E-learning 2.0 - using new internet technologies in e-learning.

Here is a selection of 7 articles that Richard Naish has written for e.learningage magazine on how new internet technologies could be used in e-learning.

Facing Challenges - has Facebook opened new doors for training via e-learning?

Internet social networking on sites such as www.myspace.com and www.facebook.com are much talked about in the media, but what relevance do they have to e-learning and how could we use them to get the training messages through to more people more quickly and cheaply? We recently designed a 4-hour training simulation US organisation as part of their intern training programme. The interns liked it a lot, of course, and wanted more. They thought their employer was very "cool" for offering this kind of state-of-the art training and it may well filter through to increased applications for graduate jobs in that organisation. So the benefit of the training was to increase the brand of the organisation in the students' eyes, train them in a realistic and engaging environment about how to do their jobs and possibly boost recruitment as well.

The next step any such organisation could take is to create a social networking portal where employees could compete in teams on a business simulation game, since there is nothing like competition to fire people up and encourage the development of skill mastery. However any internet networking needs to be mediated by the organisation, since organisations are responsible for any activity on their intranet. And if that activity includes some online bullying and accidental divulgement of internal or customer secrets, they could be financially liable. So is there a way round this?

Build it or use Facebook

Building a social networking portal in a company makes sense if you want to brand it, control the content, make sure employees are included in it, and moderate its use….but doesn't that take away all the fun of internet networking? Recently I had a look at Facebook, and was pleasantly surprised to see all the interns we had trained in the US were, in Aretha Franklin's immortal words, "doing it for themselves". They had created separate groups of ex-interns in Facebook for each of the offices around the country and were busily networking away online using this third party site. This is good news for the organisation since it doesn't have any responsibility about what goes on in a third party site. All the corporate benefits of networking and teambuilding and sharing of information are there, but also some gossip and photos.

The big question is: can this network be used to further train or communicate with these people? It would need someone to join their network, possibly their instructor from the face-to-face training course, who would then 'seed' information about training and development opportunities in the organisation into the network. It would then have to be very engaging and fun snippets of training and development, since Facebook is about networking more for fun/social reasons rather than for business/career. For business and career networking the site www.linkedin.com is more appropriate.

25% of all their employees were on Facebook

Facebook is about joining networks, making new friends and posting funny articles, photos and Youtube videos. But you can also 'poke' someone which means sending them a message if they are online. I imagine a lot of poking goes on during work hours across the country. We mustn't assume it is just "internet slackers" who are networking like this; a quick check of one of the biggest UK employers of graduates found that about 25% of all their employees were on Facebook. In some ways, this is to be expected since they probably have all been using Facebook at college; following the unwritten rule of 'Myspace for kids, Facebook for college students'. However if such established employers have so many employees using internet social networking, one can imagine that there are similar high figures elsewhere.

And what is interesting is their low need for privacy from their employer. There is nothing stopping an employer logging on and having a look at what their employees are posting. Perhaps there is so much 'Big Brother' around, on TV and in real life, that employees no longer really care about strict personal privacy. In the last few year employers have tried to operate more as 'big tents', encouraging people from all different backgrounds to join as employees. Employers have then created employment policies that show they understand the issues of work/life balance, encouraged by government legislation around the maximum working week, right to paternity leave and family-friendly work hours. This seems to have encouraged employees to feel that it is quite acceptable to use the internet to share one's life outside work with anyone else around the world, including their bosses. In fact the latest ethical dilemma posed by a Financial Times columnist was 'do you let your boss become one of your online friends in Facebook?'

Corporate use of Facebook
What is also interesting about Facebook is that some of the groups seem to have a fair amount of corporate information. For example, a group of recent graduates joining a big UK bank formed a group and put the company's logo and website address on their group page. Another group included a full page from their corporate website describing the benefits of working for that organisation. So it seems groups are happy to be corporate citizens, but at the same time as enjoying some flippant conversation. Since there is some corporate information already on these groups, so it would be a small step to use internet social networking sites to communicate to a particular group of people within an organisation. This could in the form of a web-link to some engaging and fun learning which is particularly relevant to that particular group. This kind of targeted training would achieve one of the hardest goals of training: train the right people at the right time with the right material.

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Wot no e-learning 2.0?

