



Introducing social media needn't take a revolution. Barry Sampson reveals the art of integrating it with other learning.

BUILDING SOCIAL MEDIA INTO THE BLEND

In the last article in this three part series on using social media for learning, we consider how to make social media part of the blend.

GETTING STARTED

As we've already discovered, introducing social media doesn't have to be about kicking out the old and replacing it with the new. It's about using it where it will be most effective and can help us make the most efficient use of all available resources. In some cases social media will be at the heart of the project, in others it will play a supporting role, but in all cases it pays to consider that role in advance. If we've taken the time to prepare a thorough

business case, as discussed in the second article, we should already be clear about what we expect to achieve by using social media. You may be starting completely from scratch setting up a new training function, or including social media as part of a wider learning technology programme, or you may be adding it to an already well established elearning offering. In each case, you need to consider how the social layer will fit with all of the other elements. How can it extend, enhance, support or replace other elements?

TERMINOLOGY

The social media landscape is dominated by some very big brands, and Twitter,

Facebook, YouTube and WordPress have all become synonymous with their respective pieces of the social media pie. In thinking about the blend it's helpful to focus on the tools and technologies, not the brands: eg on micro-blogging rather than on Twitter. This makes it easier to think about what we actually want people to be able to do rather than getting sidetracked by the features of any particular product.

You should also feel free to adapt the terminology to suit your organisation. For example, if you're thinking of using a tool that is similar to Twitter, you could describe it as micro-blogging, status updates or activity streams (or anything

else that suits!). You need to decide which description best suits your organisation and the context in which it will be used. The more sense it makes to you the easier it will be to identify how it can become part of the blend.

TOOLS

Clearly there are many different social media tools and a even greater number of potential scenarios, and to discuss them all would be well beyond the scope of this article. What we can do though is take several of the main social media technologies and consider ways that they could be used for learning.

Micro-blogging

What, you may ask yourself, can possibly be achieved in 140 characters? Well, quite a lot actually. The initial idea behind Twitter, the service which introduced micro- blogging to the world at large, was to provide brief updates that answered the question 'what are you doing?' and an obvious extension of that idea is to use these tools to answer other questions such as 'what am I working on?', 'what am I learning?' or 'what do I need to know?'. (If you're still in any doubt as to what can be achieved in very few characters, do a search for Ernest Hemmingway's six word novel.)

In fact, it's the enforced brevity of micro-blogging that can make it such a powerful tool. Twitter has been used to run online book clubs, with readers posting their take on the key concepts the chosen book offers. This approach can be taken with any subject, by asking learners to distil

complex ideas into concise updates, a real test of their critical thinking skills.

It has been successfully used by tutors to provide prompts, questions and thought provoking ideas alongside other learning activities which may be face to face or online. Sending out reminders, links to resources and course updates are all good ways to use these tools to provide learner support.

Blogging

Unlike micro blogging there are no hard and fast rules about the length of a blog post, and that makes them a very flexible tool. Powerful and effective posts can be written in less than a hundred words, or the author may use several thousand words to explain a complex issue. Most blogging tools also make it easy to add images, video and other rich media if required.

Learners can use blogs in a self directed way, to reflect upon their learning and shape ideas, to use the process of writing to help them clarify and define their ideas or simply to record what they have learnt.

Blogging can also be used as part of a formal programme of learning by asking students to use them to carry out certain activities. These activities may be quite broad in nature, such as asking students to keep a journal or diary of their progress through a development programme. They might be more specific and direct learners to complete specific activities such as:

- Asking learners to reflect upon their learning and blog about its application in the workplace, perhaps immediately after the learning and then again after an

elapsed period of time. (This can replace the conversation with line managers that we all hope will happen post training, but in reality rarely does.)

- Learners could be required to provide their own ideas and solutions to an issue, and then use comments to critique and develop each other's posts.
- One of the most effective ways to help someone learn something is to ask them to teach it to others. Using a blog, the student can create a tutorial or step by step guide that can be shared with the other learners.

As with micro-blogging, they can also be used to provide support, perhaps through a tutor blog or programme update blog.

Media sharing

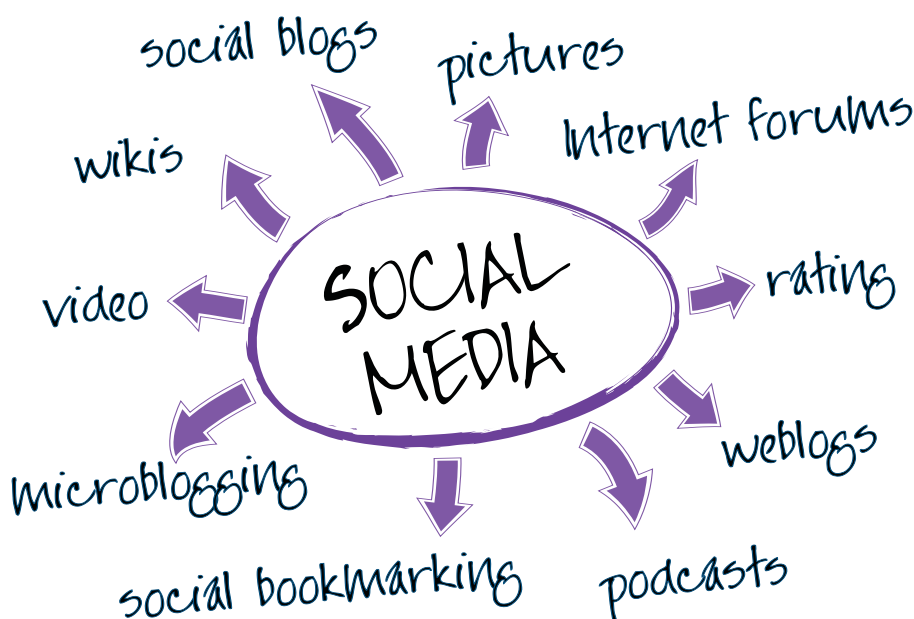
Like so many other elements of social media, the sharing of media content is not in itself new. People have been sharing content for a long time, but this was often done either deliberately by being passed from one individual to another, or by accident through storing content on a shared network drive.

