

Web-based learning communities

Summary

This document describes the various options available for creating Web-based learning communities. It also answers the key questions you may have on the subject, i.e. How do they work? Do particular formats suit certain user groups and/or types of learning material? Which is best for my organisation?

By gathering information together on the subject in one place, you will be better placed to make an informed decision on the right solution for your team. Community websites are gaining prominence and relevance day-by-day, and understanding how to make the right choice of delivery mechanism is critical to the success or failure of your learning project.

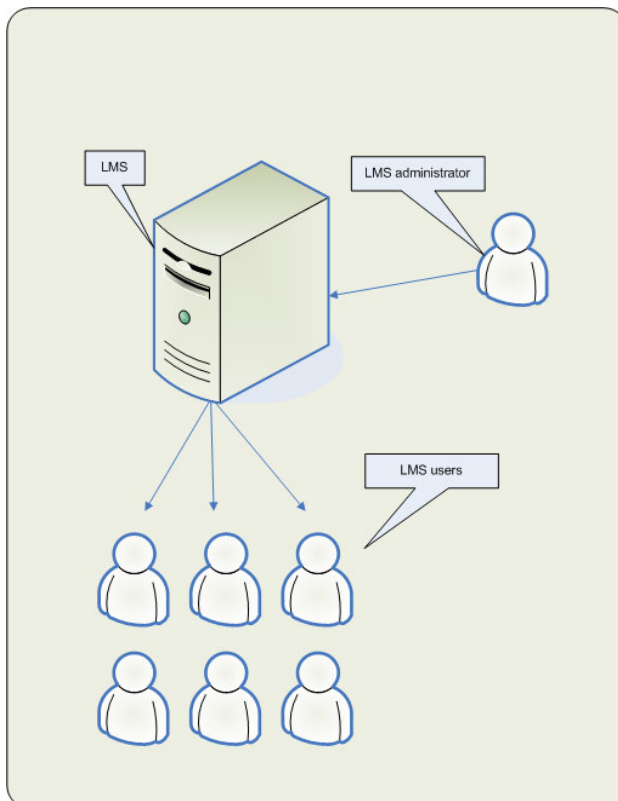
Common approaches to learning communities

Up until fairly recently, much of online learning was driven by the idea of the LMS, or *Learning Management System*. This can be defined as a centralised website where users are prescribed learning by an administration team. Many LMS applications also include a collaborative element to them. Typical collaborative tools include things like discussion forums, chat rooms and white boards. A typical LMS is capable of delivering content to tens of thousands of users, with permissions set at user or group level. Such a system enables administrators to closely track and report on what users are up to.

As such, the LMS model closely mirrors a traditional classroom, where students are brought together for a single purpose: learning. Like a traditional classroom, an LMS learning environment puts the teacher in charge, directing

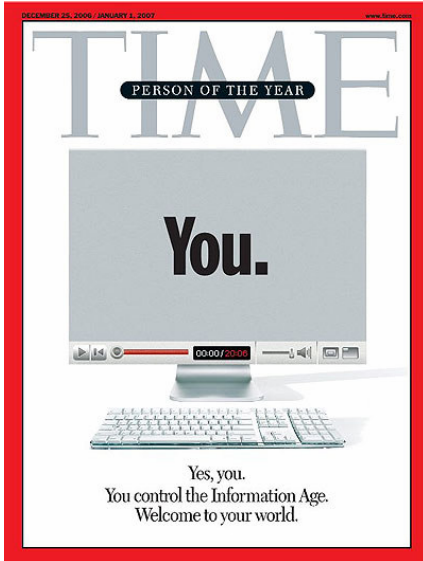
who does what and what learning is available to each student. While an LMS environment can support the notion of a community of learners, this is not the central purpose.

Aside from the pedagogic questions around this approach to learning, learners have in recent years become more used to the notion of user-generated content. This has been assisted by improvements in technology which mean that community functionality can be created at very low cost.



Social software and informal learning

Most regular users of the Web will be familiar with sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Bebo, Flickr and so on. Now you are probably wondering what sites like these have to do with work and learning. Well, to begin with, Web users' expectations have shifted radically in recent times. Users are no longer satisfied with websites with limited or low levels of interactivity and, more importantly, opportunities for social networking.



Time magazine's Person of the Year – You.