In e-learning 2.0 students create their own content and collaborate with other learners using technologies such as blogs, wikis and podcasts. As well as accessing their peers' content, they tap into many other sources of content to create a personalised learning experience. Essentially e-learning 2.0 is about users exploring and constructing their own learning experiences from multiple sources with the help of new technologies. There has been much talk of how e-learning has evolved into this newer, sassier version of learning, but is mainstream corporate e-learning now creating e-learning 2.0 content?

I recently had the pleasure of being a judge for the US-based *Brandon Hall Excellence in Learning Awards* and thought that should be a good place to start looking for examples of e-learning 2.0.

Dumbed down assessment is political correctness applied to pedagogy.

First off was some sales training for a global car producer. It had a visually pleasant layout and green flashing 'next' buttons so I knew what I had to do next at any time. The information presentation was in the form of text that popped up by rolling one's mouse over parts of a car. To test retention there was a game of 'snap' with lots of eye candy, but at such a basic level of content that you didn't actually need to have read any of the information presented. This is a common issue in e-learning. Many instructional designers seem more concerned about giving the learners a pat on the back, rather than giving them a proper test to see if they have retained the information presented and allowing them to keep on trying, with feedback, until they get the right answers. 'If at first you don't succeed, try and try again' is a very natural way of learning. Dumbed down assessment is political correctness applied to pedagogy.

The best bits were the interactive video clips. Firstly, a 'how not to do it' video clip, which is always engaging and then I had to try and sell to two quite different potential customers. I watched the clips and then selected what to say next to the customer. Like most people I like to try and see how annoyed I can make my virtual customer by selecting the daftest dialogue to say to them, and then have a go doing it right. Try and try again!

'Warm and fuzzy with signposting' is a good result for an employee induction programme

The second piece was an induction programme for a global organisation. To re-enforce the diversity of their employees, I could choose which employee to introduce me to the company, which was sweet. And when I rolled your mouse over their picture, they smiled; very Harry Potter and a lovely touch. The speakers on the video clips were very human and fluent and the clips were just the right length to maintain attention without being too long and boring.

Overall it made me feel warm and fuzzy and gave me the impression of a friendly and interesting global organisation to work for. It also pointed out lots of information available on their intranet. 'Warm and fuzzy with signposting' is a good result for an employee induction piece. However there was no testing of what I had learnt and no interaction except choosing which clips to watch and which intranet sites to visit.

Rapid sales process training?

The third piece was sales process training for a national financial services company. The navigation was not very intuitive, so it took me a while to get going on the programme. Also the demo didn't automatically adapt to my screen resolution, so I had to keep scrolling up to

see the content and then scrolling down to use the navigation. This is something which is usually picked up at the user-testing stage before the training is released.

What I did notice was the knowledgeable and user-friendly rollover text instructions explaining the software. I got a strong impression that the text was drafted by an experienced user of the software and had not been edited by an instructional designer under pressure to reduce the text length to make it look prettier. The demo was a bit too fast for me and I would have appreciated a 'speed control' slider to slow down the demo. This sort of control is much better than having to constantly pause and rewind.

The software demonstration was created using off-the-shelf rapid e-learning development software. I would wager that in fact it was the Subject Matter Expert (an experienced user), rather than an instructional designer, who produced the first version of this programme and an external consultant tidied it up to create the final version. This would explain why the training seemed well-suited to the target users but didn't have much in the way of sophisticated interaction that would help retention of the information presented. I came away thinking that that was not an award-winning bit of e-learning but, all the same, it may actually have been very well-received by the target audience who probably desperately needed some training on this new software that the company was rolling out.

After playing with these three pieces of potential award-winning e-learning, it does seem that e-learning 2.0 has yet to enter mainstream corporate e-learning. There could be many reasons for this. Perhaps the instructional designers suggested various ways of making the learning more collaborative and making use of web 2.0 technologies, but the content lead on the project preferred a more traditional approach. Perhaps the instructional designer felt more comfortable offering up traditional e-learning or perhaps the subject matter expert doubled up as the instructional designer and so wasn't aware of e-learning 2.0.

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Entertain me…recruit me.

Many large organisations are interested in using business simulations as e-learning tools, however there is often a stumble when it comes to the question 'can you prove it is effective and people actually learn relevant skills and knowledge'? There is a body of evidence that games-based learning is effective as a teaching mechanism and this evidence reservoir is slowly filling up as more organisations adopt games-based learning. However one area where the adoption is faster is using games-based learning as a recruitment tool.

