



“23 Things” as Transformative Learning: Promoting Confidence, Curiosity and Communication via Library Staff Professional Development

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Abstract:

August 2012 marks the six year anniversary of the debut of Learning 2.0, also known as 23 Things,” a professional development program that aims to educate library personnel about emerging information technology and foster the confidence they need to explore its use in the workplace. Utilizing the theory of transformative learning by Mezirow and other literature concerning adult learning and professional development as a framework, this paper will report on recent research into the efficacy and impact of the program on library staff. Surveys and focus groups completed as part of a joint research project with CAVAL in Australia and Dr. Michael Stephens form the basis for this paper which is supplemented with ongoing analysis of new data from follow up studies. The analysis has yielded the following thematic areas of impact and effect: personal practice is enhanced with knowledge and confidence; impact is mainly personal, but organizational changes may follow; libraries are using the tools to varying degrees of success, and organizational blocks prevent use of tools. These findings offer evidence that Learning 2.0 programs can have a positive effect on library staff and their confidence and ability to use IT and subsequently on the organization itself.

Introduction

“Today’s networked technology,” state Thomas & Brown (2009, p.2), “is more than just a conduit to communicate information; it is a platform to share and network imaginations. Technology, like never before has become a tool to build worlds.” Networked technology has also enabled the creation of new forms of IT-enhanced professional development and learning opportunities to flourish. Learning 2.0 is a lauded and often replicated program for learning about emerging technologies. August 2012 marks the six year anniversary of the debut of Learning 2.0, also known as “23 Things,” a professional development program that aims to educate library personnel about emerging information technology and foster the confidence they need to explore its use in the workplace.

Created by Helene Blowers and the training staff at the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenberg County (PLCMC) in the summer of 2006, the program was conceived as a means for staff to explore some of the emerging, social technologies of the day, including blogging, subscribing to rich site summary (RSS) feeds, and sites such as YouTube and Flickr. Based around a series of weekly online learning activities, all library staff were encouraged to explore an emerging web technology each week (or “Things” as they were called in the program) and compose a reflective blog post about what they learned. Every staff member that completed the program received an MP3 player and a chance to win a laptop in a drawing held at PLCMC’s staff inservice day.

PLCMC shared the program with a Creative Commons license, prompting other libraries to adapt and utilize the program. In September, 2006, Yarra Plenty Library in Australia was the first globally to adapt and offer the program for staff, setting the stage for many others to follow. Three years later, Blowers (2009) estimated nearly 1000 organizations have adapted the program in some form. Reflecting on the impact of the program, Abram (2008) noted “I believe that this has been one of the most transformational and viral activities to happen globally to libraries in decades.” Titangos and Mason argued that the program “has fundamentally changed the staff’s way of thinking and working in the 21st century” (p. 45).

There have been numerous articles in the professional literature and some scholarly case study approaches, but as of 2008 no studies of the impact of the “transformational and viral” program had appeared in the literature. This paper gathers the results of one of the first large scale research projects examining Learning 2.0, launched in Australia in 2009 as part of the CAVAL visiting scholar program, and provides new data analysis from a Learning 2.0 administrator’s survey conducted during the CAVAL project. It also reports on preliminary findings of a pilot project in the United States to examine perceptions of the program and describe the lasting effects.

Research questions

The following research questions framed the broader CAVAL research project to measure the impact and legacy of the model within Australian libraries and were utilized for the CityLibraries and US pilot studies as well as well:

- To what extent have Learning 2.0 programs enhanced library staff's confidence and ability to utilize emerging technologies?
- To what extent have Learning 2.0 programs had an impact on library services?
- What are staff perceptions of the efficacy of Learning 2.0 programs in libraries?
- What are exemplary practices for the program?

A newer research question is included in the current pilot study in the United States:

- To what extent have library staff created personal learning networks as a result of the program?

A brief look at the literature

PLCMC's original Learning 2.0 program began with a focus on lifelong learning as the first of the "23 Things" to set the stage for exploration and discovery. This concept is also characterized as an organizational goal for many American public libraries and is cited as a core competency of the profession by the American Library Association. Hiemstra (1976) articulated three factors that promote a need for lifelong learning: constant change, occupational obsolescence and an individual's desire for self-actualization (p. 9–10). One factor addressed by the Learning 2.0 model is the constant changing landscape of emerging technologies. Many of the replicated programs over the years have updated and expanded on the original "things."