Aside from user expectations, social networking software allows for new types of learning, chiefly through informal channels. More recently, informal learning has attracted increasing amounts of attention. Informal learning can be defined as learning which takes place outside of traditional formats and environments. Some studies have suggested that informal learning may represent the vast majority of our learning, even within the workplace:

"We spend almost all of our training budgets on formal learning, yet we learn most of what we learn through informal learning. A lifetime's learning will be mostly informal, especially pre-school, college/university, in the workplace and in retirement.

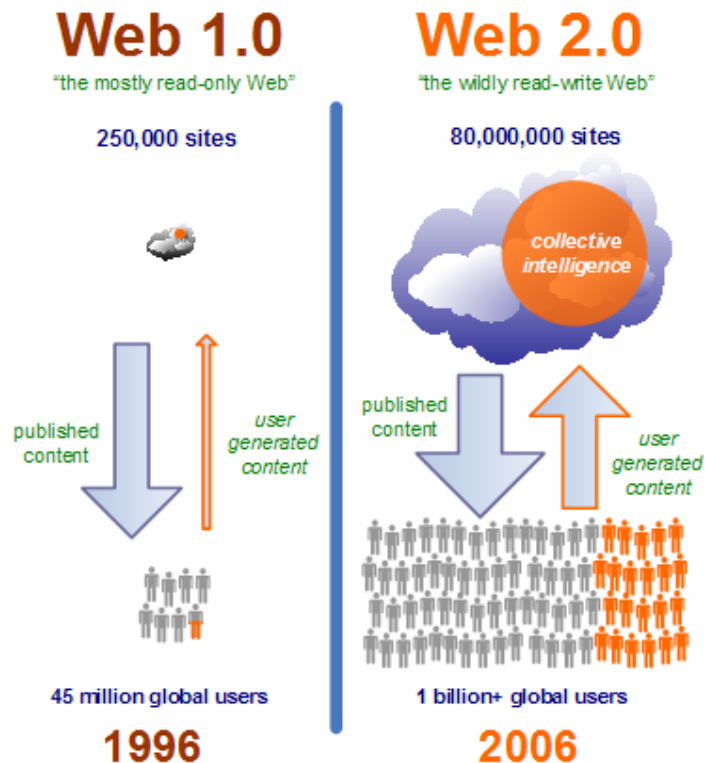
School is the only real period of intense formal learning. Focusing on work, the landmark study by the Education Development Center (EDC) in 1997 funded by the US Department of Labor and the Pew Charitable Trusts showed that every 1 hour of formal training was matched by 4 hours of informal learning."

http://www.epic.co.uk/content/resources/show_reports/LT2006a.htm

Learning pedagogies for the Web 2.0 era

Talk of social software invariably leads to discussions about the so-called “Web 2.0” phenomenon. In the past couple of years the balance has tipped dramatically towards a “read-write Web”, where user-created content becomes the norm, and we begin to harvest the power of our collective intelligence. Increasingly we turn to sites like Wikipedia for our information (never mind what you read in the papers, Wikipedia is at least as reliable source of information as Encyclopaedia Britannica – see [Nature Magazine's investigation](#)) and consult user-generated comments on sites like Amazon before making purchases.

As a result of these factors, users have become more comfortable with the notion of taking user-generated content seriously as a learning and reference source. In fact our biggest challenge as users is now longer how to get information, but rather how to verify its reliability.



<http://web2.wsj2.com/>

An early theorist of computer-aided learning, Seymour Papert, coined a term for collaborative, computer-based learning. He called this *Constructionism*, which he contrasted with *Instructionism*:

