Making social learning work at work is not trivial, but quite possible if you understand the bigger picture. Harold Jarche explains.

A FRAMEWORK FOR
SOCIAL LEARNING IN THE ENTERPRISE

Why is social learning important for today's enterprise?

George Siemens has succinctly explained the importance of social learning in the context of today's workplace:

There is a growing demand for the ability to connect to others. It is with each other that we can make sense, and this is social. Organisations, in order to function, need to encourage social exchanges and social learning due to faster rates of business and technological changes. Social experience is adaptive by nature and a social learning mindset enables better feedback on environmental changes back to the organisation.

The internet has fundamentally changed how we communicate on a scale as large as the printing press or the advent of written language. Charles Jennings explains why we need to move away from a focus on knowledge transfer and acquisition, an approach rooted in Plato's academy:

We are moving to the world of the sons of Socrates, where dialogue and guidance are key competencies. It is a world where the capability to find information and turn it into knowledge at the point-of-need provides the key competitive advantage, where knowing the right people to ask the right questions of is more likely to lead to success than any amount of internally-held knowledge and skill.

Our relationship with knowledge is changing as our work becomes more intangible and complex. Notice how most value in today's marketplace is intangible, with Google's multi-billion dollar valuation an example of value in non-tangible processes that could be deflated with the development of a better search algorithm. Non-physical assets comprise about 80 percent of the value of Standard & Poor's 500 US companies in leading industries.

FROM REPLACEABLE HUMAN RESOURCES TO DYNAMIC SOCIAL GROUPS

The manner in which we prepare people for work is based on the Taylorist perspective that there is only one way to do a job and that the person doing the work needs to conform to job requirements (F.W. Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management, 1911). Individual training, the core of corporate learning and development, is based on the premise that jobs are constant and those who fill them are interchangeable.

However, when you look at the modern organisation, it is moving to a model of constant change, whether through mergers and acquisitions or as quick-start web-enabled networks. For the human resources department, the question becomes one of preparing people for jobs that don't even exist. For example, the role of online community manager, a fast-growing field today, barely existed five years ago. Individual training for job preparation requires a stable work environment, a luxury no one has any more.

A collective, social learning approach, on the other hand, takes the perspective that learning and work happen as groups and how the group is connected (the network) is more important than any individual node within it.

MIT's Peter Senge has made some important clarifications on terms we often use in looking at work, job classifications and training to support them.

Knowledge: the capacity for effective action. 'Know how' is the only aspect of knowledge that really matters in life.

Practitioner: someone who is accountable for producing results.

Learning may be an individual activity but if it remains within the individual it is of no value whatsoever to the organisation. Acting on knowledge, as a practitioner (work performance) is all that matters. So why are organisations in the individual learning (training) business anyway? Individuals should be directing their own learning. Organisations should focus on results.

Individual learning in organisations is basically irrelevant because work is almost never done by one person. All organisational value is created by teams and networks. Furthermore, learning may be generated in teams but even this type of knowledge comes and goes. Learning really spreads through social networks. Social networks are the primary conduit for effective organisational performance. Blocking, or circumventing, social networks slows learning, reduces effectiveness and may in the end kill the organisation.

Social learning is how groups work and share knowledge to become better practitioners. Organisations should focus on enabling practitioners to produce results by supporting learning through social networks. The rest is just window dressing. Over a century ago, Charles Darwin helped us understand the importance of adaptation and the concept that those who survive are the ones who most accurately perceive their environment and successfully adapt to it. Cooperating in networks can increase our ability to perceive what is happening.

MAKING SOCIAL LEARNING WORK

Jon Husband's working definition of 'Wirearchy' is 'a dynamic two-way flow of power and authority, based on knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results, enabled by interconnected people and technology'. We are seeing increasing examples of this on the edges of the modern enterprise. World Blu's annual listing of our most democratic workplaces continues to grow and gain attention.

Google's dedicated time-off for private projects, given to its engineers, promotes non-directed learning and collaboration. Zappos directly engages with its customers on Twitter, fostering higher levels of two-way trust. As customers, suppliers and competitors become more networked, being more wirearchical will be a business imperative.