Other areas of the literature further illuminate the foundations of professional development programs such as Learning 2.0. The concept of self-directed learning (SDL) articulated by Candy (1991) emphasizes the importance of self-motivated learners managing the learning process. Candy later argued that "learner control" might be a better phrase to describe the affordances of SDL. In Learning 2.0 programs, participants have a high degree of control of their explorations, reflections and the program outcomes.

Richardson and Mancabelli (2011) define learning networks as "the rich set of connections each of us can make to people in both our online and offline worlds who help us with our learning pursuits (p. 21)." The creation of a personal learning network (PLN) via current and emerging communication technologies may be one positive result of participation in Learning 2.0 programs, as evidenced by the Australian study. Survey

respondents reported utilizing emerging technologies, specifically blogs and RSS feeds in many instances, as a means to keep up with professional news and ideas.

Finally, to frame the impact of the 23 Things learning program in libraries, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) offers a theoretical perspective. Mezirow (1997) describes a learning process that includes reflection on experience: "Transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience (p. 5)." The processes of Learning 2.0 - exploring new tools, reflecting on the experience via blogging, and thinking about its relevance to library services -- could be described as transformative learning.

Methodology and research overview for three studies

Australian research

The Learning 2.0 phenomenon was chosen as the focus of the 2009 CAVAL visiting scholarship because of the take up rates of the program in Australia. Thanks to a research partnership between CAVAL, an Australian library consortium; CityLibraries Townsville, Queensland, Australia; and Dr. Michael Stephens. The partners launched several surveys, focus groups, and a case study. These included a national survey for those who had participated in a 23 Things program, a survey of thirty 23 Things program administrators, and focus groups of academic and public librarians of program participants. In addition to the large scale survey, CityLibraries agreed to serve as the case study site.

A web-based survey of participants in Learning 2.0 in Australian libraries, announced on various national library-related mailing lists, library-related blogs, and other channels of communication, yielded a total of 384 valid responses. The national survey data was analyzed using a combination of quantitative analysis for the demographic data and descriptive content analysis for the open-ended questions by the researchers. Focus group transcripts and researcher field notes were analyzed by a method described by Krueger and Casey (2009) that follows a systematic approach focusing on frequency, specificity, emotion and extensiveness of participants' answers to articulate findings (121–122).

Articles detailing findings from the academic library respondents, public library respondents and the case study site have recently been published and citations are included in the further reading section.

Program administrator survey

As part of the CAVAL project, the researchers conducted a survey of Learning 2.0 program administrators. Potential candidates to complete the program administrator's survey were invited to participate via a general message announced on various Australian library-related email lists and library-related blogs. In addition, a web search

identified Australian libraries that had offered Learning 2.0 programs, and direct email invitations were sent to those libraries, inviting the lead program administrator to take part in the survey.

At close, the program administrator survey had a total of 41 valid respondents from Australian libraries composed of 60% from public and state libraries and 40% from college and university libraries. The open ended questions of the administrator survey were analyzed via descriptive content analysis following similar procedures as the national study.

United States pilot study

Three public libraries in the Chicago metropolitan area partnered in the pilot study funded by a grant from San Jose State University. All three libraries have offered Learning 2.0 programs within the last five years, and all three library directors agreed to participate in this study. The libraries include Mount Prospect Public Library, a mid-size public library where more than 100 staff members participated in the program in 2008; Schaumburg Township District Library, the second largest public library in Illinois, where 146 staff participated in the program in 2007-2008; and Skokie Public Library, a suburban library where 154 employees participated in the program in 2007.

The survey instrument is based on the question set used in the Australian study. All staff at each site study library will be invited to participate in the web-based survey. In addition, the investigator duplicated the focus group procedures utilized in the Australian study noted above. Data collection has just concluded at the time of this writing and preliminary impressions of the data will be presented here.

Results

Australian libraries

As noted above, 384 respondents were included in the national survey data set. Focus groups were conducted in academic libraries and at the public library case study site. The analysis of national survey and focus groups yields the following thematic areas of impact and effect of the program in Australia:

It is a personal change more than an institutional change.

