Mobile, Social and Gamification in E-Learning - Why their success is not being fully utilized in Higher Education

By Craig Weiss

Learning in higher education is somewhat of a misnomer. While students are provided with the information related to that subject (s), the interaction, comprehension and synthesis is often not there.

Part of the reason or blame is tied directly to the higher education approach towards educating students. This approach – specifically classroom based with one person talking and others taking down the information – has been the same for the last few hundred years.

 Worldwide technology has evolved at a faster pace if a computer that once was 20 tons can now be utilized in a device you can wear on your hand.

The question then must be asked, has higher education failed at not only understanding the technology itself but also at utilizing it to attain levels of comprehension, retention and synthesis?

Of this opinion the answer is unquestionably yes.

In 1993, Jones International University went 100% online. It was the first fully accredited higher education institution to be on the Internet (as we know it with web pages).

The university used a format that in the e-learning industry is synchronous based learning. The key components of a synchronous based learning format/approach are:

- Similar to placing the classroom philosophy online
- Requires an instructor/professor to post content, materials, questions, etc.
- Requires an instructor/professor to respond to questions, follow up with comments, etc.
- Assumes that the instructor/professor can maintain and even respond in an appropriate and time effective manner
- Includes a discussion board/forums – this is a core component
- Ability to have groups, group discussions, text chat
- Real time live presentations or can be recorded for later distribution
- Includes a syllabus
- Follows a linear approach – similar to being in a classroom. You cannot move forward until the instructor/professor releases the information/materials/questions/etc.
- Students post questions, comments and other students are expected to follow suit
- Students submit assignments
- There may be timed assessments
- There are time deadlines for assignments, projects, etc. to be completed. Failure to meet that deadline will result negatively to the student

The challenge to this approach is that it goes directly against the entire premise of online learning when devised back in the nineties.

E-Learning's advantages over the classroom include the ability for the learner to learn at their pace, to go back and learn and re-learn as often as they want and as many times as they want, all learning styles can be met (based on course design and delivery), learners are not afraid to make mistakes. (Weiss, 2010)

In a recent study, 66% of faculty believed that learning outcomes in e-learning were inferior to classroom learning (Chow, 2014).

Perhaps the reason behind this has nothing to do per se with the premise of e-learning, rather the delivery mechanism of synchronous based learning, which is the overwhelmingly prominent approach to online learning in higher education.

Social

The power of social learning cannot be underestimated. However, it can be misconstrued. This is evident in several presumptions that many in higher education and in business mistakenly assume:

- People use Facebook-like style in LMSs will increase social interaction
- Discussion boards and forums are effective for social engagement
- E-Learning is more effective because of less social interaction (Kineo, 2014)

Perhaps what is missing in the equation and what is needed for increased social engagement is to change the mindset.

Among college students (18-24), Facebook has decreased to 88.3% (McDermott, 2014), while Instagram, Snapchat and Vine, increased (McDermott).

What do all these social media sites have in common?

1. None are effectively being used in higher education online learning (Weiss, 2014)
2. Mobile delivery
3. Engagement

Instagram enables individuals to take photos or videos, upload and then share them with others. Vine offers the ability to upload and share videos with others. Snapchat is taking a photo or shooting a video, adding a caption and then sharing.

Mobile

 About 1.3 billion smartphones were delivered in 2014 (Danova, 2015). For tablets, 233 million (Danova, 2015).

E-Learning vendors have been slow to adopt on/off synch capability in mobile (Weiss, 2014), despite data showing among consumers, Wi-Fi usage is higher than cell usage. (Danova, 2014).

Phablets (devices slightly larger than a typical smartphone, but not as large as a tablet) are seeing higher engagement. (Smith 2014)

Gamification

Gamification has the potential to be an important component in online learning. However, often, the term itself is misunderstood, due to vagueness.

While gamification is not a game in of itself, it is true that it is a combination of game elements and game mechanics. (Dominguez, A. & Sanenz-de-Navarrete, J. & de-Marcos, L.& Fernandez-Sanz, L. & Pages, C. & Martinez-Herrariz, J-J.)

The vagueness though is tied to game elements and game mechanics as it relates to gamification in the e-learning industry.

Gamification in e-learning utilizes the following elements (Weiss, 2014)

- Leaderboard
- Points
- Badges

The question that should be asked is whether these components are game elements and equally game mechanics?

The answer is yes. However, the assumption that gamification increases user engagement, often cited by consumers, is murky.

It is my belief that the key to gamification is directly tied to personality (A or B), motivation and final objectives.

If a student is told that they win an expensive car, and they need only to complete three courses within six months, there is a high probability those courses will be completed.

Does this then constitute increased user engagement? The answer is yes, but does this user engagement represent an increase is comprehension? I do not believe so.

What it indicates is more of a Pavlov approach. The taking and completion of the course in a time frame is due to the intrinsic value of the reward to the student.

If I as a student want that expensive car, I will complete the course. If I as the student, does not want nor care about the car, I may not complete the course.

What if though, instead of focusing on user engagement, the focus is on the course content and in a way engaging, interactive and beneficial to the student? What if the design utilizes gaming elements so the student wants to take the course, because of its material, rather than just its points?

What if the course is designed in such a way, perhaps via game templates, whereas learning is truly learning, but done in such a fan and useful way, that attaining those points, is not only a reward, but a gain too?

Conclusion

An initial look of each of the four areas, would be that social, gamification and mobile as a combination would not increase or decrease its usefulness.

Taken as each component that may be true. However, with the change of learning delivery in higher education, not necessarily so.

Let's look at the facts:

- College students are using Instagram, Vine and Snapchat at a high rate
- Smartphones on a worldwide basis are increasing, Phablets are too
- Gamification if utilized correctly can work in an effective manner
- Synchronous based learning is ineffective (Weiss, 2013)

What is missing in today's higher education learning and for that matter, in LMSs for higher education?

- Effective gamification tools – A recent survey conducted by Craig Weiss (2014) found that respondents wanted a built-in badge library (LMS), game templates (LMS) and rewards for their points (LMS)
- Not one higher education specific LMS enabled students to upload video and photos from their mobile device directly into the system (Weiss, 2014)
- Smartphones can be an effective tool for students if used correctly instead of focusing on the ability to take courses via a smartphone use it for higher engagement
- Engagement and interactivity in course design
- Utilizing the social media interactions via mobile devices and apps

To make online learning in higher education more effective it must incorporate four elements I believe it missing in today's e-learning for academia.

Tie gaming elements and mechanics to mobile devices, specifically smartphones and phablets. Increase the benefits of gamification through effective course design that is engaging, interactive and provides a real world scenario rather than theory.

Embrace Instagram, Vine and Snapchat as tools to engage students, rather than stick to discussion boards and forums as social delivery.

Pull down the synchronous delivery mechanism and utilize asynchronous methods. And last, move forward with learning technologies, rather than sit back and stick with outdated approaches that no longer apply in today's online learning world.

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