Wirearchies inherently require trust, and trusted relationships are powerful allies in getting things done in organisations. Trust is also an essential component of social learning. Just because we have the technical networks does not mean that learning will automatically happen. Communications without trust are just noise, not accepted and never internalised by the recipients. Here are some ways to make social learning work in the enterprise:

• Think and act at a macro level (what to do) and leave the micro (how to do it) to each worker or team. The little stuff is changing too fast.

• Engage with web media and understand how they work. The web is too important to be left to the information technology department, communications staff or outside vendors.

• Use social media to make work easier or more effective. Use them to solve problems for work teams and groups.

• Make traditional management obsolete. Teach people how to fish and move on to the next challenge. If the organisation is maintaining a steady state then it has failed to evolve with the environment.

ANALYSING SOCIAL LEARNING

Most 20th century workplaces had two types of learning: formal learning through training and informal learning (about 80% according to research) which just happened by accident or the result of observation, conversation and time in the job.

This focus on formal training, for skills and knowledge, missed out on our social nature. Business has always been social, especially at the higher levels of management and with ubiquitous access to networks; this is once again part of everyone's work. In the global village, we are all interconnected.

In The Working Smarter Fieldbook, Jane Hart has shown how social media can be used for workplace learning and that instead of just training there are five types of learning that should be supported by the organisation.

Traditional training (FSL) is only one of the five types. Three of these (IOL, GDL, PDF) require self-direction, and that is the essence of social learning: becoming self-directed learners and workers, all within a two-way flow of power and authority.

Social and informal learning are not just feel-good notions, but have a real impact on an increasingly intangible business environment.

Jay Cross has looked at the ways that social learning is becoming real and developed this table to highlight some of the workplace changes he is observing:

SOCIAL LEARNING GETS REAL	
Past	**Future**
Subject matter experts	Subject matter networks
Need to know	Need to share
Curriculum	Competency
Clockwork, predictable	Complexity, surprising
Stocks	Flow
Clock time	Time-to-accomplishment
Worker-centric	Team-centric

Jay Cross November 2009

The changes in becoming a networked workplace can be further analysed using Jane Hart's five ways of using social media for learning in the organisation.

ASL – Accidental & Serendipitous Learning: from Stocks to Flow

Learning is conversation and online conversations are an essential component of online learning. Online communication can be divided into Stocks (information that is archived and organised for reference and

retrieval) and Flows (timely and engaging conversations between people, including voice or written communications). Blogs allow flow and micro-blogs, like Twitter, enable great flow due to the constraint of 140 characters.

The web enables connections, or constant flow, as well as instant access to information, or infinite stock. Stock on the internet is everywhere and the challenge is to make sense of it through flows of conversation. It is no longer enough to have the book, manual or information, but one must be able to use it in changing contexts. Because of this connectivity, the web is an environment more suited to just-in-time learning than the outdated course model.

ASL is shifting from looking at knowledge as the collection of bits and engaging in the learning flows around us, without any conscious plan. We are working and learning in networks and the only thing a network can do is share.

Implementing social learning:

	Undirected	Self-directed	Directed
Organisational		IOL	
Group		GDL	
Individual	ASL	PDL	FSL

PDL – Personal Directed Learning: from Predictable to Surprising

Complexity, or maybe our appreciation of it, has rendered the world unpredictable, so the orientation of learning is shifting from past (efficiency, best practice) to future (creative response, innovation). Organising our own learning is necessary for creative work. Workplace learning is morphing from blocks of training followed by working to a merger of work and learning: they are becoming the same thing. Change is continuous, so learning must be continuous. Developing emergent practices, a necessity when there are no best practices in our changing work environments, requires constant personal directed learning.

In complex environments it no longer works to sit back and see what will happen. By the time we realise what's happening, it will be too late to take action. Accepting surprise is similar to the delight an artist may have on completion of a work and only then see an emergent quality not consciously understood during the process of its creation.

