

Beyond blended learning! Undiscovered potentials for e-learning in organizational learning

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Summary

The basic question raised in this article is: Is pure e-learning able to support learning in organizations better today than 4-5 years ago? Based on two case studies on blended learning courses for company training, the article discusses whether use of new Web 2.0 and social software tools may help overcome previous limitations of e-learning.

Lately the previous confidence in e-learning has declined. An OECD report from 2005 states that e-learning has been an administrative success, but not as far as learning itself is concerned. In 2003 Commissionaire Reding gave a speech, in which she strongly promoted blended learning as the way forward towards a learner-centric approach to learning with a more or less hidden criticism toward e-learning for not delivering the goods.

The courses investigated here develop a new kind of management learning through a combination of traditional face-to-face workshops and e-learning. Thus in favour of a blended learning concept, at the same time, the further analysis presented in this article identifies three potentials related to the e-learning dimension:

- 1) Integration of e-learning into the daily practice of employees,
- 2) Focus on communication and collaboration within organizations, and
- 3) Provision of external human resources to the organization.

These potentials take e-learning beyond the traditional just-in-time and just-in-place organizational e-learning. Learning is not seen as isolated events taking place parallel to an organization's practice, but rather as an integrated part of the organizational structure.

Along the lines indicated by the recent development of Web 2.0 and social software, e-learning is moving beyond utilization of the internet for knowledge management, as a store of information, or for course management. Instead, the internet may be used for participation, communication, sharing and collaboration.

Within organizations aspiring to become development organisations, these new e-learning tools offer a series of opportunities for creating informal learning environments in which learning and development are integrated parts of a continuous organizational practice. An ubiquitous integration of e-learning in organizational development moves away from a blended learning concept and towards pure e-learning supported by online tools for communication and collaboration within the organization.

Keywords: blended, learning, e-learning, organizational learning, social software

At the opening of the *Learntec Forum* in Karlsruhe on February 4, 2003 Commissionaire Reding gave a speech, in which she strongly promoted blended learning as the way forward towards a learner-centric approach to learning:

“Modern e-learning solutions now recognise the importance of learning as a social process and offer possibilities for collaboration with other learners, for interaction with the learning content and for guidance from teachers, trainers and tutors. The learner-centric approaches have put the learner back in command, with a wealth of learning resources at their fingertips.

Teachers and trainers once more play a central role, using virtual and traditional face-to-face interaction with their students in a “blended” approach. An approach in which they are no longer seen simply as consumers of pre-determined e-learning content, but as editors, authors and contributors to a contextualised learning scenario.”(Reding, 2003)

In the light of what has happened in the early years of this decade to most of the many e-universities and virtual learning initiatives started in the late 1990’ies (Bang, 2006), Commissionaire Reding’s statement is fully understandable and furthermore in accordance with an OECD report from 2001:

“Technology alone does not deliver educational success. It only becomes valuable in education if learners and teachers can do something useful with it. (...) educational content and e-learning services (...) need to be tailored to local needs and cultures.” (OECD, 2001: 24-25)

To Reding blended learning seems to be the way to reinstall the teacher and tutor in a position, in which they take a shared responsibility with students for creating ‘a contextualised learning scenario’. By this she recognises that learning is not a simple transfer of knowledge from learning material to learner, but a construction of knowledge through planned learning activities and dialogue between learners and teacher/tutor and learners themselves.

The question to be discussed in this article, based on experiences from two blended learning courses for company training, is whether e-learning by incorporating new tools – the so called Web 2.0 – may overcome the previous limitations – or at least some of them. But first, we want to characterise the present state of e-learning and summarize the experiences from the two case studies.

The present state of e-learning

An OECD report from 2005 clearly states that e-learning has been an administrative success so far as most universities and colleges and many schools have installed learning management systems (LMS), but not as far as learning itself is concerned:

“e-learning has not really revolutionized learning and teaching to date. Far-reaching, novel ways of teaching and learning, facilitated by ICT, remain nascent or still to be invented. (...) The adoption of learning management systems (LMS) (...) appears to be one of the prominent features of e-learning development in the tertiary education worldwide. (...) The current immaturity of online learning is demonstrated by low adoption of content management systems (...). ICT has penetrated tertiary education, but has had more impact on administrative services (e.g. admissions, registration, fee payment, purchasing) than on the pedagogic fundamentals of the classroom.” (OECD, 2005:14-15)

Although problems for tertiary education and formal education shouldn’t necessarily be identical for less formalised learning in organizations, Broendsted & Elkjaer (2001) have found similar problems occurring in organizational learning:

“The discourse on organizational learning and how to support organizational learning within this field, however, seems to merely reflect learning as a process of acquiring, storing, applying, and distributing knowledge as if knowledge is a “thing” or a commodity. (...) The prevailing idea seems to be that IT-support may provide the organization with the capacity to search for, collect, acquire, and distribute knowledge as well as to create an electronic organizational memory. (...) The consequence is that learning is viewed solely as information and knowledge processing and not as social processes of human interaction and development.” (Broendsted & Elkjaer, 2001: 687).