Organisations have sought to make their recruitment more engaging by using games on their websites to catch the attention of the digital natives graduating every year from universities around the world. These games have several objectives. Firstly they get ahead of the competition in the scramble for the best graduates. Secondly they are creating a social network of students who are talking about the game and about the company, which is effectively free viral marketing for the organisation. And finally, they are also giving what occupational psychologists, like myself, call 'a realistic job preview'.

Saving money on recruitment
It is a good idea when recruiting someone to ensure they know what they are letting themselves in for. New graduates may well have done casual work, but will not necessarily have worked as an office-based executive, so they don't always know what a job entails on a day-to-day basis. The idea is that if they do know what it will be like and they are still interested in the job, then they are more likely to stay longer in the organisation. This is key for recruiters, who want good people and want them to stay, or else it means shelling out more money on recruiting replacements for these disillusioned leavers. So the ROI for this kind of game comes from several sources: money saved on recruitment, better quality graduates driving the organisation forward to greater success and increased sales driven from the increased brand awareness of the players.

PWC offers a simulation of a week's virtual work experience
PricewaterhouseCoopers UK site has some 'interactive challenges' to allow students to see what each different type of work would be like; whether that be tax, advisory or assurance. This ranges from a multi-choice questionnaire on what you would do in a certain work situations (a.k.a. 'situational judgment questions') to a full-blown one-week simulation, for a single player, on what it would be like to be an auditor or a tax consultant. At the end of the week you get a score on how well you did and a personalised review of what you did well and not so well.
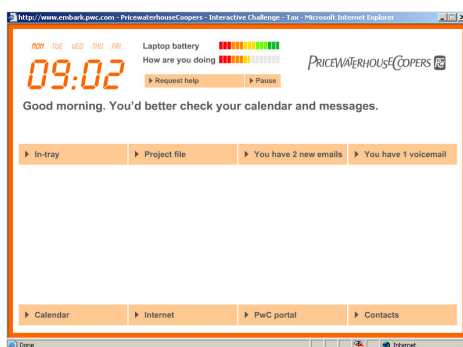
There is a virtual desktop with the usual stuff like in-tray, email, voicemail and Intranet. As in real-life, the objective is to try and do your job as well as you can. This means not just working through your in-tray, but sensitively and realistically handling all the emails, telephone calls, meetings and interruptions from colleagues and clients. Although it is a single-player game, you are judged on how good a team member you are, as well as whether you make the right decisions. And fortunately, time is speeded up so 'the week' actually only takes 20-30 minutes. I had a go and it was certainly a very busy week and very engaging. I had so much to do that I tried to work longer hours, but the system shut me down by 6.30pm every evening…. so there is still the promise of some work-life balance at this

company! I also enjoyed the irony of me forgetting to go to a web-based training course I had booked myself on….shame on me.

L'Oreal has 15,000 teams from 125 countries

L'Oreal runs two games for potential recruits: 'e-Strat Challenge' and 'Brandstorm'. In e-Strat Challenge, undergraduates and MBA students sign up, in teams, for a business simulation where get to run a virtual company. The game started in early December and finishes in April 2007 with the international final in Paris, where the top MBA and undergraduate teams have to defend their strategy in front of an executive panel of judges. This year the game has 15,000 teams from 125 countries, which is an impressive global reach into the potential recruit market.
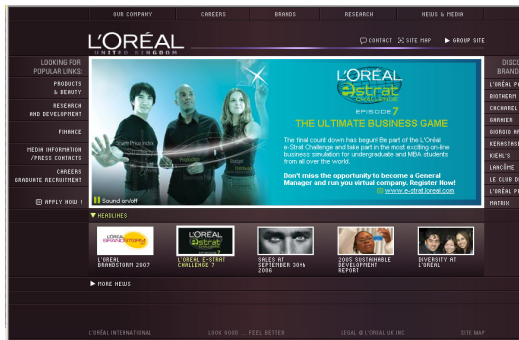
To play this multi-player game, teams are given access to a team file including general industry data relating to the previous period of activity of their virtual company. They then analyse this data, agree on a strategy and implement it by making and submitting decisions in the e-Strat Software. There are several rounds, so teams get to see how well their decisions have worked out and how other teams are performing.

The reasons for launching these programmes was to recruit people globally and also re-position L'Oreal as a modern and world-class company that offers a good career for men as well as women. It has certainly been successful in encouraging students to consider working for L'Oreal and the company has hired nearly 600 of the students who played the games.