GDL – Group Directed Learning: from Worker Centric to Team Centric

As mentioned earlier, the real work in organisations is done by groups. This means

that sending individuals on a training course and then re-integrating to their work group is relatively useless. With work and learning merging in the network, groups need to find ways that support each member's learning, while engaged in tasks and projects. Tools that can capture activities and keep group members focused should be used to reinforce group learning.

Social learning requires a certain amount of effort to maintain regular contact and association with our colleagues. Developing social learning practices, like keeping a work journal, may be an effort at first but later it's just part of the work process. Bloggers have learned how powerful a learning medium they have only after blogging for an extended period. With the increased use of distributed work groups, it is even more important to foster social learning and web media are the current tools at hand.

IOL – Intra-Organisational Learning: from Subject Matter Experts to Subject Matter Networks

Mark Oehlert recently coined the term Subject Matter Networks as a new way of finding organisational knowledge. Instead of looking for subject matter experts from which to design training, we should extend knowledge gathering to the entire network of subject-matter expertise. Once again, the emphasis is no longer on the individual node but on the network. Good networks make for effective organisations.

Networked communities are better structures in dealing with complexity, when emerging practices need to be continuously developed and loose ties can help facilitate fast feedback loops without hierarchical intervention. Collaborative groups are better at making decisions and getting things done. The constraints of the group help to achieve defined goals.

Building capabilities from serendipitous to personally-directed and then group-directed learning help to create strong networks for intra-organisational learning. This is exceptionally important because the emerging knowledge-intensive and creative workplace has these attributes:

• Simple work will be automated.

• Complicated work will go to the lowest bidder, as processes & procedures become more defined and job aids more powerful (eg mortgage applications).

• Complex work requires creativity and is where the value of the post-industrial organisation lies.

• Dealing with chaos sometimes has be confronted and this requires creativity as well as a sense of adventure to try novel approaches.

FSL – Formal Structured Learning: from Curriculum to Competency

There remains a need for training in the networked workplace but it must move away from a content delivery approach. The content will be out of date before the training is 'delivered' (another outdated term).

Work competencies will still need to be developed through practice and appropriate feedback (what training does well) but that practice will have to be directly relevant to the individual or group (group training is an area of immense potential growth).

Jointly defining work competence with input from individuals, groups and subject matter networks should become the new analysis process, enabled by social media. Think of it as social ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, evaluation) for the complex workplace.

THE RESULTS OF CONNECTING

Our workplaces are becoming interconnected because technology has enabled communication networks on a worldwide scale. This means that systemic changes are sensed almost immediately. Reaction times and feedback loops have to get faster and more effective. We need to know who to ask for advice right now but that requires a level of trust and trusted relationships take time to nurture.

Our default action is to turn to our friends and trusted colleagues: those people with whom we've shared experiences. Therefore, we need to share more of our work experiences in order to grow those trusted networks. This is social learning and it is critical for networked organisational effectiveness.

Our current models for managing people, training and knowledge-sharing are insufficient for a workplace that demands emergent practices just to keep up. Formal training has only ever addressed 20% of workplace learning and this was acceptable when the work environment was merely complicated. Knowledge workers today need

Networked communities are better structures in dealing with complexity, when emerging practices need to be continuously developed and loose ties can help facilitate fast feedback loops without hierarchical intervention.

Figure 1

to connect with others to co-solve problems. Sharing tacit knowledge through conversations is an essential component of knowledge work. Social media enable adaptation, and the development of emergent practices, through conversations.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

• After the January 2010 Learning Technologies conference, it was reported that many attendees are only just starting to shift to delivering some e-Learning. Social and informal learning are not on their radar.

• Lots of training directors have yet to grasp the concepts of learning through collaboration, the power of social networks, and less is more. Those who attend Learning Technologies are the leading edge. If they are just beginning the journey away from the classroom, imagine what things are like for those who don't attend!

• Northern America is not necessarily any different. 'New data on e-learning usage do not signal the death of the classroom. And despite some of the buzz, the direction of e-learning has not shifted much over the past several years,' report Allison Rossett and James Marshall in an article in T+D magazine.

