LEARNING SOLUTIONS MAGAZINE

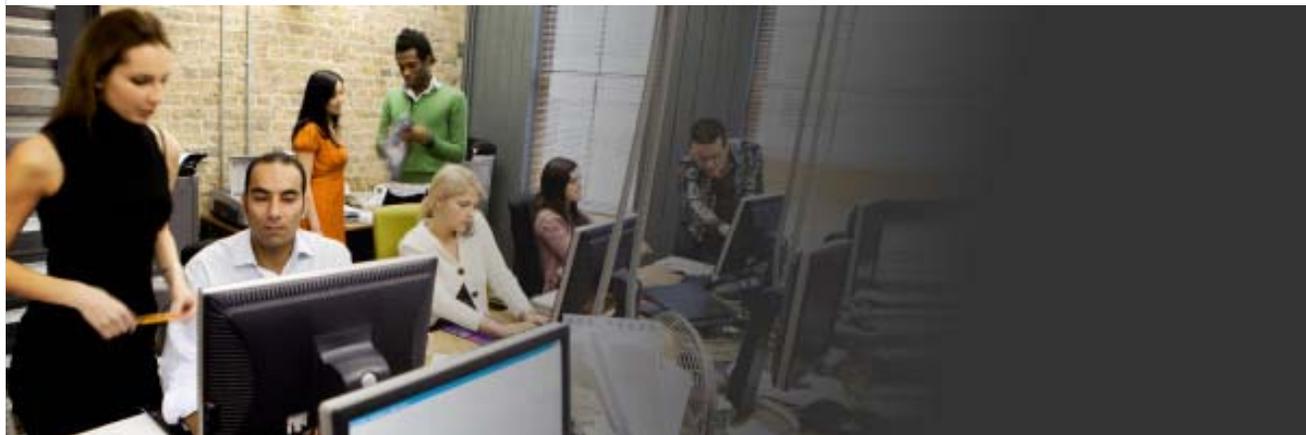Your Source for Learning Technology, Strategy, and News

Informalize Formal Learning: Smarter, Closer, Simpler, and More Appealing

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Our relationship with technology is changing the ways we live and work. We connect digitally with our mobile devices, social networking tools, and various computer devices more than ever before. We are constantly connected, and we must manage our relationship with technology differently than we managed it in the past. This presents some challenges for users and for educators, instructional designers, and others who design, create, and manage online instruction.

Implications for learners

New devices such as the iPhone and iPod have changed expectations of usability. Users expect a very low learning curve to perform their goals with a product. Products that present a steeper learning curve result in ever-greater levels of user frustration and apathy. Furthermore, users expect solutions to their problems

to be ever-more convenient and readily available. Blogs, wikis, social media sites and services such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, and others too numerous to list, have sparked user-created learning aids, tips, tricks, and workarounds.

Users have come to expect complex products to become more and more simple, linear, and easy to learn. The emergence of different Web media has made that possible.

Implications for educators

As educators we need to put ourselves in the learners' shoes and figure out ways to address their needs, because their relationship with, and expectations of, technology has changed.

Businesses now recognize both the challenges their products provide to users, as well as the ease with which they may deliver solutions via the Web. Extending beyond their own support systems and sites, many companies are reaching into social media destinations and providing their own measured, structured learning aids in the form of video, cheat sheets, online help and user forums.

These methods serve to provide users with quick and effective solutions to their problems and help them to rapidly become more successful with products, within hours or even within minutes. The "instantaneous" character of social media is undeniable and it is creating users who expect to become experts in a hurry and with no barriers to entry.

Benefits of informalizing learning

Formal learning content is good and relevant, and repurposing it brings many advantages. Informalizing formal learning content brings it closer to the learner and provides for more learning that is "accidental," or unplanned. Doing this can require changing the learning content in various ways. Putting it in places people visit on a daily basis, such as the sites and services named above, is one big, yet simple step.

