

Trends in e-Learning Reflection

“In times of change learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists”

Eric Hoffer

Moodle was implemented as the Learning Management System (LMS) in the organisation I work for approximately two and a half years ago. In that time demand for courses delivered through Moodle has grown and we have progressed from using external instructional designers to developing e-learning modules in-house. As I embarked on the Msc I hoped to further my knowledge of how Moodle and e-learning could be used to enhance our training interventions. Starting with the Instructional Design module and moving through the Supporting Virtual Communities module and now the Trends module I have found that I have progressively moved from areas that I had some familiarity with in Instructional Design, to areas that I had limited experience with in Supporting Virtual Communities and now virtually no previous experience of at all in the Trends module. The result has widened my knowledge and whetted my appetite for what can be achieved.

As we began the module questioning if we have moved to a post LMS era I was faced with the prospect that technology recently introduced and functioning well in our organisation was now defunct. One of its current functions is as Pugliese (2012) describes, to simplify how training is “scheduled, deployed and tracked”. With compliance the current buzz word in the financial services sector, any replacement of our LMS would need to incorporate the security, reliability and traceability characteristics we have come to rely on. Yet as the module has progressed I can see the need to move from a system that Sclater (2008) describes as a “storage facility” for lecture notes to a technology that Campbell (2009) as cited in Mott (2010) suggests should enable co-learners “frame, curate, share and direct learning engagement streams”. Aaron Porter (2009) in a keynote speech delivered with Gilly Salmon at online educa articulated the student’s perspective, outlining research indicating students used external social networking sites to form groups for the purpose of discussing course content thus creating a learning network. The research revealed that students preferred external sites to their LMS as they found them less formal, they were more familiar with the interface and logging into them was part of their daily routine. The progression appears to be towards a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) where students harness a range of tools, services and content outside of the institution to use during their studies. Sclater (2008)

suggests that some proponents of the PLE predict open source PLEs will emerge and students will download the PLE of their choice. Morrison (2006) as cited in Slater (2008) contends that eventually individual students will request that their PLE docks with the “mother ship” LMS to download and upload content. Mott (2010) suggests that the flexibility, adaptability and openness of the PLE make it a teaching and learning platform that is superior to the LMS but without the security and reliability that is characteristic of the LMS. Both Mott and Pugliese agree that there is a trade off when making a choice between the two systems. Pugliese (2012) suggests that any future LMS design cannot “sacrifice one ideal for the other”. Mott (2010) concurs and proposes the “Open Learning Network” (OLN), a system that takes the best of each approach and “mashes” them up into something different. This model has just been introduced to Brigham Young University. Mott (2010) contends that at the same time the OLN is “secure and open, integrated and modular, private and public, reliable and flexible”. That it has progressed to becoming a working model advocates the idea is a workable one, and it may be the answer institutions and students are looking for.

Moving to mobile learning and its definition leads us to consider if it is just e-learning that is delivered through a mobile device. There are definitions of mobile education that define it purely in terms of its hardware, Traxler (2007) suggests that these definitions are “constraining and techno centric” and we should explore other definitions that look at the underlying learner experience. In defining mobile learning Traxler initially contrasts it to “conventional tethered e-learning”. Reflecting on my own context and the e-learning solutions we have provided I disagree with Traxler’s description. The introduction of “tethered” e-learning to our organisation has provided learners with a freedom not previously encountered. They can access modules at times that suit them and complete the required courses without the need to travel lengthy distances to seminars. However as I review the ability of mobile devices to create new forms of knowledge, facilitate learning on the go and just in time learning I can envision how the introduction of mobile learning to our organisation can enhance face to face training and provide further freedom for learners who are constantly away from the office. An area of interest for me is in providing these learners with an alternative to the training manuals they carry with them just in case they need to access technical information while out on calls. Traxler (2007) suggests that this “just in case learning” can now be delivered “just in time just enough and just for me” through the use of mobile technology. My initial thoughts were towards the development of a mobile app as a solution to facilitate this just in time learning. Schaffhauser (2011) presents advice on app

development from the developers at Stanford University whose iStanford app broke iTunes download records. They advise start small, keep it simple and use readily available data. My research into mobile apps allowed me to experiment with some free software to create an app. Whilst it was intuitive the constraints of the free version of the software would necessitate an upgrade to the full version if creating an app. Further research is needed to identify the full range of options available to enable app development without the involvement an external vendor.