The researchers discovered that respondents described personal benefits and changes more often than organizational changes. One respondent in national survey stated enhanced awareness of emerging technologies was a benefit of the program and she was “keeping up with the emerging changes and incorporating that into my workflows.” Organizational impact, however, was not as evident: “The work practice needs changing but that is not happening.” 26% of the national survey respondents reported no impact on their organizations from the program.

Certain tools and technologies that learners explore continue to enhance personal professional practice. In the Townsville case study, one focus group participant articulated a common theme from the data about rich site summary feeds from blogs and news sites: "I don't know about library as a whole but the way I function has changed, I use RSS feeds every day." Another focus group participant stated when asked if the program was a success: "Personally, yes for me it was. The best ever thing, that RSS Feed."

Respondents noted that institutional changes may be coming as the tools are adopted and explored beyond the program. Still, the most pronounced impact across the data was a personal one. From the CityLibraries focus groups: "Maybe it will take time. Maybe other staff will see that there's this whole community within the community happening and choose to get on board a bit later on once they see that it is working. Maybe they are not game to put the work in until they're sure they can see what benefits it has and maybe that's our job, is to show them what benefits it has."

Staff are more confident, comfortable, and open to emerging technologies.

Across the national survey data, analyzed by data sets of academic library staff, common themes of confidence, comfort and openness in relation to the tools and emerging technologies studied. Survey respondents are also continuing to explore new technologies because of the program. In the national survey, for the question "Are you continuing to explore emerging technologies online?" the majority of respondents reported in the affirmative (85%) with the remainder (15%) reporting they were not continuing exploration.

In the Townsville study, those who had at least started the program still felt they were more comfortable, confident, and prepared by participating. A response from the open-ended survey question for impact after the program reflects this concept: "Increased awareness of Learning 2.0 tools, increased confidence in dealing with customer service issues involving them, increased awareness of the way the tools fit into current library goals."

The library is using the tools to varying degrees of success.

Across the data sets from the national survey and focus groups, respondents described uses of the tools to varying degrees of success. Some had enhanced services while others were using tools - wikis, RSS, blogs - within departments.

Another institutional impact is via outreach to other departments in the university setting or with the governing council in Australian communities. Others respondents noted "greater visibility" of the library through the new library blog, Facebook page, and Flickr account/ Another stated there is "more openness and sharing, a higher profile for the library, willingness to make the system/policies etc allow experimentation."

Organizational blocks prevent use of the tools.

In the public library data set specifically, reporting blocks and prohibitive policies that prevented successful completion of the program or inhibit use of the tool after the program was a common thematic area. Respondents noted lack of “progressive” policies and “archaic” approaches to emerging technologies by IT departments and local government.

From the data are illustrations of these blocks: “We are unable to do most things covered by web2,” and “Participants continue to lobby supervisors for wider use of Learning 2.0 technologies.” One respondent reported: “Many staff have moved along with technology though IT is the one that provides the most obstructions be it from a control / security / non progressive point of view.” Outside of the library, another respondent noted that the “IT department at Council has not encouraged use of Web 2.0.”

Australian program administrators

The program administrator survey yields further data to enhance the emerging picture of the impact and lasting effects of Learning 2.0 on library staff and libraries. Some preliminary findings from the survey include:

- 94% of the programs encouraged staff to work together to complete the learning modules.
- 97% of the programs gave staff time at work to complete the program.
- 65% of the programs offered incentives for those that finished (as did the original program with the MP3 players and laptop raffle).
- 81% of program administrators recognized an ongoing impact after the program.

As an extension of the question about impact, descriptive content analysis of the open ended follow up question “Please describe any details or observations relating to your answer” yielded the following thematic statements:

- Staff are more aware and confident with emerging technologies - 62%
- We are adopting various emerging technologies - 45%
- It's too soon to tell / Need a more practical application of the tools to actually see impact - 24%
- We are investigating how to best use emerging technologies - 20%

This statement from the open-ended question data illustrates the positive aspects of the impact of the program: “For some staff it gave them the interest and encouragement to work in new ways. By using the skills and knowledge they learnt during the program staff work more collaboratively. Some of the tools have been implemented into our eLibrary service and staff who completed the 23 Things can easily explain these tools to clients.”

It should be noted, however, that others did not see the value of the program or perceive there was an impact. Another indicative statement from the data: “I feel this program was truly enjoyed by a small percentage of staff members. Most of the feedback was lukewarm or negative. Most did not see the point and still did not see the point after it was over and were glad to get back to 'real' work.”

