

Elements of Social Media Arrive on the Learning Scene

Bryan Menell

In January 1996, Elliott Masie declared himself a nanolearner. In doing so, he placed his finger on the pulse of a trend in e-learning that was just starting to take shape.

For several years, our society has been “microchunking” everything — it just seems more palatable to break everything down into its smallest logical component.

The sale of record albums has been going down, but sales of single songs (through services such as iTunes) are skyrocketing. Amazon.com recently announced that rather than buying a book, it will be possible to purchase just a chapter of that book, or perhaps even just a single diagram or chart. People are more likely to read brief blog postings these days rather than buy a newspaper.

This trend has not been lost on the learning community — the length of custom e-learning courses requested in 2007 is half of what it was in 2004.

The learning field was actually an early pioneer in microchunking. Wayne Hodgins is widely credited with coining the term “learning object” in 1992, many years before the Internet came into common use. Hodgins immediately recognized one of nanolearning’s major benefits: the ability to remix, reassemble and reuse.

Teens today inherently understand this value when they create custom playlists (e.g., “New Releases,” “The Best of Hip-Hop,” “Cool Party Mix,” etc.) of iTunes songs to share with their friends. The interesting thing is that there could be a single song

that would be part of all three of those playlists, but it would play a different role and have a different impact based on the other songs in the list (and their order) — the experience of listening to that track can be very different, depending on its context.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, context could fill a dictionary. Let’s look at some examples of how this might work in a corporate context.

From Restaurant Review to Alternator Noise

Ben attended the University of Michigan and earned a bachelor’s degree in electromechanical engineering. While in school, he helped to create a Web site that reviewed local restaurants, and he kept up with his school friends through Facebook. To help meet the rigorous demands of his curriculum, Ben organized and took part in online study groups using software such as Skype and virtual whiteboards. He even found a group of students at the University of Miami who were using the same textbook used in his class.

Ben was recruited by a major automobile manufacturer headquartered in Michigan. His engineering group at work was focused on alternators, and over time, Ben became somewhat of an expert on alternator noise. That expertise came about through some work

assignments on a new car model that isn't slated for production for another two or three years. The car will be a plug-in hybrid, which has required a type of alternator that never has been used in production.

Being familiar with Internet technology, Ben started using the company's blog to write about this new alternator's challenges, specifically, types of noise problems that he was encountering. The subject matter is pretty technical, full of engineering terms and formulas.

As this project has been evolving, Ben found out that the truck division in Georgia was also planning a plug-in hybrid model. One of the engineers there had searched the company intranet and found Ben's blog entry on noise issues at certain voltage levels, and he decided to contact Ben directly.

Because this particular blog entry was extremely useful, Ben decided he was going to beef it up a bit — adding some graphics, charts and diagrams would get his point across in more detail. He also modified the format from a blog posting to a page-based slide deck, which he annotated with some voice-over, using the microphone on his computer.

Searching through some material from the manufacturer, Ben came across a brief introduction to this new type of alternator's structure. The information really set the stage for Ben's new slide deck on alternator noise issues. He packaged these learning microchunks together on a single page on the engineering department's intranet. It consisted of the manufacturer's introduction, his new slide deck and a reference to his original blog posting that contained comments from his co-workers and other engineers about the issue.

A month later, the alternator's manufacturer updated the introductory material on its Web site, to which Ben had linked. Because he had syndicated this microchunk, his intranet page was automatically up to date because it pointed to the manufacturer's Web site.

The truck division in Georgia found Ben's intranet page extremely helpful because it was not some watered-down corporate learning course, but relevant information in the language that its engineers understood.

A director at the Georgia facility allocated funding to build on this success by adding microlearning modules to it. Although he enjoyed the slide deck Ben had created, the director wanted to make significant changes to it while still using it as a starting point. The director also had a different audience in mind: mechanics in the dealer



in practice:

Trend Micro: Making Learning More Modular

In a speech to the American Physical Society in 1959, Richard Feynman described a procedure by which the capability to maneuver individual atoms and molecules could be developed using one set of specific tools to build and drive another proportionally smaller set on down to the needed scale. In other words, everything big can be made small.

Feynman's ideas gave birth to what we now call nanotechnology, and his overarching idea has trickled down into all areas of life.

As with most techno- and corporate-speak, nanolearning sounds more complex than it actually is — much like Feynman's original idea, it involves taking something larger and breaking it down into smaller pieces. In fact, many companies use this practice without calling it nanolearning. Nicknames such as microlearning and chunking have been used to describe what is essentially nanolearning.

Internet security solution company Trend Micro puts this into practice for many reasons. First, it helps with its home and small-business clients, who need to learn only the parts of the program that relate to them. Second, it's good for the sales team, which would not oversell or undersell a product, but know exactly what to pitch.

"Instead of making one big module that covers all of them, we have a very specific, say, five-minute module on spam," said Lynn Crilley, head of global sales training. "These are online, e-learning courses, so they have voice, interactive slides and things like that so they can review them at any time."

Crilley also said Trend Micro's main focus is on smaller businesses, which means the concept is especially relatable.

"They don't have large IT staffs — they're small companies," Crilley said. "That's where we implement more of the nanolearning concept for our products and for threats in the industry"

Trend Micro's use of nanolearning concepts is two-pronged: training the sales team and supplying end-users with short, succinct information packets relatable to the topic at hand.

From the sales perspective, it's slightly longer programs that are designed to educate employees on product information and other necessary angles.

