

From User-Centred to User-Generated Learning

by Matt Moore

This article is about two worlds colliding. The first world is the world of training and education. Traditionally this was a world of classrooms and textbooks with the learner as recipient. This model of learning was essentially industrial – the student raw materials go through the process and come out the other end trained against various competencies. This model is still embedded in many corporate training departments and Learning Management Systems (which are really Training Management Systems – another thing entirely). However, many now view this model as incomplete at best. We know that learners are not necessarily passive consumers of training. They can own their own learning and draw on a wide variety of sources to achieve their goals. This newer approach can be called “user-centred learning”. The learner is no longer a product but they are still only a consumer. There still seems to be something missing here.

The second world is trickier to define but could be called “the digital”. The last two decades have seen the spread of content creation technologies. These include word processing and presentation software (eg powerpoint) in the corporate world and digital cameras, audio and video records along with editing software in the consumer space. In theory I can now create content for virtually free that would have cost a corporate training department tens of thousands of dollars to make 20 years ago. This increase in the capabilities of ordinary people to do the work of professionals has been called “massamateurisation”. Of course this is only in theory. We all know that giving someone presentation software does not turn them into a better presenter (in fact it may even do the reverse). Or that having a digital camera may not improve your photography.

However not only has the cost of content production dropped significantly but the cost of content distribution has as well. The emergence of sites such as Wordpress (for text blogs), YouTube (for videos), Wikipedia (for encyclopedia entries), Slideshare (for presentations) and Flickr (for images) means that I can share my content with everyone. Critics say that the bulk of material on these sites is dross. They may be right but Getty Images (one of the largest stock photography collections in the world) has around 70 million images. Flickr has over 2 billion. That means that if one in 25 images on Flickr is as useful as those in the Getty collection then Flickr has the edge. Wait a minute, the critics say, that’s not right! Flickr may have as much useful material as Getty Images but it will be harder to find with all that dross. In fact, tools such as tagging, collaborative filtering and social search mean that good material can be easier to find on sites such as Flickr. If lots of people are looking for something then they can help each other find it – this is essentially how Google works (by exploiting the hyperlinked nature of the web and mass behaviour).

We used to live in a world where content was expensive to produce and distribute and was therefore scarce. We do not live in that world any longer. Some people think that this means that quality will be swept away in tidal wave of poor material. This is a genuine risk but we are deluding ourselves if we believe that our old materials were always of the highest quality. In 2005 the scientific journal Nature compared the accuracy of articles in the Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia. They found Wikipedia had an average of 3.9 factual errors per article. Terrible, the critics say, these new information sources are leading people astray. However, Britannica had an average of 2.9 errors per article – and the errors on Wikipedia were fixed the next day. The truth is that there will simply be more content in the world now – both good and bad.

So what does this mean for training content providers, training managers and learners?

For learners it offers a great opportunity – and a challenge. There will always be a significant number of people who simply want to be spoonfed information on a topic. In fact that’s probably true of all of us on at least one topic. For example tax law doesn’t fill me with passion but it may do for a tax accountant. Just gimme the facts, ma’am. Then there are those mixes of people and topics that create more energy. In my case this might be politics or circus skills. I’ll take a course AND google the topic, ask experts about it online, read blogs, watch videos, maybe even join a practice or interest community. Finally, there are those topics (which in my case are around knowledge management) where I write blog posts, record podcasts with people and design presentations.

To an extent, the more expert I become at a topic, the more I am able to contribute new content. However even if I am a comparative newcomer, I can still help those who know less than me. In fact I might even communicate the simple stuff better than an expert because I do not suffer from 'the curse of knowledge'. I can relate to the newbie situation more easily and may not spray them with excessive facts. We have largely forgotten that learning is a social activity. Our focus on individual development and performance, coupled with an education system that has treated collaboration as cheating, means that we must remember that people learn from each other. In the comments sections of blogs, on discussion boards, wikis and email lists, in the exchanges of videos and the tags on photos, these learning conversations become visible.

The opportunity for us as learners is to increase the range and quality of the learning experiences we get and to play a role educating others. There are two challenges. The first is the amount of attention we give to any particular topic. We have to choose wisely because we only have so much attention and we have to select good information from bad. The second challenge is the gap that will open up between those who embrace this new diversity and those who still want to be spoon-fed. There is an assumption that young people do this naturally and those who are older will struggle. This is not necessarily true. There are many young students on university courses who just want to be spoon-fed and there are many of us with a few gray hairs who take to creating our own content with relish. Attitude is more a differentiator than age.

The role of the training manager is to support the learner in this dynamic and diverse new environment. This may involve creating and delivering training – either in the form of instruction materials or instructional experiences. It may involve helping learners choose the right combination of resources that will enable them to achieve their goal. It may involve coaching learners in creating their own content and experiences. Or it may involve all three. The world of massamateurisation means that the expert must be a guide and a facilitator as well as a doer. Some people will not be able to make this move whereas others will thrive. If you haven't used any of the resources mentioned above then you really should give them a go.

Finally, for content providers, the news is both good and bad. There will be more competition. MIT now have 1800 courses online with lecture notes, exams and videos available for free. And it's not just the big players – the best introductions to social software are produced by Common Craft, a husband and wife team operating out of Seattle. If what you do is unique then you are very well positioned. If what you do can be commodified then you won't be doing it for much longer. However the new content jungle and new approaches to intellectual property management such as Creative Commons open up opportunities for new development and delivery models to the imaginative.

This user-generated world will ultimately mean more choice and higher quality learning resources. It requires learners and educators to adapt and grow. There will be both positives and negatives. However, it is already here in Australia. Ask Arthur Shelley (RMIT), Anne Bartlett-Bragg (UTS), Mark Pesce, Jasmin Tragas (IBM) and many others who are using these tools with learners or in their own learning.

Just try it yourself.

Matt Moore is the director of Innotecture, a consultancy specialising in Collaboration, Knowledge Management & Organisational Learning. He has spent the last decade working with organisations such as PwC, IBM, Oracle and ASIC. He can be reached by matt@innotecture.com.au or on +61 (0) 423 784 504