Other companies using games to recruit include the consultants Booz Allen Hamilton, the international food company Danone and consumer goods company Proctor and Gamble. And of course, for all these games, the team-members don't necessarily have to be co-located, so students can get real experience at what it is like to be part of a virtual worldwide team before they do it for real.

Recruitment or assessment?
Although most of these games are pitched as encouraging students to consider the company as a potential employer, the games don't actually set themselves out to select which student will get a job. Currently, winning the game doesn't necessarily get you the job, but it certainly helps. It says something about your motivation, strategy, analysis and team working skills, which employers are unlikely to ignore. And it also helps the employer with employee retention through a realistic job preview.

Maybe there will come a day, as the virtual business simulations become more and more authentic, when all recruitment is part business simulation-based and part traditional "application form and interview". E-learning companies wishing to broaden their market could take some time in 2007 to have a chat with their client's recruitment team, as well as the learning and development team.

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Overcoming the issues of e-learning on the move

A year ago I wrote about using audio podcasts in e-learning and the potential of adding video to it. Now that is possible, with Apple releasing its video iPod at the end of last year. Video podcasting (vodcasting) to a mobile device is now an everyday reality. Next on the agenda is making it interactive. With a touch screen for the iPod planned for next year, this may well happen soon. Then we will have a critical mass of people with viable m-learning devices, so all we need some great content.

The problems with e-learning
The main problems that e-learning faces are around audience, culture, interactivity, accessibility and record-keeping.

Budget-holders nearly two generations older than the target audience
The target audience of e-learning is more likely to be skewed to the younger end of the population; from 4 to 25 years old. The people who are making the content and making best use of the available technology are on average generation older. However the generation that is holds the budget for such development is between one and two generations older than the target audience. This means that e-learning has to work really hard at being 'hip'…appealing to a younger generation, and yet appeal to the budget-holder as well.

Myspace, MSN messenger, SMS, mobile phones and gaming
The culture of the younger generation around technology is evident from the technologies they use; Myspace, youtube, MSN messenger, mobile phones, texting and gaming. They want to chat (in writing as well as talking) show each other videos they have shot, listen to music and play games. And yet the culture of e-learning is a bit more grown-up; using a PC to follow a programme that needs to be finished, some basic interaction and a test at the end to ensure you have understood it all. E-learning is not really hip and trendy right now.

Interactivity
Making e-learning sufficiently interactive that it is engaging to learners has always been a challenge. It needs to make up for the fact that the learner is not getting the group motivation that they would get in a classroom of other people learning the same thing. Self-paced learning is something one can always put off 'til tomorrow.

Distributed population
People are more likely to be on the move than they were a generation ago. And mobile phones feed this mobility, since you don't actually need to be stationery at home or work to

communicate anymore. So how can you learn when you are constantly away from technological 'bases' such as home, work and school?

The cult of the learning management system
The last problem of e-learning is keeping tabs on it all. Somehow organisations need a record of who did what programme and when. And especially, who hasn't done that vital programme that everyone must do to comply with yet another piece of new legislation. This gave rise to the cult of the Learning Management System, which provided us with the software to record and present the data.
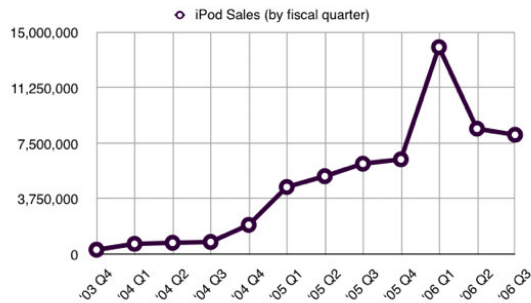
Keeping up with the consumers
E-learning needs to constantly update its technology to address all these problems. There will always be a lag from the emergence of the technology to the sign-off by the budget holder on a new e-learning programme that uses that technology. At a rough guess, the lag is about two years, which means e-learning is always a bit behind consumers' use of the new technology.

One technology that is not likely to go away, given its huge take-up, is the iPod or other MP3 player device. Nearly 60 million iPods have been sold worldwide…not bad for a technology that only arrived 4 years ago. Sales are down from the peak earlier this year when the video iPod came in, but still running at about 30 million new iPods a year, as the chart shows.