• Reading between the lines, I suspect that many organisations are accustomed to progressing one step at a time. They expect gradual, comfortable change. One step a year seems a break-neck pace.

• Incrementalism is the worst enemy of innovation. We're playing a new game now and it's fruitless to follow yesterday's rules.

Business is dancing to an ever-faster beat. Cycle times for product design, manufacturing, and deployment are shorter and shorter. The pace of change itself is picking up. The future is unpredictable. Our old models of training can no longer keep up. They're racing
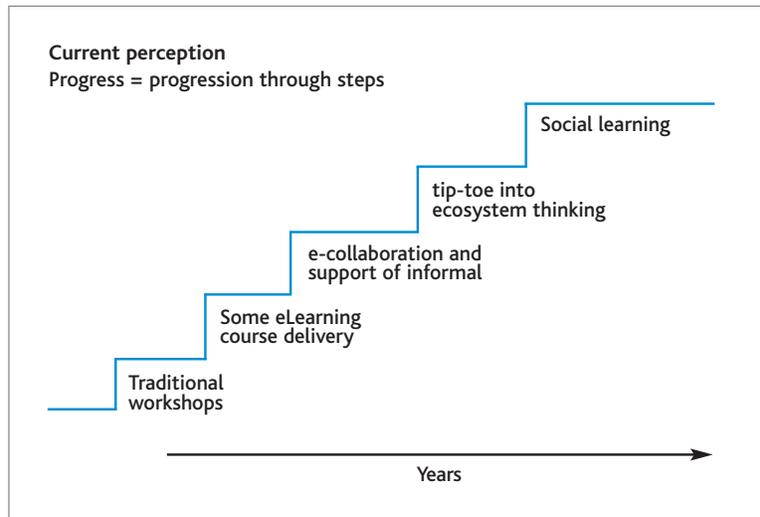
along so fast that the wheels are falling off.

As the environment becomes more complex, linear approaches are giving way to emergent behaviour. People take different paths to learn what they need to do. Our task is to prepare them for things we don't even see coming!

The fundamental shift toward informal learning is taking place on internet time. Instead of plodding along step by step, Internet Time Alliance is encouraging organisations to leap over the intervening steps and adopt social and informal learning patterns immediately.

Our model looks like this (Figure 2):

In 2008, India had only 3.3 fixed telephone lines per 100 and Nigeria 0.9 lines per 100 inhabitants. Rather than planting telephone poles and stringing copper wire, developing countries are going straight to mobile.

Fixed telephone infrastructure is costly to set up, while wireless technology is cheap to deploy.

Courses, delivered in-person or online, are the phone poles and copper wires of learning technology.

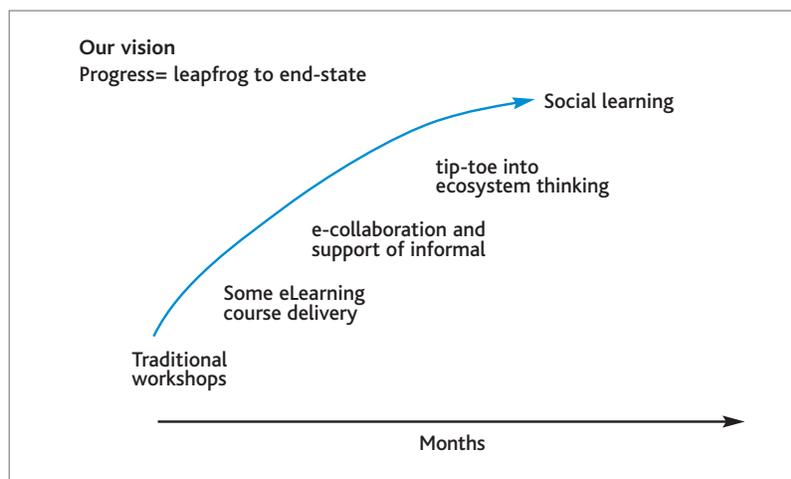Are you laying land lines or going directly to wireless?

Figure 2

Our proposal is analogous to implementing telephone service in developing countries. In much of the developing world, fixed telephone infrastructure is poor.