The wording of the problem is slightly different – ‘pre-determined e-learning content’ vs. ‘knowledge [as] a “thing” or a commodity’ – but both Reding, OECD and Broendsted & Elkjaer reflect a constructive approach to learning or at least a critical attitude to the concept of learning through knowledge transfer – respectively: learning management and knowledge management.

In a report on vocational education and training (VET, 2004) a more balanced view on e-learning is expressed by acknowledging the fact that net-based communication (digital communication) is dominating society:

“e-Learning clearly has the potential to stimulate learning networks and new forms of training organization. The basic principle of good pedagogy remains that the design of the whole learning process (possible supported by e-learning) is the decisive factor for the learner’s success. Therefore, European countries’ e-learning related measures should not be limited to questions of hard- and software, but rather focus on the pedagogy and e-learning in work processes.” (VET, 2004: 17)

Here the potentials of e-learning are emphasised and, at the same time, the problems of e-learning are identified as a technology focus that has dominated the debate – and may we add: in order to reduce educational costs. In most areas the introduction of IT and technology in general has reduced cost of production, but it looks like this may not be the case within health care and education. When the Belgian teachers went on strike in the late 1980’ies they used a bon mot on their banners: If you think education is expensive, you should try ignorance! Similarly, could the current debate on e-learning and education in general be relieved from the implicit demand for cost reductions an enormous creative potential would be set free to make Europe the knowledge society of the world.

Organizational learning as blended learning – two cases

From 2004 to 2006, two management courses *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow* were organized as blended learning. Both projects were financially supported by the European Social Fond and the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.

The overarching purpose of the courses was to develop a new approach to learning in organizations and to develop new ways of teaching. The choice of a blended learning approach was motivated by the same conclusion that Reding expressed in the above quotation: “to put the learner back in command, with a wealth of learning resources at their fingertips”.

Blended learning was chosen as the pedagogical approach due to previous negative experiences with both purely workshop based and purely web-based courses. The experiences with courses purely based on face-to-face workshops were that they often lacked active participation in the periods between the workshops. Further, the participants found it difficult to relate the subject matter to their practice. On the other hand, experiences with purely web-based courses show that it is difficult to make participants active and to encourage collaboration in web-based environments.

Based on such experiences, both cases were attempts to create coherent and continuous courses, in which participants were active throughout the entire course – and not only at the face-to-face seminars.

The idea was to rethink traditional courses in terms of blended learning, and, thus, develop a new kind of management learning through a combination of traditional face-to-face workshops and e-learning. Furthermore, the two cases involved participants from different companies. The idea behind this was to establish networks between managers. Thus, the idea was also to use e-learning technologies with the purpose of teaching the participants to communicate, share knowledge, collaborate and solve problems using web-based tools.

Figure 1 shows an overview of the two courses. *Business Leader* ran for 5,5 months in 2004, and consisted of five workshops with e-learning in between. The workshops were distributed equally within the period with approximately one workshop each month. *Board of Tomorrow* ran for 12 months in 2005 and 2006. It also had five workshops, which meant that there were periods of two months between the workshops. The first course had 24 participants from three different companies, whereas the second course had 19 participants from five different companies.

