The argument for social media-based learning is clear: more reach, more depth, and more efficiency. The question now is: “How?”

The future of learning is social—people want to learn together. The tools exist, and the potential is huge. Anyone can publish, share, find, and comment on content. Reactions in the learning world vary from the fear of the expert-trainer (“they won’t need me anymore”) to the excitement of the cost-cutting manager (“we won’t need them anymore”), to the control issues of internal practitioners (“they can’t do it without me”). Among all of the conjecture about what social media could accomplish, some learning and development professionals already have taken action, testing how different tools bring added value to learning.

Ensure social media is worth using
It is tempting to simply tack on social media to your existing learning programs and hope for success. Use these guidelines to make informed choices during training design.

Align to learning objectives. Understanding Eisenhower’s priority setting model doesn’t require social learning. Look for objectives that will benefit from an element of sharing, co-creation, or networking. Key indicators are phrases—such as best practices, common approaches, and most acceptable—that suggest a real need for social comparison or network expertise.

Think minimum effective dose. The principle of minimum effective dose is about identifying the smallest amount of the correct learning activity to produce the desired learning outcome. The most impressive applications of social media in learning bring more speed to learning, deliver a wider or deeper range of content, and successfully reduce time in formal classroom environments.

Ask yourself: What can be done without a trainer or facilitator? What must take place in class? Where could participants provide the content via social media, rather than being spoon-fed in a classroom environment? How can we use social media to get more people up to speed more quickly? How could social media help to measure learning success?

Know your customers. A business owner who sets up shop in the middle of nowhere will quickly understand that customers don’t like a long walk into unfamiliar terrain. The same is true as
you incorporate social media within learning design.

Ask yourself: What tools are my learners already using? Where do people publish, share, discuss, organize, find, and comment on content? Which tools are likely to confuse or annoy, which will inspire and please, and which are easiest to begin using today?

Implement before, during, and after training

Social media can be used to enhance formal training-based learning tracks, nonformal (intentional) learning initiatives, and on-the-job accidental learning. The examples that follow are aimed at enhancing training-based learning tracks, although the principles can be applied elsewhere.

**Introduce preclass activities.** Typical preclass activities such as prereading, intake questionnaires, and expectation setting can be accomplished more effectively and efficiently using social media tools. Additionally, some activities that regularly take place at the start of training now happen beforehand to further improve efficiency.

For example, introduce yourself and the objectives, content, and agenda via YouTube. Ask participants to introduce themselves and their expectations to the group using a community tool such as LinkedIn, Facebook, or Yammer. Provide prereading of a particular model or theory via a blog and ask participants to add comments.

**Encourage learning narration during formal scenarios.** Use learning narration to seek regular Level 1 and Level 2 feedback from participants during ongoing formal classroom training. Social media implementation in these moments also improves the reach of learning, offering “outsiders” the opportunity to follow (back-channel learning).

For example, provide a Twitter hashtag (#) that participants can use to comment on learning. Identify the specific hashtag before class and mention it regularly in community-based forums. In place of Level 1 evaluations during training, ask participants to note their reactions on a Wallwisher.com page. Invite participants to interview each other and publish the videos on YouTube so others can follow and judge reactions to the learning process.

**Assign social media-based projects.** These tasks provide more quality sharing and allow co-learning at a distance. For example, ask virtual learning classes to co-create a Prezi presentation on a given topic. Allow browsing time during training so people can find their own examples and new content or media for a given topic using whatever devices and platforms they prefer.

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**Leverage each participant’s network.** Since each learner has her own network, seek represented practitioners and subject matter experts who can share best practices, cases, and opinions. Invite a remote expert into the classroom using Skype, or ask participants to consult their own networks via LinkedIn or Twitter.

As a learning facilitator, use your own personal learning network (including references from previous participants) to provide more depth and breadth in future initiatives.

**Incorporate post-training exercises.** It is a myth to think that learning stops at 5 o’clock, after formal training concludes for the day. Use social media to keep the learning alive. Many post-classroom strategies use approaches similar to pretraining activities.

Create a community space where learners can continue sharing resources, stories, and experiences. Use Doodle- or Twitter-based polling to elicit votes on applicable topics. Deliver more in-depth content via links published on a subject-based blog, or co-create a Pearltree with your learners to collect, filter, and organize relevant resources.

**Know keys to success in the face of challenges**

Several challenges may arise in the implementation of social media-based formal learning. Follow these best practice responses to combat such challenges.

**Introduce new learning approaches to the right people.** Innovation creates concern and confusion for some people. Some learners will not use LinkedIn to share their pretraining questions for fear of exposing themselves to future employers or peers. Others don’t believe in the value of social media based on their own limited experiences talking about the weather on Facebook.

It is important to identify motivated early adopters and encourage them to take action. Approaching Generation Y is a no-brainer—they are used to the tools and willing to share. Also, naturally creative people often are happy to try new things. Look for the technology savvy, those in cross-functional teams, and people who regularly attend cool conferences or seem interested in trends and fashion. “Slowly, slowly catchy monkey.” In other words, eventually you will achieve your goal. A sudden, radical shift to 100 percent social media-based learning will scare the majority of people and be ineffective. Introduce one or two elements at a time and measure success before moving forward.

**Strategies for Social Media Usage Are Twofold**

One-to-many and many-to-one methods improve the distribution of ideas and resources toward participants, while collecting from them. Such approaches can help to reach people at a distance and seek reactions and feedback in a discrete manner.

Many-to-many, community-based methods allow for sharing and discussion, co-creation, peer feedback, and crowd rating.
Filter quality, but don’t over control. Many learning professionals worry that if they leave learners to it, quality will decrease and be replaced by more unfiltered electronic noise. In reality, the majority will set the tone, taking things seriously and delivering solid input. Credible resources will be “liked” and get more attention. This will discourage low-quality participation and create overall success. On the off chance that one learner seriously derails the process, step in with corrective action.

Stoke the fire with intelligence. Some effort is required to encourage engagement. For example, ask learners which tools they want to use. Provide tweetable references in class, publish your flipcharts as photos, and cross-reference different platforms. Since your learners are present in different social media spaces, create links between them—videos posted on YouTube can be referenced in LinkedIn groups, and a Pearltree pearl can link to your Wallwisher site.

Provide online recognition for participant efforts by liking and commenting on posts. Assign specific tasks and give in-class feedback. Thank those who share, and let others know who posted quality content and where it can be found. Gamify sharing, posting, and rating by creating fun objectives and rules.

Measure your success and seek to improve

As noted in the ASTD Infoline “Using Web 2.0 Technologies,” there are three ways to measure the success of social media-based learning activities. First, look at the amount of traffic you are getting to evaluate the adoption of social media. Count the number of hits on a blog, views on YouTube, likes and comments, or members of a group.

Second, check content regularly to see if posts are relevant to the topic, what is being learned, and how you can integrate it into future learning. Finally, look for continuity between references and posts. If you see people commenting on “what John said,” you know they read other input before providing their own.

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