

## adding web 2.0 to the e-learning mix

Dr Naomi Norman, Director of Learning at Epic

### An Epic Insight

The many-way participative environment of Web 2.0 brings new opportunities to the e-learning arena. Dr Naomi Norman, Director of Learning at Epic, explores how we can maximise the potential of these two worlds to achieve ever more successful workplace learning.

Traditionally, e-learning has been about one learner interacting with one computer. Put simply, you click from one screen to the next to the next to the next, and as you do so you are introduced to new knowledge and concepts. To borrow and adapt Descartes' most famous expression, 'I think therefore I am', this traditional type e-learning may be best described as 'I click therefore I learn'.

However, in practice, the extent to which clicking leads to learning depends on a number of factors. Firstly, there is the organisation of content. For example, how well the diagnostic tool at the beginning pitches the e-learning to your level; how clearly the summary screen at the end reiterates the key learning messages to aid retention; and how much opportunity there is for practice in the middle, with explanatory feedback that ensures you are kept on the right track. Secondly, there is the design: how the content is chunked into manageable parts, how the navigation is kept simple and logical, how language and tone is used to engage you, and how the text, graphics, audio and video are carefully chosen to scaffold understanding. And, of course, there is the timing of the learning too, both in terms of its direct relevance to work and the immediacy of its value.

Get the content, design and timing right, and you can undoubtedly achieve successful e-learning. So, if this is possible with one learner interacting with one computer, why then bother with Web 2.0 and the joining together of many learners and many computers?

With the advent of Web 2.0 we can now build on what is good about one learner interacting with one computer and incorporate collaboration as well. This enables learners to ask questions of each other, negotiate understandings and test out ideas. In short, at last they can learn from each other, as well as just the e-learning program. To once again borrow and adapt Descartes' most famous expression, the new opportunities afforded by Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, tagging and social bookmarking, may be best described as 'we collaborate, therefore we learn'.

However, just as with traditional e-learning, the success of Web 2.0 is dependent on a number of factors. Firstly, there must be an environment that is conducive to honest collaboration, and this takes a certain kind of business culture. Knowledge sharing must be rewarded and it needs to be OK to reveal not only what worked well, but also what didn't work well, so that others may learn from it. Secondly, appropriate tools should be employed for appropriate tasks: synchronous tools that allow for real time collaboration are most useful where there is a requirement for immediate responses, such as in a brainstorming activity; while asynchronous tools are most useful where there is a requirement

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for reflective thought, such as in a collaborative writing activity. And the design of such tasks should encourage participation that is focussed enough so as not to lead to cognitive overload, yet open enough to benefit from all participants' various perspectives and expertise.

In the end, what Web 2.0 can offer is better group understanding and learning than would have been achieved by any single individual. In essence, it is an e-learning quest for the kind of activity we have been employing in business for years when working in teams and when negotiating in meetings: that of many heads being better than one!

However, in this informal, collaborative world of Web 2.0, there is no trainer, no subject matter expert and no instructional designer imposing what and when the learner should learn. Nor is there a structured beginning, middle and end to the content or to the learning. Instead, peer-to-peer interactions are largely voluntary, understandings materialise accidentally, and learning develops sporadically, over time. And this is quite a departure from the more formal, organised, finite world of the traditional e-learning program. Therefore, how can we possibly unite these two worlds, that are so different, and make the most of both to achieve ever more successful workplace learning?

Certainly the answer is not a rejection of one in favour of the other, as both clearly have a contribution to make to learning. Nor is the answer to bolt one on to the other in the vague hope that learners will make use of either, or both, and still be successful: this is the hit and miss approach. Instead, the answer is to truly integrate e-learning and Web 2.0, taking the very best of what each can offer for individual and collaborative tasks and for formal and informal learning, so that the required learning is realised.

A large multinational seeking to implement a universal pricing policy across all staff, regions

and countries recently benefited from just such an integrated e-learning and Web 2.0 approach, as designed by Epic. The solution is a portal with some e-learning inside it.

The e-learning is about one head one computer interacting to ensure there is a basic knowledge and understanding of the principal pricing concepts. It employs all that is good about formal learning, such as curriculum and structure, with design that is grounded in sound multimedia theory so that text, graphics, animations, audio and video work together to underline rather than detract from the key learning messages.

Now for the Web 2.0! Yes, there is a discussion forum to enable questioning; and yes, there is the opportunity to upload pricing strategy plans to share best practice. So where is the integration? Well, any piece of content, be it part of the e-learning, part of a discussion, or part of an uploaded document can be tagged, bookmarked and commented on, allowing for every bit of portal content to be linked intelligently to every other bit of portal content, and allowing every learner to follow a route through the learning that makes most sense to them and share it with others. Moreover, there is a map that is a window on the portal learning of colleagues around the world, so that at any time, when working on a particular aspect of pricing, a learner can see who of their colleagues is working on something similar, and so who would be most beneficial to collaborate with.

The key to achieving success has been threefold: firstly it has been about separating the essential concepts to appear in the traditional e-learning program from the understanding that can be realised through collaborative tasks, made possible by Web 2.0 tools; secondly, having separated them,

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it has been about their integration, enabling the e-learning and the Web 2.0 to seamlessly support one another, and link in ways that allow learners to engage in a coherent learning experience; thirdly it has been about choosing the right timing, with the correct environment and culture in place, to implement the portal and maximise on its success.

*That's how we at Epic believe you can bring these two diverse worlds of e-learning and Web 2.0 together to achieve ever more success with workplace learning. If you'd like our help in doing this, or would like to further discuss your e-learning/Web 2.0 strategy, then please get in touch: [naomi.norman@epic.co.uk](mailto:naomi.norman@epic.co.uk)*

*If you would like to learn more about Web 2.0, a free White Paper is available from [epic.co.uk](http://epic.co.uk)*