Discover how SharePoint fits into the world of social learning, and the four functional requirements that social learning platforms need in order to support learning effectively.
The Situation

“In the world of learning content is king,” was the message Elliott Masie gave to learning professionals at Learning 2008. And he is certainly not the only one. It is indicative that SCORM – the standard used by modern LMS’s – stands for the Sharable Content Object Reference Model.

And in the world of content, SharePoint is arguably king. In a vast number of enterprises, it is the installed system used for managing and sharing content, and the system mandated for collaboration.

SharePoint Benefits

SharePoint is becoming the de facto standard for content management in many organizations, for many reasons.

- It is beloved by many IT departments, who already have a license as part of their agreements with Microsoft, and find it easy to install and administer.
- It has superb integration with the Microsoft desktop, allowing nearly transparent inter-operability with Outlook and Microsoft Office.
- All documents are automatically versioned and workflow is supported.
- Templates can be created for such things as meeting agendas and it is easy to create lists of things.
- There are a variety of add-ons and solutions – such as the SharePoint Learning Kit – that extend SharePoint’s native abilities. In this case, the external solution permits the organization to store and launch SCORM content from SharePoint document libraries.

These features make it easy to push content to learners throughout the enterprise, even when they are globally distributed.

New Directions

In addition, later versions of SharePoint have introduced collaboration features such as blogs, wikis, and MySites. Organizations are experimenting with utilizing these features to support informal learning via expert locators, communities of practice, personal blogging, virtual teams, etc.
The Problem

Disseminating content is not the only activity required to instruct learners. If it were, universities could be replaced by libraries. Learning is a process in which content must not only be delivered, but assimilated into the cognitive structure of the learner. Often this requires active involvement with the content, asking for and obtaining more information, using the new concepts, and practicing new skills.

The recognition of this fact has led to the rising popularity of social learning systems.

Instructional Processes

While the focus of attention is all too often on the shiny new web 2.0 technologies they offer, the more interesting question from an instructional design point of view is: what instructional processes do they support?

One way to answer this question would be to do a literature review of instructional theory and research; but an easier and better way is to simply hearken back to our own experiences in the best face-to-face instructional programs we have been privileged to participate in as learners and/or instructors. When we ask learning professionals about this, the activities they tell us about most frequently include:

- Interesting (and concise!) lectureettes
- Hands-on practice sessions and simulations
- Individual assessments, exercises, and games
- Q&A sessions with knowledgeable instructors
- Stretch assignments and other on-the-job activities
- Coaching and mentoring opportunities
- Case studies and other small group activities

In addition, people note that these activities aren’t simply thrown together in a jumble, there is a sense of sequence and flow that
creates a holistic experience; there is (dare we say it?) an instructional design to it.

To create that memorable learning experience, the instructor could not have spent 100% of his time designing fantastic lectures, and then said “Well, that’s the content. Now you all go off and have some practice and exercises and coaching and case studies and Q&A and stretch assignments and what not on your own.”

No – planning these other activities had as much if not more time and attention devoted to them as did the content.

By extension, it is important to ensure that the technology used to support your social learning initiatives has the features and affordances required to do so effectively.

Solution

So what does your social learning platform need to do in order to support social learning effectively?

Support Learning Processes

The platform needs to create processes that consist of a sequence of learning activities of multiple types, with clear navigational aids, where learners can see their status and next steps at a glance, and dependencies guide learners along the right path.

Instructors need to be able to quickly create these “learning maps” and assign learners to them, so that they can manage hundreds (or thousands) of learners in small groups.

Support Assessing the Important

The platform needs to assess the important – not just the easy. Of course it should track SCORM and AICC completion. But if we want to walk the walk about what is important in the learning process, it should also track web meeting attendance, forum participation, assignment completion, feedback to other learners, meetings with managers, coaching sessions – and all the other activities that make a quality learning program. And it should display all the results in one place so the instructor can see at a glance how the learner is doing overall.

Support Multiple Roles

The platform needs to support learners in providing clear navigation in directions, in cleanly disseminating content and
robustly supporting discussion, and letting them know their status at all times.

It needs to support coaches and instructors by giving them email pings to go directly to assignments that need evaluating; giving them dashboards to see learner status; giving them embedded tools to create web meetings; and giving them shortcuts to essentialize their coaching time.

It needs to support program managers by giving them templates to create new courses in a few mouse clicks; by giving them reports on coaching promptness; and by giving them roll-up reports on learner activity.

