

The Future Of E-Learning: What's Missing Right Now

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The Future of E-Learning*Abstract*

This paper explores a report by Chatti M.A., Jarke, M. and Frosch-Wilke, D. (2007) as well as an article Dale Splender and an article by Jane Hart. All three resources suggest that e-learning as a learning tool lacks a people driven approach. While the three of them approach the subject differently, the need to involve people in the learning process and to make learning more informal is mooted by all. While Chatti M.A., Jarke, M. and Frosch-Wilke, D. (2007) explore the concept with regards to knowledge management (KM) and learning management (LM), Jane Hart (2009) explores the subject in conjunction with learning at the work place.

Keywords: learning management, knowledge management, e-learning

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Introduction

In the olden days, only the elite few had the privilege of reading. The so called high society individuals were considered more talented than others and they were the only ones who were granted access to scriptures and other religious material. But then came along publishing and the printing press, and the world of learning was turned topsy-turvy.

The printing press gave access to the common man to a lot of knowledge. However, the common man couldn't read and that's why, he needed teachers to help him understand words and symbols. The print medium is based on a symbolic system- the alphabet (Dale Spender, 2006). Readers have to crack the code before they get to the meaning and the learning (Dale Spender, 2006)

However, with e-learning or digital learning, it is different. The students of the tech age spend lesser time watching television or sleeping than they spend online. Teenagers today are hooked to technology. They don't need to be told how to use a computer or how to run a CD. They already know it before they sit down in a classroom to take a lesson.

Contrast this with the learning in the print medium. A person, when he enters a classroom for the first time, cannot read and write. Thus, he needs somebody to guide

him along the path of learning and that person is the teacher. However, with the digital medium, the screen tells a student what to do. There need not be a teacher during the whole session to tell a student what to do.

That's not to say that teachers are a redundant commodity with e-learning. However, with the advent of e-learning, the role of teachers has undergone a transition- the transition from learning-enabler to learning manager.

Learning management (LM) and knowledge management (KM) are often construed as different concepts, but a closer look reveals that they are the different sides of the same coin (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosch-Wilke, D. , 2007)

Knowledge Management (KM)

There is no one definition of knowledge as such. Some have defined knowledge as something which is different from data and information and something which is specialized (Drucker, 1989). Other have defined knowledge as something which rests in an individual and resides in the collective (Siemens, 2006).

Speaking broadly, knowledge can be classified into four different types- know how, know what, know why and know who (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosch-Wilke, D., 2007)

Differentiation can also be made based on explicit or tacit knowledge (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosch-Wilke, D., 2007) and structured or informal knowledge (Davenport

and Prusack, 1998). While the former in both the cases can easily be codified and stored, the latter is harder to define.

While KM which focuses more on explicit knowledge sees knowledge as something which can easily be captured, stored and retrieved, KM which focuses on informal knowledge sees knowledge as something dynamic and which can be created only through active social participation.

However, knowledge management as a whole rests on three basic premise: knowledge repositories, communities and networks and experts and knowers (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wike, D., 2007)

Learning Management (LM) and how it is connected to Knowledge Management

For long, KM and LM have been viewed as separate from an organization point of view. In almost all the organizations, the two use different tools and are based on different concepts (Hackett, 2001). However, of late, needs have arisen to fuse the two together.

Learning is the foundation of knowledge (Allee, 1999). To learn is to come to know (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). To know is to have learned (Siemens, 2006). Just like in knowledge, learning too can be categorized into different components viz. learn what, learn how, learn where and learn why.

The objectives of the two fields are also quite similar. Both knowledge as well as learning aim to enhance the professional as well as personal performance and increase

the ability of an individual (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). The production of knowledge and connecting people to quality resources of knowledge are the primary objectives of both the disciplines.

And contrary to popular, the two share common tools and processes too to achieve their aims and objectives. Just like knowledge, learning too is a dynamic process and a non-linear one, enhanced by greater social participation and an action-oriented approach.

Furthermore, tools of KM becomes the enablers for LM (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). For instance, CoP, which is one of the major tool of KM is often used in the processes of LM.

And just to reiterate the point of KM and LM being two sides of the same coin, the three major components of KM viz. repositories, networks and experts form the core of LM too. And that's where the problem arises in the useful implementation of e-learning.

What's lacking in KM and LM approach

Although both of them are viewed as different, both of them follow the same principles as explained above. If we go back a little further back to the start of this paper, we said that digital learning should see the transformation of teachers from learning enabler to learning manager. However, even with the rising popularity of e-learning, that transition is not happening in the real sense of the word.