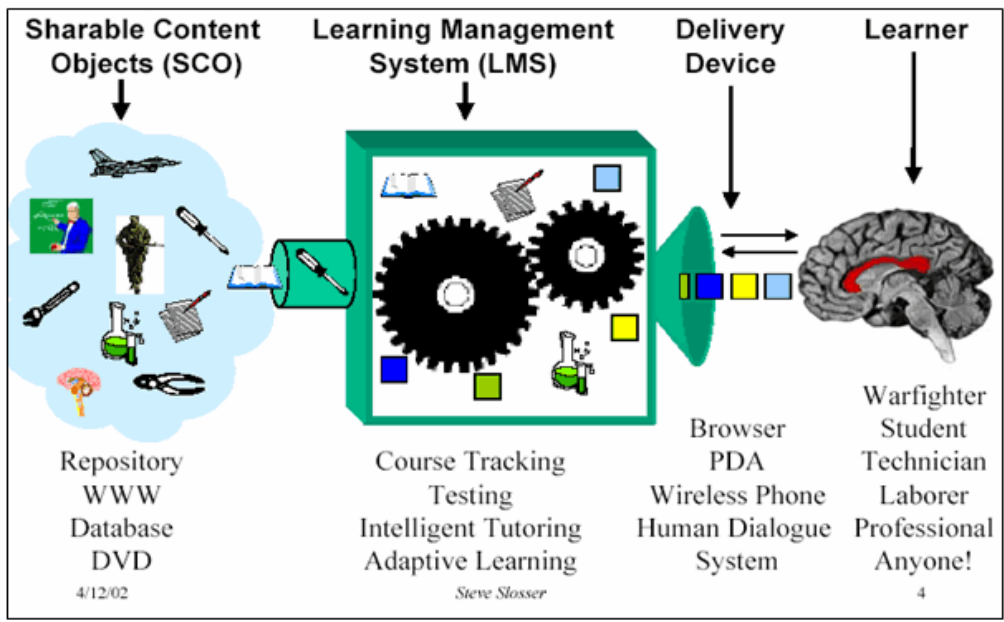
"Instructionism is the theory that says, "To get better education, we must improve instruction. And if we're going to use computers, we'll make the computers do the instruction... Well, teaching is important, but learning is much more important. And Constructionism means "Giving children good things to do so that they can learn by doing much better than they could before."

According to Papert, this:

"happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it's a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe." (http://www.papert.org/articles/const_inst/const_inst1.html)

Of course this was written long before the social software we have today, but it is not hard to see how theories such as Constructionism fit well with a “read-write Web”. In fact today Papert is involved in the “[one laptop per child](#)” programme, aimed at equipping every child in the world with a simple networked laptop, enabling children to learn by participating in a social, networked environment.

Even if you are not directly familiar with pedagogies such as Constructionism, we have all had personal experiences where we “learn by doing”. Learning which takes place in an environment where learners create the content themselves can be highly motivating and extremely effective. Let’s contrast that with the traditional LMS model, as seen in the diagram below:



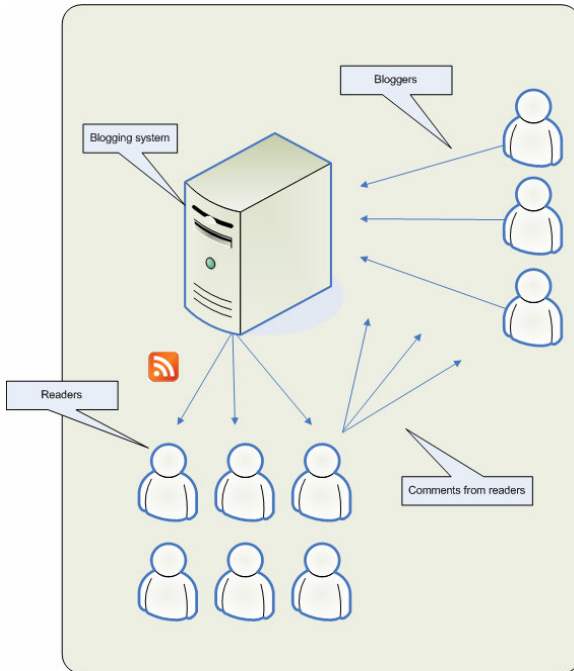
Advanced Distributed Learning

<http://www.nectec.or.th/courseware/pdf-documents/adl-scorm.pdf>

The LMS model assumes that content is created and stored in an online repository, and the LMS is then used as a channel to deliver the learning to the student. Web 2.0 turns this model around, putting the learner in charge of creating content and sharing their content among their peers.

Delivering incidental learning


Let's say you have decided to think seriously about using social software to deliver some type of learning to your organisation. What are the options? Well, if you are not comfortable with the LMS model or you think that a Virtual Learning Environment (or *VLE*) such as Moodle is probably more than you need, then perhaps a blog (or indeed blogs) can provide some of what you need.



Blogging can be a great way of getting thought leaders within your organisation to disseminate their knowledge as well as inform others on things such best practice, changes to procedures, industry news and so on.

Typically blogs also allow readers to comment on any posts made, meaning that blogs can also be useful for gauging feedback and assessing the impact of what we say.