"For the sales track, we develop these 20- to 30-minute modules because they go into much more detail about the product, but it's a standard template," Crilley said. "Again, it's very familiar if you're looking at it. It outlines the positioning, the target audience, competition and those kinds of key things someone would need to know if they were selling it."

As Feynman noted in his speech nearly 50 years ago, matter can be broken up into smaller and smaller pieces as needed. In addition to the smaller sales modules, Trend Micro breaks up information even further for end-users and as refreshers for the sales staff.

Small-business owners, not necessarily needing to learn everything about a certain product, can get what they need, and while waiting on a sales call, team members can quickly review all pertinent information.

"We have that kind of structure for a number of different reasons, our thought being people don't have much time for learning and can't sit down sometimes to do an hour-long course," Crilley said. "But they can take five minutes, especially if they're going out to a customer. That's just five minutes to brush up on the product instead of having to wait through an entire set."

Crilley added that Trend Micro's main customers, a loyal base of small business owners, welcome the focused chunks of information as much as the sales force does.

"Small business folks usually have to wear many different hats, and so they don't really want to be certified — it's not in their advantage to take the time," Crilley said. "But they do need to learn about our products in a very succinct way based on what they're doing."

— Ben Warden, bwarden@clomedia.com

network. This new and highly modified module would be part of a larger series on diagnosis of alternator issues.

Ben also received an e-mail recently from a fellow employee at a different office. In the e-mail, Ben was praised for his great information on alternator noise, and that led his co-worker to look at other topics Ben was writing about — knowing Ben from his role in the company and his very popular learning module led his co-worker to track down other things Ben was researching.

Nanolearning in Health Care

When Remote Operations rolled out its medical transcription services platform, company co-founder Richard Bagdonas knew adoption of the new technology was the key to success. In the company's early days, it was easy to train the first few pilot customers in person or through webinars. It was this personal approach that helped to fine-tune its technology and service offerings because it created a direct channel of communication to customers.

But as Remote Operations gained traction in the medical transcription marketplace, this personalized approach was no longer a scalable option.

"Our first approach was to take all the e-learning material and make it available to our customers through our system," Bagdonas said. "Our customers are online with our platform every day in order to accomplish the transcription tasks."

The benefits were those of most e-learning programs: The material was available on-demand, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Creating the learning content was difficult, though, because it required skilled employees to create and update the information. Remote Operations needed to find a better way to provide this information to its users.

"We realized that we have a tremendous amount of information about these physicians, nurses and hospital administration staff, how they use our system and what kinds of procedures they are performing," Bagdonas said.

With information about the users' behavior, both Remote Operations and hospital management could start prescribing online learning modules within the context of the work that was being done. In mid-2007, Remote Operations partnered with NanoLearning.com to create bite-sized

chunks of learning delivered in context, based on the users' job roles and their experience level.

When new physicians, nurses or health information staff members become a part of the system, they visit the Remote Operations system. They log in and receive e-learning courses intended to make their use of the system very efficient. All users receive a suite of learning modules tailored to their job duties and their role in the transcription process.

For example, if a physician begins using the company's digital signature feature — a process wherein the physician reviews the transcription online and affirms its accuracy — the system can offer an e-learning module specifically outlining the steps a physician uses to “e-sign” the transcription.

The courseware is not limited to just information about the Remote Operations system. The company went one step further and began licensing content from several well-known publishers of continuing medical education. This information was packaged in modules and offered to users of the system for a fee on a per-course-completion basis.

“Physicians are required to keep up to date with medical information in order to maintain their credentials,” Bagdonas said. “Now, they have a login to one system that bundles their day-to-day work with credentialing from publishers.”

Because Remote Operations has selected multiple content publishers, it can be publisher-neutral for the courseware — the hospital administrators can select which publishers they would like to offer and can offer courses from several. And the addition of learning modules allows the company to grow its user base without adding employees to manage the process.

“As we add new features and services, we simply add new modules,” Bagdonas said. “The continued growth for Remote Operations relies on our use of e-learning.”

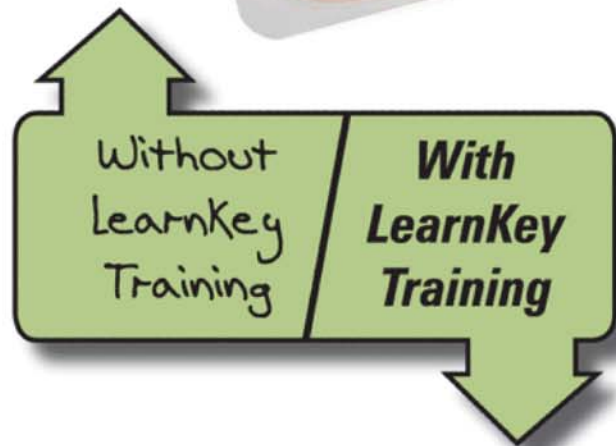
Scenarios like these are playing out in many organizations today.

If corporate-created e-learning is on one end of the spectrum, then peer-produced learning would be on the other end. Because peer producers aren't tasked with learning content creation as a full-time job, the things they produce tend to be smaller and more focused. It's not a cognitive decision to create smaller learning chunks — it's just the reality of the time they have available to devote to it.

Although nanolearning is becoming the norm, the rise of rapid learning tools is bolstering peer-produced learning. As corporate learning systems begin to adopt social media features such as commenting, ratings and recommendations, the real power of peer-produced nanolearning will be realized. ■

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