

Revolutionary learning



Insight introduces the first of a series of features put together by Nelson Croom, the IRRV's new distance learning provider. This month, co-founder Alan Nelson asks, can revenues and benefits officers lead the way?

➔ Alan Nelson is the co-founder and Managing Director of Nelson Croom, the Institute's e-Learning partner for the Distance Learning and Euclidian Online Training suite of programmes

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The work we do at Nelson Croom has always been about understanding the needs of learners and thinking through how we can make it as convenient and simple as possible for them to stay up-to-date with developments in their subject areas.

Over the years, this has set us at odds with many e-learning companies who tend to focus on ways of teaching remotely rather than on how they can facilitate learning. But our work with groups of specialised professionals (as diverse as accountants and dentists, optometrists and pensions managers) has taught us not to make assumptions about what people want or need to learn, or how they would like to do so.

Nowhere could this be truer than in the world of benefits and revenues, with its bewildering array of regulations, and updates being issued on a daily basis. The Euclidian suite of learning resources, which has been built in partnership with the IRRV, is a good example. Every learner accesses Euclidian in a different way, looking for different things and our job is to make it easy for them to find what they are looking for and, when they do, to help them learn about it as quickly and effectively as possible.

For 10 years now, Nelson Croom has been preaching about personalised professional development, but events are now taking place that will accelerate the pace of change and will put learners in charge of their own development, once and for all. That change is Web 2.0.

You may have heard the term Web 2.0 and you will most likely have used some of its best-known sites. Some people dismiss it as just a marketing phrase, but I think it's a useful way of describing a whole host of new uses for the web. While the first is a one-to-many relationship, the second is a many-to-many relationship. I find this distinction useful:

◆ Web 1.0 is where content providers publish their content for people to consume; and

◆ Web 2.0 is where everyone can share their content with everyone else.

In case you are a bit at sea with these new terms being bandied around, there is a glossary to the right.

So what has all this got to do with learning? I think the answer is that it depends on what you are trying to achieve. Let's look at two extremes:

Web 2.0 in distance learning

Where we are creating study materials that enable students to work towards an exam, as with the IRRV distance learning resources that were launched recently, the new Web 2.0 tools are a great way of adding richness to the learning experience. The social interaction is a gloss that maintains students' interest and reduces their sense of isolation.

Web 2.0 in professional development

These tools really come into their own when the aim is professional development. Who better to answer your question about implementing a new circular than other benefits officers? Our IT Director has been

GLOSSARY

BLOG

'Blog' is an abbreviation of 'web log'. It is typically either a commentary on current events or a personal online diary. Readers can leave comments in an interactive format so that some blogs become the focal point for a community. The IRRV President's blog is an example (irrvpresident.blogspot.com).

WIKI

A 'wiki' is a page or collection of web pages designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using simplified 'markup language'. 'Wikis' are often used to create collaborative websites and power community website. Wikipedia is a good example of this (www.wikipedia.org).

PODCASTING

A podcast is a series of audio or video digital-media files which you can subscribe to over the internet. It can be syndicated, subscribed to and downloaded automatically when new content is added. The BBC podcast is a good example of this (www.bbc.co.uk).

doing this for years, logging onto the forums to find the answer to tricky technical queries. He didn't call it Web 2.0, but that's what it was. Rather than thinking of learning in terms of courses that people can go on, we should instead be thinking in terms of building a "community of practice", a repository of the best practice in the profession, kept up-to-date and mediated by the community itself.

For the time being at least, with both extremes, the content remains central. Studying for a formal qualification would be pretty scary if you had to study purely by interacting with others. The syllabus provides the spine of your study and the dialogue with other students brings it to life.

In professional development, the dialogue may be more prominent but the content still needs to be there to stimulate the debate. Some days you just need a quick answer to your question and don't have time to share!

In some cases Web 2.0 will merely provide a new set of tools for learning and development professionals to use to engage learners. However, as a new generation of internet users grows up, be prepared for a complete change of attitude required to maintain their interest.

VIRTUAL WORLDS

A virtual world is a computer-based simulated environment intended for its users to inhabit and interact via avatars. Second Life is an example of a 'virtual world' (www.secondlife.com).

SOCIAL NETWORKING

A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web-based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services. There are numerous social networking sites, including Facebook, Bebo and MySpace (www.facebook.com, www.bebo.com, www.myspace.com).

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING

In a social bookmarking system, users save links to web pages that they want to remember and/or share. News Vine is an example of social bookmarking (www.newsvine.com).