Readers of blogs often choose to subscribe to the feed, meaning that they are automatically updated as

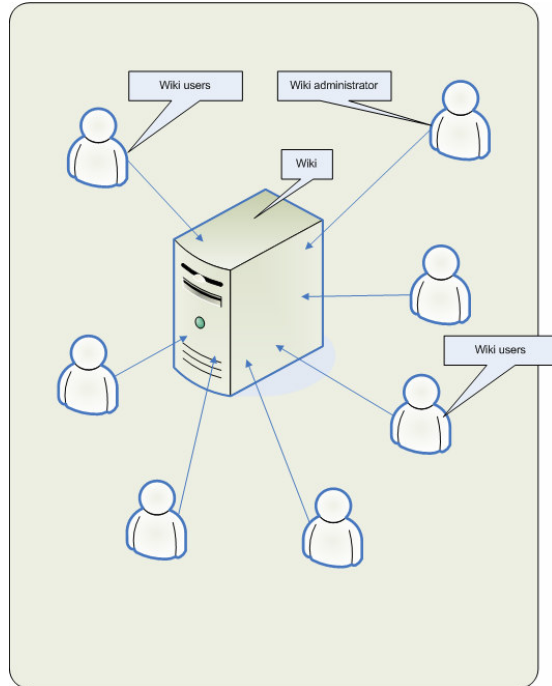
soon as anything new is published, saving users valuable time and effort. You will no doubt have seen the small orange RSS icon  on many websites and blogs, indicating that you can subscribe to updates to the site, saving you the trouble of visiting the site itself.

An often overlooked aspect of blogging is the historical or narrative nature of blogging. Because blogs store posts in order of the date published (with most recent items appearing first), blogs can be a useful way of tracking changes over time or presenting information in a narrative fashion.

Learning is Chaotic

Perhaps you are considering using a wiki as a means of assisting your learners. For many organisations, the notion of allowing *anyone to edit anything* will be a terrifying one. Just in case you are not sure exactly what a wiki is, let's remind ourselves. A wiki is a website where anyone is allowed to create or edit pages as they see fit. A wiki does not have a backend administration system: all editing is done via the front end of the site, meaning that reading and editing are two sides of the same coin.

If your organisation is not comfortable with the idea of a completely open wiki, then it is generally possible to set up the software so that users must log in if they wish to edit a page. If vandalism is a serious concern, then workflows can also be integrated, but this is generally to be avoided as it discourages the dynamic nature which is what makes a wiki unique.



Wikis can work very well in certain environments, such as workplaces where collaboration is highly valued and there is a strong culture of knowledge sharing. Many companies are now using a wiki to manage their intranet, with users creating new sections to the intranet as the need arises.

Introduction

Choosing a learning environment for your organisation is not a simple task. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question. Rather, it is important to consider a range of issues regarding your audience and the type of learning you want to deliver. Hopefully the table below will help clarify some of the things you should be thinking about.

| | LMS | Blog | Wiki |
|--|---|--|--|
| Organisational culture | Traditional, top-down, management led. Best for larger organisations. | Could be either management-led or a flat hierarchy. Can suit small, medium or large organisations. | Flat hierarchy, knowledge sharing is highly valued. Works best in a larger organisation where there may be dozens or even hundreds of contributors. |
| Nature of the material | Systems training, compliance training, any material which could be seen as sitting within a traditional classroom environment | Incidental learning, updates, time-critical information, delivering best practice information, collecting feedback through comments | Knowledge building, sharing of best practice and methods, defining, documenting and refining processes |
| Audience | Anyone | Knowledge workers whose value is increased according to their ability to constantly maintain and increase their knowledge | Knowledge workers who must collaborate and share ideas and information in order to succeed |
| Amount of time learners have to participate | Suitable where learning is a separate activity and learners are given a set amount of time for training | Ideal in high-pressure environments where learners are not able to devote separate amounts of time specifically for training. Features such as RSS and podcasting also mean that information can be pushed to learners on a need-to-know basis | For a wiki to operate and flourish well, there must be a high level of user involvement. Because Wikipedia has an enormous number of editors (about 20,000 for the English edition alone), it has grown very rapidly. Wikis with only a few editors may struggle |
| Cost of setting up and maintaining | Medium to high | Very low set up costs, some time needed for bloggers to create posts | Very low set up costs, cost of use potentially high if lots of employees are contributing |
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