of Warcraft that has immense multi-player games
- virtual social worlds such as Second Life that allow users to create avatars and interact with each other through them in a virtual online environment.

The boundaries, of course, blur across these categories. A blog allows you to share and communicate links and information as much as a social networking site. However, the dominant experience provided by each kind of social media is different. For example, if you wish to provide an immersive experience to learners about how to make quick business decisions in a dynamic environment, choosing a virtual world may be a good idea. For a discussion on how to apply policy guidelines better, comments on a Facebook page may suffice.

Know your technology

As great as social media is, accessing it with mobile devices takes the reach and flexibility

of content exchange up a few notches. If your learners will use mobile devices to access social media, you need to take this into consideration while designing your learning experiences.

There are three main choices with mobile social training:

- **kind of devices** Will learners be accessing social media through desktops only or also through mobile phones or tablets?
- **web-based or intranet-based** Will the training use social media options that already exist, such as Facebook or YouTube, or will you restrict the social media to users only in the office?
- **customised or off-the-shelf** If using an intranet-based option, must it be customised for your specific needs or will an off-the-shelf variety do?

Each choice you make will bring a different user experience and set of limitations with it. For example, if learners need access to troubleshooting advice while they are out on the field, a good option would be to use mobile devices instead of laptops. If learners work extensively with classified information, an intranet-based option can help keep information more secure than a web-based option.

Focus on facilitation

The role of a facilitator is important when you decide to use social media as a training intervention. The facilitator, to a large extent, drives the social media experience. How social do you want your social media to be? Can anyone create and share content? What kind of content makes the cut? Who should participate? How should participation be monitored and, more importantly, how can it be encouraged?

These questions need far more deliberation than one might suspect. This is especially true if you plan to use social media for senior ranks in the organisation or you want an open forum in which policies are debated.

Social media will not necessarily cause learning to occur. However, it will definitely cause the learners to *want* to learn. Intuitively, we know that we are social creatures driven by a need to connect with others, especially when we learn. With one eye on training efficacy, social media could possibly be the next best thing to the Socratic approach. After all, the questions and the answers will be coming from 'one of us'. As trainers, we know that very little can beat that. **TJ**

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