Vodcasting

Vodcasting is more popular than it was, but in the top ten most popular podcasts in the UK, only 2 of those were vodcasts. Ricky Gervais's vodcast is at the top; he is experimenting with the phenomenal power of being his own scriptwriter, comedian, cameraman, producer and distributor. In fact six of the top ten podcasts were comedy-related; showing the desire for mobile entertainment. Also in the top ten was National Geograhic's vodcast and very interestingly, a learning podcast….learning conversational Spanish. This shows that learning by podcast has potential for popularity.

Vodcasting addresses some of e-learning's problems
When compared against e-learning's problems, vodcasting as a potential e-learning technology does reasonably well.

Audience: Podcasting can reach a significant proportion of the target younger audience, via iPods, mp3 players and mobile phones with mp3's. And with any luck the budget-holder of the content-development owns or has had some exposure to this ubiquitous technology. If weekly vodcasts are good enough for Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, then it should be good enough for others of this generation. This is a good indicator that video iPods will get a good penetration.

Culture: iPods and sharing/watching of video are very much part of youth culture and technology is regarded as up-to-date and socially desirable.

Interactivity: This is where podcasting and vodcasting falls down. They are essentially media-delivery tools. However with the advent of a touch screen and wi-fi enabled iPod of the future, this could be overcome. There is also potential in using the other ubiquitous technology, the mobile phone, to allow the interactivity. The learner could register and then be sent questions via SMS message to answer as part of completing the learning programme.

Accessibility: Since iPods and mobile phones are usually carried everywhere, then the accessibility of this technology is very high. And much higher than a laptop, PDA or desktop computer, which are the typical delivery mechanisms of e-learning.

Record-keeping: again this poses a challenge, since for e-learning to be funded by an organisation or public body, then they need to know that it has been completed, or it is potentially a waste of money. The SMS messages used for the interactivity could also be used for record-keeping.

M-learnings' killer application
Overall vodcasting has great potential for distance learning killer application once the interactivity and record-keeping are addressed.

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User-generated content- 'Just because it is on the web doesn't mean it is true'

Patti Shank, the Denver-based instructional designer and author of *Making Sense of Online Learning* suggests that, in this new complex world we live in, learning through Internet-driven social networks will be better than formal training. Indeed 'training organisations will use fewer resources to build static content and more resources to support learners in finding and using learning resources'. However, I would look to Mark Twain's famous quotation and say that 'reports of the death of training are premature'.

Blogs, Wikis and IM as the font of all knowledge
Is this world really so complex? The main human behaviour drivers are still there: wealth, health and happiness. So all the accompanying levers and pullies that make up the systems of our current world are working towards the same ends as in the old world. Yes, there is more information available, but surely trainers should be helping the younger generation by codifying that information, based on solid research, into high-quality and engaging training material. It is not helpful to encourage them to regard single-dimensional Blogs (a web log written by one person), Wikis (a website editable by a group of people) that are constructed by a small group of like-minded people and Instant Messaging to internet-friends, as the main source of their learning.

The key is appreciating that there are two main types of knowledge: explicit and tacit.

Explicit knowledge
Explicit knowledge is knowledge that 'has been or can be articulated, codified, and stored in certain media. The most common forms of explicit knowledge are manuals, documents, procedures, and stories.' Knowledge can also be audio-visual in the form of e-learning and traditional training programmes.

Training needs analysis
Training programmes, and other types of formal learning, are mostly imparting explicit knowledge. The designer has analysed the training gap and has designed training that will bridge that gap. The training gap is the difference between what a target group of employees need know to perform effectively in their organisational role, and what they currently know. The analysis is based on solid research of the target group's skill levels and of the organisational stakeholders' view of the organisational goals and processes.

Design, delivery and internal marketing
Once the gap is known, then the training designer can research all the best resources available that help bridge that gap with a high level of certainty. They can then find organisational manuals, training videos, external training material and authoritative books to help them design case studies and interactive exercises that help people learn what they need to learn. The important next stage is to deliver this material in a way that learners can easily access it, as part of their working day. Finally they have to internally market the material, so learners actually know it exists.

This is classic training design and the end results (people who are better at their jobs) are amazing when the process has been done thoroughly by a competent training designer.

This training needs analysis process saves each individual target employee having to do exactly the same research themselves, which is clearly a waste of their time and they also may not necessarily pick the best resources and end up absorbing lots of false knowledge.