Business Leader	Board of Tomorrow
<p>Course period: 6.8.2004 – 20.1.2005</p> <p>Budget: € 550.000</p> <p>Funding: The European Social Fond (€ 200.000), Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (€ 60.000), and private funding (€ 290.000)</p> <p>Project ownership: Kjaer Group</p> <p>Course organizers: KnowIT, and Ankerhus</p> <p>Topic: General management</p> <p>Workshops: 6.-8.9.2004, 4.-5.10.2004, 4.-5.11.2004, 15.-16.12.2004, 20.1.2005</p> <p>Participating companies: Kjaer Group, DCS Group, and Daloon</p> <p>Participants: Mid-level managers</p> <p>Number of participants: 24</p> <p>LMS: Customized system</p>	<p>Course period: 2.6.2005 – 2.6.2006</p> <p>Budget: € 515.000</p> <p>Funding: The European Social Fond (€ 235.000), Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (€ 45.000), and private funding (€ 235.000)</p> <p>Project ownership: Kjaer Group</p> <p>Course organizers: KnowIT, and Hildebrandt & Brandi</p> <p>Topic: Management, strategies and board work</p> <p>Workshops: 2.-3.6.2005, 1.-2.9.2005, 11.-12.1.2006, 19.-20.4.2006, 2.6.2006</p> <p>Participating companies: Kjaer Group, Clausen & Weber, Middelfart Savings Bank, Bowl Inn, and McDonald's</p> <p>Participants: Top management</p> <p>Number of participants: 19</p> <p>LMS: Moodle</p>

Figure 1. Overview of the two cases.

The participants in the courses were mid-level managers in *Business Leader* and top management in *Board of Tomorrow*. The *Business Leader* course was concerned with soft issues within general management such as human relations, and *Board of Tomorrow* was concerned with topics within management, strategies and board work.

The courses used a student-centred approach, which meant that participants were encouraged to influence their own learning. For instance, each participant sat up a “development contract” with himself or herself. The contract contained a description of certain areas in which the individual participant wanted to develop his or her competences as a manager. In both courses a pedagogical approach was applied in which practice of the participants was taken as a starting point. This meant

that assignments were related to the reality and practice of the participants. For instance, the participants in *Board of Tomorrow* worked with problems faced by a real board in a real company. At the end of the course, participants submitted a report on their work, which they presented at the last workshop. Further, the courses placed great emphasis on collaboration and discussion between participants within and across companies. The participants worked together in groups on assignments.

The workshops were used for teacher presentations and for discussions among the groups. The participants were given assignments, which they worked on during periods between workshops. During these periods, participants used a learning management system (LMS) to support their activities. The LMS provided participants access to news, messages, schedules for the workshops and materials such as papers, video clips and assignments. Furthermore, the LMS provided discussion forums and video conferencing, which was used by the participants to communicate and collaborate. Each team had their own discussion forum to support their work on assignments.

A closer examination of the cases first of all shows that participants felt that they could relate the course to their own practice. E-learning between the workshops meant that the participants were able to communicate, discuss and collaborate with other participants in direct relation to their daily work. This meant that issues and problems from their present day-to-day work were brought up in discussions between participants. For instance, assignments or themes for discussions were based on participants' specific practices. E-learning helped create a relation to participants' practice, which was an important pedagogical achievement with clear bearings for the future.

Furthermore, the LMS used in *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow* provided participants with a shared frame of reference. News, messages, etc. kept participants up to date with activities of the course. More importantly, however, the LMS also kept participants informed with the activities of other participants through communication within the discussion forums. For instance, everybody could see how other participants and other groups solved the assignments. In relation to this, the two cases revealed a third potential of the LMS: providing access to external human resources – e.g. teachers from workshops participated in discussions with participants and provided feedback to their assignments.

The LMS also made it possible for employees to communicate with external teachers and consultants at a distance.

E-learning as communication and collaboration within organizations

In a future perspective the most interesting experiences from the *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow* are the potentials within e-learning, which are revealed:

- 4) Integration of e-learning into the daily practice of employees,
- 5) Focus on communication and collaboration within organizations, and
- 6) Provision of external human resources to the organization.

First of all, the participants' discussions within the LMS in relation to their daily practice point towards a use of e-learning which is broader and more integrating than in isolated courses. In other words, there is a potential to bring (e-)learning into the organization by enabling employees to participate online as a part of their daily work. This means that the practice of the employees is not only the starting point, but also the *setting* for learning. From this perspective, the strength of e-learning is not that a course can take place parallel to a practice, but that it is related to and an integrated part of the practice.

Secondly, there is a potential in e-learning to encourage an increased interaction between employees. Increased transparency between the works of employees within an organization is supported. For instance, employees can exchange documents and share experiences and thoughts in relation to their collaborative work. This points towards an emphasis on e-learning tools which do not focus on course management, e.g. in forms of management of documents, assignments and tests. Instead, the key role for e-learning technologies becomes to provide tools for communication, exchange and collaboration.

