IMPROVING FORMAL LEARNING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

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The use of social media has been on a meteoric rise for several years. According to statistics portal Statista, there will be an estimated 2.13 billion social network users worldwide by 2016. Facebook remains the leader for tools used, with LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms also getting significant traffic, per Statista. But social media is not just for friends and relatives to share pictures of their kittens. The plethora of tools also presents many opportunities to improve your formal learning—not only classroom training, but any type of formal learning process.

Each type of social media tool presents different ways to improve formal learning. Creating communities, as well as finding and sharing ideas, is much easier to achieve in 2015 than ever before. If you use the tools well, you can make formal learning more effective and efficient, increasing learners’ motivation and adding longevity to the learning process.

In this issue of TD at Work, you will learn:
• the opportunities and benefits of social media
• strategic approaches to using social media in formal learning
• when and how to use today’s social media tools
• potential obstacles to avoid and keys to success.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Formal learning is defined here as any intentional, structured learning moment. Created by instructional designers, trainers, and learning managers, such initiatives aim to create effective, efficient acquisition and implementation of required knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Social media tools can support these initiatives. Note that when we talk about social media tools in this TD at Work, we’re referring to any online tool or platform that allows users to create and share content and ideas.

If you are developing and delivering formal learning programs, social media tools can help you better prepare your learners for the classroom. For example, by delivering packets of knowledge before a training session or creating discussion around learner attitudes, you can add value and improve in-class efficiency.

Social media is equally valuable when creating a formal learning process without classroom training. Social media tools make it easier to communicate with learners, create community spaces for discussion, and conduct surveys or tests.

The learning world also talks about social learning—getting people to learn together, often with no formal structure. For example, daily work narration is a great way for employees to share their ideas and problems in a way that is more user-friendly and efficient than traditional knowledge-sharing platforms. However, this issue of TD at Work will focus on structured, intentional learning moments, although those can be more social than ever before.

It will be useful to think of the function and direction of your learning process. Tools such as YouTube and inklewriter (see sidebar on tool descriptions for explanations of social media tools mentioned in this issue) allow you to distribute content and ideas to learners (one-to-many). Other tools such as Socrative, designed to help trainers and teachers gauge learners’ understanding of material, are used to receive content and ideas from learners (many-to-one). Additionally, you may want to encourage sharing between participants (many-to-many) on platforms such as LinkedIn or Padlet, which let you share notes, references, and ideas. As you develop learning activities, ask yourself if you need to:
• build a community
• help learners find, share, and use content
• facilitate the creation of content
• improve productivity for the learner or learning facilitator.

There are multiple benefits to using social media in your learning processes. Learning effectiveness is improved as learners more quickly
get their hands on better knowledge. Certain skills can be practiced in public, and learners can easily give and receive peer and expert feedback. Online discussion and sharing allows learners to question their own attitudes as well as the attitudes of others. All of this helps improve the actual learning process, as well as the transfer of knowledge to the workplace.

Social media tools also allow trainers to begin the formal learning process earlier than traditional classroom teaching, and keep the learning process going much longer. With easier access to learners outside of the traditional training environment, trainers can better pinpoint the most appropriate time for learners to engage with key learning points, which may help to improve knowledge recall and implementation. Keeping the learning alive for longer also improves the chances of creating real behavior changes.

Social media allows us to more easily leverage existing participant networks. Learners can bring their own acquaintances and connections into the learning process, obtaining and sharing better content, ideas, and discussion points.

Social media tools make it easier to communicate with learners, create community spaces for discussion, and conduct surveys or tests.
The initial investment in finding and creating content, and setting up tools and community spaces, will soon pay off in time rewards for trainers. Incorporating social media tools into learning is also quite fun.

**A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN FORMAL LEARNING**

Some organizations use social media in formal learning because they can, or because it’s fashionable. Managers and executives often ask trainers, “What can we do with social media?” simply because the tools are available. Other organizations want to stimulate the ongoing use of internal sharing platforms by piggybacking on formal learning processes. However, these are not strategic reasons to integrate social media tools into formal learning. All use of social media should start with a clear learning objective and a good sense of timing and direction, even before thinking about which tools to use.

**Bringing Social Media Tools Into the Process Has Only One Goal: To Achieve the Learning Objectives.**

With a traditional training mindset, you might create an exclusively in-class experience to work through this basic learning process. With social media tools, you can profit from the benefits described previously, but you’ll first need to do a little more work.

**Using Social Media Tools Strategically**

Here are some questions to ask yourself when creating a social media strategy for your next training project.

- What is my learning objective?
- To achieve that objective, what learning activities need to happen in what order?
- What topics are best discussed before a formal learning moment? What topics are best discussed after a formal learning moment?
- For each activity, which social direction (many-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many) is required?
- What is the most appropriate tool?
- How will I present the benefit of using the tools to the learners?

**The Right Time and Direction**

To determine when, how, and what tools to use, think about what does and does not need to happen in the classroom or any traditional moment when learners physically gather for instruction. The flipped classroom principle can be a good starting point. Instead of receiving knowledge or instruction during class time, learners first study the material by themselves. That way, class time can be put to better use.