We learn not to acquire knowledge but to increase our abilities and improve our performance. And in that regard, KM has failed the purpose. KM has been seen as a technological tool rather than a social interaction (Delmonte and Aronson, 2004), which has resulted in the downfall of the concept. It has failed to give individuals or organizations a competitive advantage over the rest, which is basic purpose of learning.

The KM approach views knowledge as something static which can be easily captured and stored. But that's not the reality. We are constantly acquiring knowledge through informal means. We interact with people, take part in discussions and exchange information over the web in an informal environment, and all that adds to our repository of knowledge. Knowledge is not something static which can easily be stored and retrieved; knowledge is something dynamic and social, and it is the dynamic concept which KM fails to address.

Similar is the story with LM. This discipline too follows the static approach to learning, just like knowledge. A strong emphasis is placed on how to centralize and standardize the learning experience (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). Content is delivered, authored, designed and managed via centralized Learning Management Systems, Content Management Systems like CLIX, WebCT and others or through Drupal as static content (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007).

The digital delivery of medium is simply an online version of the classroom event, with the teacher still acting as the learning enabler. E-learning still follows the old-

pedagogue of one-size fits all approach. And that's the approach learners and knowledge makers resist today (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D. 2007)

Learners are tired of the confined system and the centrally managed learning systems. In the tech-savvy world of today, most of the learning happens through informal means. People log on to Youtube to take guitar lessons or take cooking classes; housewives and bachelors exchange recipes through their blogs; and tips about travelling are shared through e-mail.

But unfortunately, e-learning today fails to acknowledge the human side of learning. Learning and knowledge are more than static, and technology is just an enabler (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007)

Currently, learning through the digital medium is focused on the know what. But for learning to truly enable an increase in the ability of an individual, it has to shift to the learn how and learn who approach; and that's where the future of e-learning lies.

The Future of E-Learning

Learning and knowledge are social, personal, flexible, dynamic, distributed, ubiquitous, complex and chaotic in nature (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). Most researchers believe that the social factor has a lot to contribute to the process of learning and more so in the digital age. We learn more by interacting with one another and performing certain tasks in an informal setting than by studying a subject in a formal environment. And the social factor is going to be the key for the future of e-learning.

Learning also has to move from being content driven to user driven. At the moment, too much emphasis is laid on content and design (Chatti, M.A., Jarke, M., Frosche-Wilke, D., 2007). However, the transition has to be made from an e-learning approach to me-learning approach, whereby every person has a personalized learning experience (Hodgins, 2005). In other words, e-learning has to move from Learning Management Systems to Personal Learning Environments, for the concept of a one-size-fits all is fast becoming redundant.

Personal Learning Environments are systems with a set of tools which fully support the learning process and are matched very closely to the needs of the learner (Milligan, 2006). It is when the learner will have greater control over what he wants to learn, how he wants to learn and when he wants to learn will the transition happen of the teacher from a learning enabler to a learning manager.

The future of e-learning also lies in breaking away from the centralized systems of knowledge and information and moving to a distributed model. Information in the tech-savvy age is broken into several units which can be distributed over dozens of domains (MacManus and Porter, 2005). Learners are interacting outside the formal environments of a classroom and boundaries are increasingly losing their meaning. It is a socially open approach which holds the future of e-learning; an approach where small pieces of information are joined together albeit loosely in a decentralized manner.

The future of e-learning is an environment which encourages knowledge pull than knowledge push. In methods of learning so far, knowledge is pushed down the

throat of the learners. However, the new approach of e-learning should give learners the freedom to pull the content they want according to their own personal requirements.

The future is also mobile

Thus far, e-learning has been delivered over desktops, their mobility being restricted best to laptops. However, with the advent of tablets, smart phones like iPhone and with developing nations taking to 3G, e-learning would increasingly shift to the mobile medium.

As of now, only 1% of the population in developing nations has access to high-speed mobile internet. However, the penetration is fast growing, and mobility of e-learning solutions is where the future lies.

Conclusion

The paper tracks the origin of learning and the shifts that have happened in the field. The paper also tracks Knowledge Management and Learning Management as two separate fields and how they are similar to one another. The two disciplines lack a dynamic approach to learning and that's where the future of e-learning lies. E-learning has to move away from centralized systems to a user-generated environment where the learners have greater control over how and what they want to learn. In this new future, the role of the teacher has to transform from a learning enabler to that of a co-coordinator and a learning manager.

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