**Support Rich Conversation**

The platform needs to support structured conversations for action. The rise of Web 2.0 applications has opened a wide variety of opportunities for people to connect with each other and learn from one another using a range of new tools. Yet, as we examine the most effective public sites (Linked-in, Facebook, Jive) we see that the most effective online social learning is that which happens within sustained, focused discussions. People learn a great deal from talking with one another, from examining assumptions, bringing in new information, telling war stories. It is this kind of sustained sharing which forms the matrix within which a productive, effective learning community grows. Thus we find that even in an age with diverse tools for communication, the asynchronous discussion forum remains the heart of effective online community spaces.

**Our Point of View**

We have found that by using the XPERT eCampus in conjunction with SharePoint, we can create very powerful solutions that address the key instructional characteristics identified above.

**eCampus: Designed for Learning**

The XPERT eCampus quickly gets learners up to speed and keeps them on top of their game by integrating structured training, informal learning, and performance support.

Customizable portals with a rich widget library increase adoption by personalizing the user experience, while informal learning is supported by a social media toolkit that includes blogs, wikis, web
meetings, social bookmarking, tagging, and other popular Web 2.0 tools.

Learning maps increase speed to proficiency by teaching the way people learn. Instructors can sequence and track a wide range of activities including eLearning, assessments, assignments, webinars, coaching, group discussions and manager-driven plans, while providing instructors the ability to track all types of activities and manage thousands of learners in small groups.

Knowledge bases enhance and extend skills on the job while eliminating learning decay by organizing tasks into step by step processes, and providing focused content, learning assets, best practices, and access to experts at each step.

Templates enable administrators to convert one-off projects into replicable programs by easily saving and re-deploying portals, learning programs, and community sites.

The eCampus plus SharePoint

Customers tell us that the eCampus enhances and extends their use of SharePoint. They leverage SharePoint’s strength as a content management platform, and its integration with the Microsoft Office desktop by maintaining their documents in SharePoint repositories.

They build their learning maps and curriculums in the eCampus, seamlessly linking out to SharePoint for content. This way they go beyond simply tacking a wiki onto published content and calling it blended learning – they can create well designed learning processes that track all the activities involved – social and content – and deliver measurable results to their stakeholders.

Other customers use the eCampus’ robust discussion engine to power their communities of practice, and link to documents in SharePoint but display them within the eCampus so that users can rate them with one click or review them with a familiar Amazon-like interface.

Yet others build support systems with the eCampus’ XPERT Access knowledge support module, offering a drag and drop taxonomy, description templates for each page, and social resources such as wikis, SCORM objects and experts – then add the canonical document resources from SharePoint.
Conclusion

For years we’ve created great learning experiences face-to-face, and now after a detour into somewhat impoverished eLearning, our professional is ready to replicate these best practices of learning online.

SharePoint, with its rich content management features and its tight integration with the desktop, can be a key part of this solution, allowing users to both generate and obtain content easily. When combined with a social learning platform such as the XPERT eCampus, which can create learning maps comprised of a wide variety of interpersonal, tracked activities, instructors are limited only by their imagination in creating groundbreaking, performance driven learning solutions.
About Q2 Learning

Q2 Learning continues to lead the online learning revolution with our award winning social learning platform, the XPERT eCampus. Our groundbreaking technology, consisting of our social media toolkit, widget library, performance support system, and portal engine, supports a full spectrum of formal, informal and just-in-time learning solutions.

The eCampus social learning platform makes it possible for our customers to transform their traditional training events into learning processes that rapidly produce dramatic shifts in capability. Our customers love the eCampus because it takes so much of the time and effort out of creating and managing learning programs and communities through the use of templates and management dashboards. To get you up and running quickly with minimal investment, we provide our Software as a Service. To further ensure your success the first time out of the gate our seasoned professionals offer a full range of professional and managed services.
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Since 2001 Bill Bruck has been the lead solutions architect and general manager for Q2 Learning, of which he is a founding partner.

He designed the XPERT eCampus technology and end-to-end methodology that has been used in deploying over a hundred blended learning solutions for Fortune 500 companies.

Bill was a tenured full professor of psychology and director of institutional research at Marymount University, where he designed a system for assessing institutional effectiveness that was cited as an exemplar during reaccreditation by the Southeastern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Bill has written over a dozen books on the effective use of technology, which have been translated into five languages. He serves as a luminary for media and industry relations, and provides keynotes internationally on collaboration technologies and their impacts on organizations. His accomplishments have been recognized by his listing in Marquis Who’s Who in America.