Increased appeal to learners

Rich content delivery through social media sites is more appealing to the user in appearance and content. This approach also tends to present complex information in ways that invite students to learn in a casual environment. Users feel that they have more choice in the matter: when to learn, what to learn, and how to learn it. All of these factors are contributing to escalating growth rates of informal learning.

Draw learners into formal instruction

ELearning animated assets, for example quick product demonstrations, are ideal for posting to a site such as YouTube or Vimeo. Not only do these sorts of demonstrations provide concise, targeted training but they can also be teasers to draw people to more formal learning, such as a full training course, of which

the demonstration is just a part.

Obtain information about learners

One of the other key benefits of providing these short eLearning assets online is the wealth of information that is collected about the users. This is data that you can access and use.

For instance, YouTube and Facebook offer businesses demographic information about their users, as well as their daily and monthly activity trends. The more effective and relevant your information, the more traffic your Facebook page or YouTube channel receives. In this way, you establish an immediate and symbiotic relationship. Users get the most relevant and up-to-date training materials. The educator receives valuable information about the users, in addition to receiving direct feedback from users about content.

Simplified format

Public social media sites and services provide another benefit that large businesses appreciate – a simplified format. Every Facebook page and YouTube channel offers the same general layout. This has proven to be comforting and predictable to users, who quickly learn how to navigate every channel or page as well as how to expand, collapse, or increase quality of content, such as videos. The user is truly in control. They can build their own custom playlists, tag audio and video favorites, and subscribe to users and channels based on their own needs for information.

When the decision is between searching the multiple layers of a corporate Website, or tuning in to your own customized list of videos, the decision isn't a difficult one. As users flock to public media sites to reap the benefits, educators are not far behind.

Provide advance organizers and prerequisite knowledge

Users gain valuable and free information from online media and services. At the same time, instructors gain a means to gather users into formal classes where they can truly engage the product and learn in an in-depth manner. Users can go from learning general or typical product objectives online to the classroom where the objectives become more complex and require more interaction between student and instructor. In the classroom, students can ask specific questions about how to implement our products in their businesses to help them achieve their personal business goals.

Establish learner-to-educator-and-topic links

As educators "recruit" users through social media sites, the educators can become closer to their users. Many sites and services offer more than just multimedia; they are a way to capture users' attention and whet their appetite for information. Users receive links and paths back to more formal training, which often contains a larger sampling of the media which users have seen free online. In this way, educators persuade users to trust their education materials and encourage them to pursue formal training.

Our company is now posting instructional videos that present both general product usage and specific product scenarios on YouTube. These videos and their objectives are included in and elaborated on as part of the formal training.

For example, our in-house course on Enterprise Architecture is a demonstration showing how to set up, configure and navigate the interface. This instructor-led course presents students with a hands-on lab where they can perform what they see in the demonstration, as well as learn how to apply it to their specific business environment after leaving training. After their formal training is complete, the videos can serve as reference material on the job. Our learners, who often request additional videos after completing the formal classroom training, many times confirmed the value of videos as reference tools.

Reposition learning closer to the moment of need

Another easy way to informalize formal learning content is to reposition it closer to a product rather than have it stand alone. It is possible to convert portions of a Web-based eLearning course to "digital cheat sheets" and to incorporate these in product documentation, or embed them into the product itself. These can also serve as teasers to draw people back for additional or advanced formal training.

Why bother?

You may be asking, "What then is the difference between informal and formal learning content?" The main difference is that informalized learning is simple, concise, rich, and easy to find and understand. It starts many users down the path of learning. Once their learning process has begun, users may choose to take advantage of more formal learning media.

We are all learning at a much more rapid rate than before. Learning new concepts and adding new skills, on what sometimes seems like a weekly or monthly basis, is coming to be the norm in an increasingly globalized economic order. The world is full of ever-growing complexity, while at the same time the desire for simplicity drives much behavior. Learning is no exception. Engaging users simply, directly and quickly via informal methods is key to recruiting them into more in-depth and traditional learning formats.

Topics Covered

Design Strategies, Instructional Design, Management, Mobile Learning, Social Media

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