Further analysis of the remaining open ended questions for the administrator survey will continue to enhance the “big picture” of the impact of Learning 2.0 in Australian libraries. Analysis will continue for an article to be published in 2013.

US pilot study

The pilot study replicates the Australian research, with updated methodology and survey instruments, and an ongoing analysis of the theoretical frameworks that can help understand the impact of the Learning 2.0 phenomenon. A total of 71 valid respondents participated in the survey. Preliminary results from the web survey of the three libraries that conducted Learning 2.0 programs include the following percentages of positive answers (agree and strongly agree):

As a result of the Learning 2.0 program:

- I am continuing to explore emerging technologies online: 71%
- I am more comfortable learning about emerging technologies: 91%
- I am more confident about emerging technologies: 82%
- Opportunities to continue learning and communication are ongoing: 83%
- I feel I am part of a learning organization: 86%
- I can continue learning on my own with the tools I discovered: 87%

The focus groups at the three Illinois libraries were recorded and transcription of those recordings as well as analysis of the field notes will further add to this data.

Implications of the research to date

After analyzing the national survey from Australia, focus group data, and preliminary results from the administrator's survey and US pilot study, it is worthwhile to examine the results as a whole to see what themes appear. The themes culled from a synthesis of the research findings so far include:

Confidence

Staff who have participated in the program feel more knowledgeable, comfortable, and aware of emerging technologies. A majority of responses to the national survey and in the academic library focus groups, as well as the case studies and US pilot, focus on descriptions of feeling more confident about dealing with emerging technologies. A focus group respondent stated: "I feel more comfortable answering questions and talking about new technologies."

Curiosity

One respondent stated the lasting impact was "more of an openness to try new things and collegiality about some of the aspects of 23 things," while another reported: "I'd like to think that it would encourage librarians to look outside the box and think okay well our library's getting a little bit dormant, what new things . . . or just continue to look at the things." This sense of curiosity is also supported by findings from the national survey in Australia. 91% of respondents answered in the affirmative to the question "Are you continuing to explore emerging technologies online?"

Communication

Finally, the theme of communication is represented by the reported uptick in use of the emerging tools for personal and institutional communication and learning. Respondents reported the creation of library blogs, wikis, answer sites, test reference, Twitter accounts and more as a result of their learning programs. However, this uptick was not perceived by all, as evidenced in the results from the administrator survey: "It's too soon to tell."

On a personal level, staff reported an increase in communication and participation within the social networks. "I never read a library blog until this I have to say and now I'm reading library blogs all the time, that must be a change," stated one of the Townsville focus group participants.

Exemplary Practice for Learning 2.0

Analyzing the key questions from all of the survey and focus group data leads to a list of exemplary practice to ensure success for libraries launching Learning 2.0 programs as an extension of PD activities. This list, constantly being refined and updated as more data is collected, includes:

Staff benefits of Learning 2.0 include better awareness of new technologies and enhanced feelings of inclusivity for those who participate.

The program yields improved comfort and confidence with new technologies for staff who participate.

Use the program as a way to promote the library and its services to other departments and then encourage sharing, outreach and utilization of the tools.

Allow staff time to work on the program and make it a firm commitment.

Break down any barriers on the tools put in place by IT departments making sure access is possible from employee computers.

Time allotted for learning should be consistent and encouraged by administration.

Program champions - staff selected to provide support throughout the program in each department - are beneficial to learners.

Program scheduling can detract from success - avoid too many conflicts during the program running time.

Non-completion does not imply program failure - participants report increased knowledge and confidence even if they did not finish.

Commit to an ongoing communication and learning strategy for staff after the program concludes.

Conclusion

Examining the perceived impact of Learning 2.0 / 23 Things professional development programs leads to the conclusion that the program has the potential to truly be transformational for those who participate. The analysis has yielded the following thematic areas of impact and effect: personal practice is enhanced with knowledge and confidence; impact is mainly personal, but organizational changes may follow; libraries are using the tools to varying degrees of success, and organizational blocks prevent use of tools. These findings offer evidence that Learning 2.0 programs can have a positive effect on library staff and their confidence and ability to use IT and subsequently on the organization itself.

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