

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Baby steps in Web 2.0 education

Colleges are using social media to enhance education. Consider what that might mean for the workforce of the future

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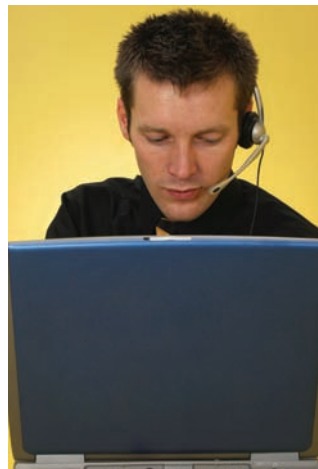
about the author

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A lot has happened to the business of knowledge sharing since intranets and portals gave way to webinars, flash demos and animated-to-death PowerPoint slides. Sooner or later a new flavor arrives to give a temporary fillip to information distribution.

But no matter what it involves, any method that borders on a “push” technique, or that people feel is too technical, will find it hard to sustain a loyal audience. That’s why simple approaches such as YouTube videos and podcasts have taken off, and why many instructors at colleges and universities are tapping into these and other technologies. These tools have low barriers to entry—they’re often free—are highly collaborative and not too “tech-y,” and they seem to get students all fired up. Looking ahead, they could give business communicators a clue as to what motivates the workforce of the future.

If you think that only uber-geeks use Twitter and wikis, and hover around in Second Life, consider what Alan Lew, a pro-



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fessor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, is using to communicate with his students. He teaches sophomore- and junior-level courses in world and U.S. geography, tourism planning, and world tourism, and he uses something called Innertoob (www.innertoob.com) for podcasts and a Twitter-like service called Utterz.com for microblogging. “Students tell me they understand the material best when they have access to both audio and text versions of my podcasts,” he says.

Innertoob is a web-based service that enables someone to upload an audio or video file and allow listeners to participate

by posting comments directly onto the audio or video. They can pause the narrative or video and attach “timeposts” such as links and comments, effectively enhancing the content. Lew thinks of it as the audio equivalent of Twitter (a phone-based service that posts text messages to a web site), because it creates a thread of commentary on particular topics. As for Utterz, think of it as a multimedia blog community built around cell phone users. Anyone with a cell phone can register and contribute content, which could be a mash-up of posts using voice, video, digital pictures and text—all created and uploaded from a phone.

Lew is not a lone ranger in this area. The University of California at Berkeley is approaching knowledge sharing using Web 2.0 tools from the ground up, and has set up an OpenCast Community to develop a way to capture, process and distribute educational podcasts. A number of institutions, including Cambridge, Oxford, Princeton, Australian National University, ETH Zurich and Columbia, have expressed interest in it.

Digital thought leadership

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has opened to teachers and students 1,800 courses captured in video, audio clips, animation or lecture notes. The lectures play on RealVideo. Many are translated into Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and Thai, and can be pulled in through an RSS reader. MIT reports that its OpenCourseWare site receives an average of 1 million visits a month; about another half-million visits are to access translations.

For a global organization intent on improving its thought-leadership profile, this trend is encouraging, and worth following. Because the world is better connected today, hidden markets and silent influencers who hunger for content will seek it out. MIT's site gets 61 percent of its traffic from non-U.S. audiences, 22 percent from East Asia.

At the University of Mary Washington in Virginia, professor Gardner Campbell uses collaborative tools to encourage students to explore their imaginations. Campbell, who teaches literature, new-media studies and writing, talks of a blogging initiative tapping into "digital imagination" to take a fresh approach to knowledge sharing. Knowledge in a digital realm becomes a "persistent resource" once it is created in, and made accessible through, social media. In online marketing, this is

referred to as the "long tail" that accounts for extraordinary business gains long after the product or service has been advertised.

E-learning meets social media

The concept of distance or e-learning and online degrees has been around for some time. But what's interesting is how e-learning has gotten into the business of teaching new media, using new media. At News University (www.newsu.org), a project of the Poynter Institute, there are more than 50,000 registered students and faculty from 175 countries. Courses are taught entirely online, and cover the staple J-school fare: reporting; editing; multimedia; ethics; and visual, broadcast and online journalism.

More emblematic of this trend is what one professor at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, did last year. Alexandra Juhasz, a professor of media studies, began a college-level class called "Learning from YouTube." The courses about YouTube were taped and uploaded to YouTube! Students who wanted to attend had to log into YouTube, watch the videos and post comments, and were encouraged to make similar video posts for class participation. We know of many organizations that upload corporate videos to YouTube, but few think about the value of using it for knowledge sharing.

Another advocate of new media in education is Barbara Ganley, a lecturer in English and the writing program at Middlebury College in Vermont. In 2007, she decided to give her students "a chance to explore hypertext creative nonfiction, integrating image and sound in their writing, and to play around with blogging and digital storytelling." What did she use? Twitter, the micro-blogging platform used on mobile phones. She believes Twitter creates an "asynchronous, forced concision" in collaborative writing.

When we invest in the next iteration of communication strategies, how might we factor in the tools and techniques that tap into the imagination of our future workforce? In the past five years, blogs have certainly done a lot of heavy lifting. There are great examples in organizations of how a decentralized workforce has become more inspired, collaborative and engaged.

But the age of engagement is still in its infancy. Let's just say the cute, cooing infant is still in diapers (translated: needs tech support) and consuming pureed food (translated: attending Social Media 101 sessions). But soon that infant is going to have a mind of its own, make huge demands of our time, and pick its own content off the digital bookshelf.

Let's create the access points to the knowledge we hope to share with this audience, now. ●

learn more

MIT OpenCourseWare

<http://ocw.mit.edu>

Jon Udell's interview with Gardner Campbell (podcast)

<http://itc.conversationsnetwork.org/shows/detail3451.html>

Pitzer College YouTube class on YouTube

www.youtube.com/MediaPraxisme

"Another Educational Use for Twitter" (Christopher D. Sessums' blog)

<http://eduspaces.net/csessums/weblog>