Improvements in the available technology have made it possible to share content to a much more distributed audience, just think of YouTube, Flickr or SlideShare. It is also now possible to capture high definition video as well as high quality photos and audio using mobile phones or low cost video cameras such as the Flip. This means people are frequently carrying with them the tools they need to capture learning opportunities at the moment they happen, or to produce them at the most convenient time.

This opens almost limitless opportunities for creating and sharing content:

- Students can use video to record and share a demonstration of how to do something, or to present an explanation of a complex issue or area of specialist expertise.
- They could use screen capture tools to record how to do something on line or use a particular piece of software.
- Photos can be used to illustrate a 'before and after' scenario, or to record the development of some physical item such as a retail display.
- Instead of just storing them on a shared drive, when making presentations people can be encouraged to record accompanying narration and share them online.

It is possible that the production of this kind of content may already be happening



in your organisation, but what's probably lacking is the sharing. If people value the content enough to take the time to produce it, then it shouldn't take too much to convince them it's worth sharing.

Collaboration tools

Online collaboration tools are increasingly common within organisations, but often outside L&D. Some of these tools are quite familiar, such as online office suites which mimic typical office tools that most PC users will be familiar with.

Others, like wikis, are perhaps a little less familiar and may require users to learn something about how they work in order to be able to use them. In between there is a wide range of other tools, but they all share one common characteristic: they allow remote users to collaborate in the creating and developing documents and other resources.

Some example uses are:

- Working together to document a process that can be shared with others.
- Building a reference resource that will grow and grow and develop over time, such as a group of remote experts building an organisation wide knowledge base.
- Collaboratively developing course materials during the pilot phase of a training programme.
- Building a personal, individual knowledge base or reference system.

Social networking platforms

Many social media tools are also social networking tools because they enable people to connect, comment and share. This is especially true of blogs and micro-blogging, but it's also possible to build social networks around shared media such as videos.

However, there are also dedicated social networking platforms, which on the public internet would include Facebook, LinkedIn and Bebo as well as smaller sites such as the Learning and Skills Group's own site which runs on the Ning platform. Even that very short list of examples shows how diverse social networks can be, and that is true within organisations too.

A social networking platform may be a permanent place in which learners can connect and collaborate with others over a period of time.

- Each user would have a detailed profile that would allow them to find, and be found by people with similar interests.
- Maintaining a professional network like this can be a good way for users to

manage and record their CPD activity without the more formalised approach of an LMS.

- It can also provide an informal overview career and project history.
- It may have special interest groups that focus on particular skills or functions within the organisation.

It might also be something temporary, designed to support a small cohort of learners through a specific development programme.

Most social networking platforms would have all of the other features mentioned here: status updates, blogs, wikis etc as well as many others. It becomes a virtual meeting place, somewhere that people can connect and share their learning.

RSS and syndication

With so many possible information sources, it's understandable that some people may be worried about how anyone would find the time to get to it all. One of the most helpful technologies in this area is known as Really Simple Syndication, or RSS for short. RSS can wrap up most types of web content and deliver it as a 'feed'; a stream of content that can be subscribed to using a feed reader.

In practice this means that instead of visiting ten different blogs to read what has been posted, I can subscribe to each one and read those posts in my feed reader. It isn't just limited to blogs, as most sites offer some or all of their content as an RSS feed: everyone from the BBC to Twitter.

There are also many options for receiving those feeds; my feed reader may be web based, or on my mobile phone or I may use an email client such as Outlook.

RSS also allows trainers to select useful feeds, from around the web or internally to the organisation, and provide them to learners.

PLAN, BUT NOT TOO MUCH

Without wanting to detract too much from the advice to plan how we will use social media, it is worth pointing out that in time our intended use case may well change. Much of the benefit of these tools comes through chance connections and happy coincidences as well as users identifying scenarios that we may not have previously considered. It's important to be open to these changes as you may be able to realise benefits you hadn't even considered at the start.

In these three articles we have looked at what social media is, how we can build a business case for using it and how we can make it part of our learning blend.

To view all the articles online, go to <http://bit.ly/ILTM32> and search for 'Barry Sampson'. If you're beginning your first social media project, or even just considering it for the first time, I hope that this introduction has provided some useful ideas to help get you started.

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