The third potential is to bring in external consultants and teachers, who can participate in the organization by answering questions and by providing input and feedback within an online environment. This means that the “course” and the teachers can be moved to the practice area of the participants – and not the other way around as in face-to-face learning. Bringing teachers into the organization through online tools means that they can follow the work of the employees. Again, the potential of e-learning here is to provide tools for communication.

These potentials of e-learning take e-learning beyond the traditional course-based e-learning in which learning takes place in isolation from the organization. Similarly, it goes further than the blended approach developed in *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow*. Learning is not seen as isolated events taking place parallel to an organization’s practice, but rather as an integrated part of the organizational structure. Elkjaer (2003) has suggested creation of development organizations within organizations to promote learning. In development organizations employees are engaged in project work, where they work collaboratively on solving problems related to their practice:

“The purpose of a development organization is to create a setting for experimenting and learning. Concretely, in the development organization one could work with developing new products and services and new ways of organizing work, as well as with new forms of management and cooperation.” (Elkjaer, 2003: 492)

Based on our analysis of experiences from *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow* we could envisage that the companies providing employees (learners) went a step further to become development organizations making learning activities an integrated part of developmental processes within organizations. Through a continuously exchange of views and opinions, employees could work collaboratively on problem framing, problem solving and creative development of ideas in an open and flat structure of a knowledge generating organization. As the two case studies indicate, e-learning tools support increased communication and collaboration between employees. Further, these tools enable external teachers as consultants to participate in development processes.

An ubiquitous integration of e-learning in organizational development moves away from a blended learning concept and towards pure e-learning supported by online tools for communication and collaboration within the organization.

Undiscovered potentials e-learning: Web 2.0 and social software

Thus, the question arises: Can pure e-learning support learning in organizations better today than some years ago? Will history repeat itself and the same disasters of e-learning reoccur? Or are we able to point to new features and innovations that support our renewed confidence in e-learning?

Web 2.0 and social software are used as buzzwords to describe new web-based tools used for social interaction, participation, sharing and collaboration (Alexander, 2006). The concepts of Web 2.0 and social software cover a number of different tools such as weblogs, wikis, social bookmarking and RSS feeds.

Today, people from all over the world are using these technologies to publish their own thoughts to the rest of the world, to participate in communities and networks (MySpace, Blogger), for collaborative writing and user-generated content (Wikipedia), to share bookmarks (del.icio.us), to share and discuss photos (flickr.com), for video sharing (youtube.com), etc. Communities and networks are created and social interaction takes place between people who never meet face-to-face.

A common characteristic of people's use of these different tools is that the starting point is each individual's own interests in daily life. But, at the same time, the tools support participation in virtual communities and collaboration among participants. For instance, weblogs are personalized websites in which people express their personal thoughts, ideas, problems, etc. – and simultaneously, on the basis of individual weblogs, people form networks and engage in discussions and exchanges. Thus, such tools are able to form the basis of collaborative work as part of development activities.

Within organizations aspiring to become development organisations, these new e-learning tools offer a series of opportunities for creating informal learning environments in which learning and development are integrated parts of a continuous organizational practice. Employees become engaged in development activities as a part of their daily work and the organizational structure encourage communication and collaboration between employees. For instance, employees could be engaged in joint development of shared “knowledge” in the form of link collections or wikis. Furthermore, the increased transparency between employees, made possible by web-based technologies, can potentially support communication and collaboration between employees located in different offices in different countries.

Teachers are turned into coaches to be facilitators of learning processes rather than courses. In other words, the teachers should be able to construct and facilitate activities within a contextualized learning scenario. Further, teachers should participate in discussions and collaborative activities of the employees. Teachers may initiate discussions, they may give advice, they may answer questions, etc. but they may also give lectures recommending literature – all based on their insights into the needs of the employees in relation to their problems at hand.

Along the lines indicated by the recent development of Web 2.0 and social software, e-learning is moving beyond utilization of the internet for knowledge management, as a store of information, or for course management. Instead, the internet may be used for participation, communication and collaboration.

But this concept of e-learning is not cheap. Whereas, for instance, CD-ROM based individual training courses and small just-in-time web-based courses were relatively cheap, this approach is costly, because it requires participation from external teachers. Uses of standardized course materials are reduced, and, instead, learning environments are customized to the individual organization.

However, as demonstrated in *Business Leader* and *Board of Tomorrow*, e-learning technologies do not necessarily have to be the costly part. In the two courses fairly simple technologies were applied (including an open source LMS). The most expensive part of these course were the teachers.

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