Continuing on to the area of game based learning; Van Eck (2006) suggests that after years of preaching the advantages of digital game based learning (DGBL) proponents have been caught unaware like the person who is still yelling after the music has stopped at a party. He suggests that this is due in part to the amount of research that has been conducted on the power of DBGL. An example is illustrated by Prensky (2004) who suggests that the specific behaviours described in Steven Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly effective People" are formed automatically by game players. In addition Carstens and Beck (2005) contend that the amount of time spent playing games during a child's formative years has led them to be "hardwired" in a different way to previous generations advocating that in the workforce, game players have beliefs that lead them to be proactive workers who seek to evaluate multiple solutions to issues. Although research has illustrated the positive effects of gaming and Van Eck (2006) is suggesting that DGBL has everyone's attention, Klopfer, Osterweil and Salen (2009) point to the barriers facing games in education and suggest that while they are significant they are not insurmountable. There is a coordinated effort required though and Klopfer et al (2009) suggest that it is needed from "funders, developers, schools, parents, and kids". When it comes to work based learning Whitton and Hollins (2008) suggest that the misconceptions associated with play may affect the acceptability of game based learning for adults in educational contexts. However Whitton (2007) as cited in Whitton and Hollins (2008) suggests that there is evidence that adults will be happy to use games if they are perceived to be an effective way to learn in that context. Research is working towards providing solutions that will overcome some of the barriers to the introduction of games in education. An example is the work done by Torrente, Del Blanco, Marchiori, Moreno-Ger and Manjon (2010) in designing their e-adventure platform, an educational games authoring tool that aims to make video games another tool at the disposal of an educator. Klopfer et al (2009) offer similar advice to that of the Stanford app developers in that they suggest when introducing games "think small (sometimes)". The use of virtual gaming worlds is one that I

can envision being used for new and existing employees, allowing them to survey and compare safe and dangerous sites, however that may be a step too far at the moment. Klopfer et al (2009) suggest that the field of games in education will do better if many small efforts are made in addition to a few larger ones and from my perspective if the ground can be prepared through the successful use of smaller games this may pave the way to the use of larger scale games in the future.

As we progress towards the end of the module and look at technology, its effect on education and how we learn, Traxler (2007) comments that mobile technology alters the nature of work which is the driving force behind much education and training. This comment allows me to reflect on the changes that have occurred in my experience of delivering workplace training. Technology has made a huge impact on how we work. When using manual processes the learner was required to understand each part of the process and training reflected this. It could be argued that the learner had a deep knowledge of the processes as manual repetition reinforced the learning. As the use of technology escalated, the discussion of how training had to change began. My own perspective was that there was no longer a need for such detailed training. This was in contrast to the views of my colleagues who felt that learners still needed the same level of information and knowledge to understand the process. Time has progressed and we have seen that previous levels of information and knowledge are no longer required by learners and this has been reflected in our training methods. The generation of learners who experienced the manual processes argue that the new generation of learners don't have the same level of knowledge. It's true they don't, but they don't have it because they don't need it. They have the knowledge they require to allow them to operate efficiently and if they need further information they use technology to access it.

Reflecting on the trends encountered during the module and indeed on those alluded to in the presentations there is much to think about as we look at how we can adopt and implement what has been discussed. The level of adoption of technology in education varies greatly. A number of factors are contributing to this. Traxler (2007) points to strategic factors which he contends are different from technology and pedagogy. He alludes to resources which include human resources and intellectual property as well as finance and culture which is not just the practices and values of the institutions but the expectations and standards of the staff and students. Salmon (2009) in her keynote speech at online educa Berlin uses the Darwinian metaphor the tree of learning for education and suggests that some branches of the tree are

reaching out towards the rays of technology or “tech-shine” and flourishing while others are starting to wither and die. She suggests that some institutions have tried too many changes at once with no clear pathway towards what they want to achieve, while other institutions are victims of their past successes and are unwilling to move from the legacy of past achievements to look at new innovative ways of learning. Her advice is chose innovation that is appropriate to the learner and exploit it. The final word must go back to the student and Aaron Porter (2009) in the same speech suggests that the expectations of the future learner are rising; students expect to be stretched and to grow when they attend university and institutions need to react quicker to innovation. The same can be said of workplace learning as the future learners graduate and become part of the workforce.

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