Tacit knowledge
By definition, tacit knowledge is not easily shared. Scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi had a famous aphorism: 'We know more than we can tell.' Tacit knowledge is about the habits and culture that we do not recognize in ourselves. In learning terms, it is knowing 'how to do it in practice' and 'what really works'. In knowledge management terms, tacit knowledge is the opposite of explicit knowledge. We learn tacit knowledge by trial and error and by learning from others in the workplace in real-time (also known as employee performance support). It is usually our informal learning that picks up the tacit knowledge. For example, 'sitting by Nelly', or apprenticeship, is a way to add to one's explicit knowledge, soaking in all the tacit knowledge that one's 'Nelly' has to offer.

Formal and informal learning
So there are also two types of learning: formal and informal. Training falls clearly into the formal learning pot, whereas informal learning is often used to pick up all the tacit knowledge. What Shank argues is that instructional designers should concentrate more on designing systems that allow people to pick up tacit knowledge informally from others using internet-enabled technologies.

I would argue that we still need both formal and informal learning to train the next generation in the skills they need to do their job well. I don't think the way forward is solely designing tools to point them in the direction of Wikis and Blogs so they can have a bash at synthesising all the information there and hopefully work out how to do their job better.

'Just because it is on the Web, doesn't mean it's necessarily true'
If you want to stay sane in this information-rich world, just keep repeating to yourself: 'Just because it is on the Web doesn't mean it's necessarily true'. In the old days we had print publishers that edited all the world's information and presented it as books of knowledge. An important role was played by authors and editors to 'sort the wheat from the chaff'. Unfortunately (or fortunately if you believe in free speech) there are no editors editing all the information on the web (except in China, of course). So there is a lot of chaff out there!

The next generation
It is hard to imagine how it feels like to enter the workplace as a young person these days. There is so much information out there and everyone around you at work is busy and stressed with precious little time for passing on tacit knowledge to you. However, it is an indictment of an organisation's 'learning and development' department if learners end up using Wikis, Blogs and Instant Messaging to internet-friends to work out how to do their job well.

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Can Wikis be useful for learning?

A Wiki is the "simplest online database that could possibly work". It is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit webpage content using any web browser. Given this worldwide reach and ease of use, could Wikis add value to the world of e-learning?

Wikis trace their ancestry all the way back to 1995. The inventor, Ward Cunningham, named them *Wiki-Wiki* (Hawaiian for 'quick') to avoid calling the concept 'quick-web'. Like many simple concepts, "open editing" has some profound and subtle effects on Wiki usage. Allowing all users to create and edit any page in a website is exciting; it encourages democratic use of the web and helps less IT-competent users to contribute content, which is something we want to happen in e-learning.

Wikis and sacred cows
The most famous Wiki of all is Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia with 4 million entries. Anyone who has used it will know it is a fabulous resource. And yet all of the pages have been created by the online community. Now most folk would think this a recipe for misinformation and distortion, and yet Nature did a serious peer review comparing the accuracy of Wikipedia (established 2001) with that of the venerable Encyclopaedia Britannica (established 1768). The results showed Wikipedia as almost as accurate. For example, one of the findings was that of the 42 entries tested, Wikipedia had 4 errors per entry and EB had 3 errors per entry. However both sides have since hotly contested both the method and the results since the report was first published last December.

Wiki works because:
- Everybody feels that they have a sense of responsibility because anybody can contribute.
- Any information can be changed or deleted by anyone. Wiki pages represent consensus because it's much easier to delete insults and remove spam than let them stand. What remains is naturally meaningful and has been collated from multiple points of view.
- Anyone can play. This sounds ominous, but to make an impact on Wiki, you need to generate real content. Anything else will be removed. So anyone can play, but only the good players remain.
- It's fun to participate, and people play nicely when the game is fun.

And if you feel intrigued but don't feel brave enough to edit a Wiki page, there is the wonderfully named *Wiki Wiki Sandbox*. There you can have a go at editing a live webpage without any risk of comeback.

Making money out of Wikis
Commercial companies have been quick to spot a good idea and make it chargeable. And there are over 20 Wiki tools listed at the UK's http://www.e-learningcentre.co.uk with great names such as Duck Computing and TWiki. However it does seem a shame to pay for a fully-featured version when the basic software is free.

But how can Wikis be used in learning?

Well the first use is as an information resource. A good internet user would use Google to find out the meaning of a new concept or term, whereas an expert internet user would be more likely to use Wikipedia. Unfortunately, Google has the power to find all the misinformation on the web, as well as all the good information.

Secondly, a Wiki is a powerful collaboration tool. A geographically distributed team could use a Wiki as a way of keeping in touch, sharing ideas and developing a project. Anyone who is on an email distribution list of over 3 people will appreciate that email is a poor collaboration tool. Once a group size goes over 3 people, one can be swamped with 'reply all' emails and find it hard to keep track of the different contributions, the consensus and what the proposed actions should be. If it were all on one webpage, which everyone could edit (and put their name against the edits) it would create a clearer picture of team direction.

Essentially this is workflow learning in action. The team members would be learning from each other as part of the natural flow of the project. All the important project management issues would be on the Wiki and everyone can access them and contribute. There could be:
- To do lists
- A forum for asking and answering questions
- Meeting agendas & notes
- Project Plan and related documents
- Task assignments
- Group announcements
- Document preparation
- Interacting with clients
- Status Reports
- Contact Information
- Links to: other Wiki contents, documents, network folders, internet and intranet sites, etc.

Wikis building e-learning content
What about building e-learning content using a Wiki? Subject matter experts (SME) have all the learning content in their heads, or have easy access to it, but they currently need an instructional designer/programmer team to create engaging, interactive e-learning content. E-learning design is currently a jolly merry-go-round involving SMEs, programmers, designers and the client, and hopefully a project manager to make sure it all gets done. A better way of all these parties collaborating may be to use a Wiki to construct the content. Some organisations already use collaborative software to keep an e-learning project on track, however the difference would be that the Wiki *is* the final e-learning content. SMEs and learning designers can both access it and amend it and users can be user-testing it as it develops. Clearly it would not necessarily be the most complex bit of learning but it could certainly avoid being linear by using hyperlinks to allow students to move around and explore the content.

Icebreaking Wiki
It has also been used as an icebreaker tool for online groupwork. At Deakin University, Australia, they adapted a group icebreaker that usually worked very well face-to-face by turning it into a Wiki.

They took a standard icebreaker exercise of a list of questions for which you have to go ask all the other participants to get all the answers. For example, 'Find someone who has the same colour car as you?' People have to get up and circulate in the classroom, asking each other questions, to try to locate people who match the criteria outlined in the questions. Because everyone is participating, the exercise creates a non-threatening way for everyone to introduce themselves to everyone else.

The Wiki version of this icebreaker hosted 451 users who actively participated in the icebreaker exercise. A popular question asked users to tell the group if they had pets. Some students chose to upload a picture of their pet instead of a picture of themselves. Many linked the images of their pet to their posts responding to this question. Overall the Wiki proved to be a good technology for online collaboration. All participating students managed to complete the exercise, proving they could use the Wiki in the process. Throughout the exercise there was no misuse or intentional deletions from the Wiki.

Good e-learning is certainly about informing, collaborating and meeting online, which are things that Wikis do well.

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Blog to learn?

Blogging has become a web phenomenon with at least 5 million active blogs on the web. In a recent US survey, 30% of people admit to reading blogs regularly. Jonathan Schwartz, Sun's COO actively encourages Sun employees to blog as a way of improving products and processes; and 30,000 of them read his blog as well. It has even become mainstream enough for the BBC to create a blog on the May 2005 general election. Given this massive interest in blogs, could they be used to good effect in the e-learning world to help people learn?

What are blogs?

The word 'blog' comes from 'weblog'; literally a personal log on the web. Using simple software that saves one from having to know anything about HTML programming, a person can regularly post their thoughts and musings to a personal website where anyone can view it and even add their own comments. Usually the entries are short, frequently updated and refer the reader to selected web links to maintain the surfing experience. The blog software then automatically archives the logs, so previous entries can still be viewed by anyone. So, in effect, it is an interactive and hyperlinked web diary with the most recent entries viewed first. Some people have described it as a cross between a newspaper column and talk radio. Some examples for e-learning are www.learningcircuits.blogspot.com and www.elearningpost.com

More popular than messageboards?

It is the individualised nature of blogs that perhaps has made them more popular than messageboards, which are often included in an e-learning solution. Messageboards are more group-based and often controlled by a moderator and so people's personal motivation to post contributions is lower. Lee LeFever of Commoncraft uses this matrix, reproduced with permission of the author.

It seems blogs are more personal than messageboards and yet this does not seem to deter people from wanting to read them. Given the popularity of blogs, could they be used to make learning more effective and so be part of any e-learning solution?

	Weblogs	**Message Boards**
Locus of Control	Centralized and personal	Decentralized and group
Authoring of New Topics	Centralized: Individual or small group drives all new topics	Decentralized: Group shares equal responsibility to post new topics
Intent	Personal accounts, news, reflection	Group input, decision making, collaboration
Responses	Comments are extraneous, not required	Replies are required for a discussion
Tools	RSS, Aggregation, Trackback, Permalinking, Cross linking, etc are currently in the weblog domain	Message board may integrate new tools, but most have not. This is quickly changing
Chronology	Reverse chronological order of topics on front page	Wide variety of topic or discussion organization and presentation
Personal Connections	Deeper look into one person or small group's thinking	A broader look at a large group's thoughts in group context
Pollution control	Can be unspammable or unflame-able by others without loss of primary value	Must be managed closely to deal with spam or flames
Content Buckets	Weblog topics are all presented on the weblog front page and then archived into categories.	Message board discussions are often presented in multiple places across the online community and archived independently.

Education
In education, blogs are already being embraced by researchers, teachers and students. There are 'group blogs' where the current VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) or LMS (Learning Management System) cannot provide discussion forums or bulletin boards. Groups of academics share short essays and comment on them from their different perspectives. Likewise students use blogs to publish their essays and get comments from other students about their essays' content and style.

Warwick University has its own blog site http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/ and encourages students to blog. They hope to build up collections of entries about a particular subject, that will be 'informative and thought-provoking' for new students and others interested in Warwick. It seems that they want to develop an archive of blogs that would make up an 'informal intranet', as well as encouraging students to develop their thinking. Another objective is to encourage creativity and the development of a personal prose style, which some students would not otherwise be able to develop due to the type of course they are studying.

Warwick is also developing new ways of using the blogs in academic work. It plans to allow tutors to create 'blog prompts'. This means they will pose questions to their students on a topic and get responses. Perhaps this may end up being a kind of 'tutorial discussion at a distance'. The asynchronous nature of the technology would allow students enough time to make informed contributions. This would be a change to the long pauses that currently exist in university tutorials, after a tutor has posed a discussion question.

They also plan to have a system that will allow tutors to easily read 'aggregates' of blog entries on specified topics from groups of students, which will save the tutor the time of searching blogs for a particular topic. This could then be used to get good feedback from the students about what they do and don't understand on the course. The tutor could then correct common misunderstandings among students, which using conventional channels (i.e. students talking to the tutor) they may not have been aware of.

Professional development
The one time in life where one **has** to write a personal log about what one is doing is when one is studying for a professional qualification like medicine, accountancy, law or nursing. You need to record your work experience and demonstrate how you have applied your knowledge of the professional syllabus, which you studied for your professional exams. This is a very time-consuming and difficult task if it is left too late. It is difficult enough to remember what you actually did at work and then harder still, to try and remember **how** you applied your professional knowledge. For this you actually need to remember what you were thinking at the time.

Professional bodies always recommend that you try and do this log as you go along, perhaps even at the end of every day. Blogging is certainly a way that this can be done any time and anywhere, as long as you have a computer with internet access. It also has the advantage that you could share this log with your professional supervisor or mentor, who could comment on it as you go along, rather than in long face-to-face sessions every 3 months. The log, combined with the comments from your mentor, could form the full documentation of your period of professional work experience.

A number of UK universities have already set up such a system for their health and nursing students. Their students keep a blog to record and report on their experiences during their practical or field subjects.

Surface vs. deep learning
The good news is that this kind of reflection on what you have done allows one to achieve a deeper level of learning. 'Surface learning' is where the learner completes only the minimum content needed to meet assessment requirements (a very practical but short-sighted strategy). Whereas 'deep learning' occurs when a student stands back from an experience and looks for connections between concepts and finds their own meaning from what they have experienced. Blogs therefore can help people achieve deep learning of a subject.
Blogs, by their nature, are personalised and free of institutional intervention. This makes them hard to include in the formalised learning in the typical LMS or Corporate University. However, given their popularity, there is a strong case for trying to build in this popular technological practice into the mainstream of e-learning.

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