

Facilitating social learning

Randy Emelo argues that the learning advisor is the key to unlocking productive social learning

Picture this: Kara is a newly promoted manager in the client relations department. It's budget season and she has never created a budget before, but as a manager, this is now a task she must complete. In order to develop this skill, she decides to leverage her organisation's social learning technology, which her co-worker recently recommended. She logs in to the system and joins a learning group called *Budgeting 101*. She gets excited by this new opportunity available to her and looks forward to learning from her fellow participants (not to mention finally crossing "Build next year's budget" off her to-do list). She notices that one person has posted an article on the subject of creating budgets in the social learning group, so she reads it and likes the post. But she's not really sure what to do next. She understands the broad concepts in the article, but doesn't know how to put the concepts into action.

Upon further investigation, she realises that no one is interacting or collaborating in the group. She is tempted to post a question or comment, but she decides not to. She doesn't want to look foolish and she doesn't really know where to begin when it comes to building a budget anyway. What if her questions sound dumb? What if she embarrasses herself?

As a result, she decides to just wait until someone else posts a question or comment, and then will piggyback off of that person's interaction. She thinks to herself, "This is a social learning group, and someone will start collaborating sooner rather than later, right?" She logs out of the system and gets back to work on other tasks and projects.

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? I call it 'Social Learning Chicken' and I see it occur all too often in social learning environments.

Social Learning Chicken

People typically will join a social learning group with much excitement and anticipation. They think about all the things they are going to learn and all the problems they will be able to solve with their new knowledge. Or they think about how they can contribute and share what they know, and all the ways they can help their co-workers succeed. Unfortunately, their excitement fades – sometime slowly, sometimes



Reference

- 1 CEB
 "Building a Productive Learning Culture," *Learning Quarterly*, 2014. <http://ceb.uberflip.com/i/337397>

very quickly – as they face the need to start or restart the same conversations over and over. They may begin to feel frustrated by the lack of progress occurring, or they may feel stalled with uncertainty because they don't even know where to begin. They become overwhelmed or disillusioned, and idly wait until someone else posts or prompts discussion.

If everyone waits on one another to start or pick up the conversation, little to no learning collaboration happens and a game of Social Learning Chicken commences. It's a very common human trait. A 2014 CEB *Learning Quarterly* research study, "Building a Productive Learning Culture" points to the fact that only 20 per cent of people are effective learners on their own. The rest of us need to be prompted, prodded, pushed and poked into taking action. It's no wonder we see so much inactivity when left to our own devices!

It's easy to understand why this type of waiting game is unproductive. Discussion, collaboration and discovery are building blocks of social learning. In their absence, transformative learning does not occur. To lessen the chance that Social Learning Chicken will occur, and to increase the chance that transformative learning *will* transpire, someone in the learning group must assume a leader, moderator or facilitator role. In social learning groups, this person is the advisor.

The advisor's role

Healthy and dynamic social learning groups require one or more people to assume the role of advisor or group learning leader. The advisor should be someone who knows more about a certain skill or has more knowledge and expertise in a certain area than the people who are in the group as learners. Your organisation's designated subject matter experts (SMEs) aren't the only people who can serve as advisors, though. People with intermediate skill levels can make great advisors for beginners. They are only one or two steps ahead of the learners in terms of skill level and can still speak about the topic in a way that is not too far removed from a beginner's level.

It's also worth noting that an advisor's age and title should have no bearing on whether or not they are advisors. For example, a millennial finance manager may have experience in social media marketing. Thus, this person could serve as an advisor on the topic for a group of people from across the organisation who have relatively less understanding of the practice. In this way, advisors can span the organisation hierarchically, functionally, geographically and so on.

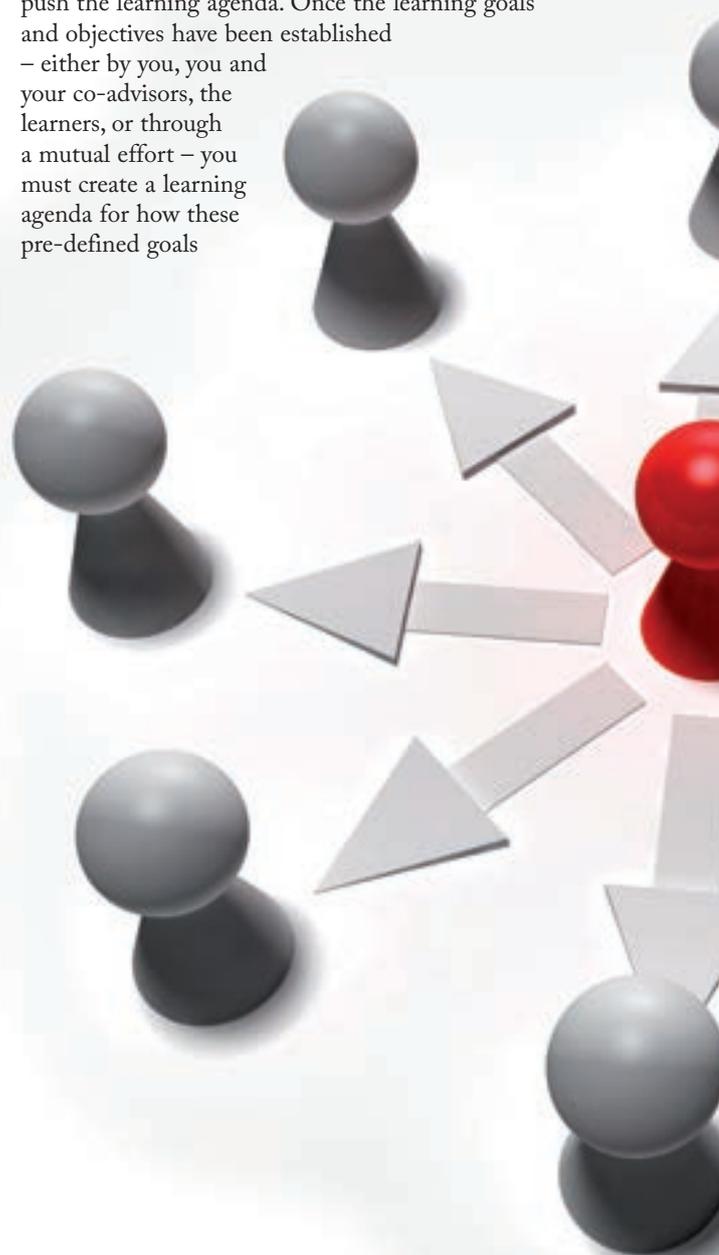
Yet bear in mind that the role of an advisor

extends beyond just possessing relatively more knowledge or skill than the learners in the group. Equally as important, an advisor must be able to take responsibility for learning that will take place within the group. I contend that the advisor must see himself or herself as a catalyst for learning, in fact. The advisor must lead group members toward learning and discovery.

Advisors in action

What does this all mean in practice? It can seem daunting to have so much responsibility placed on you as an advisor, but from my own personal experience in leading social learning groups, I believe there are four areas that advisors should focus on for success. These best practices can help advisors create productive and effective social learning groups.

Set the learning agenda. As an advisor, you must take on the responsibility to actively create and push the learning agenda. Once the learning goals and objectives have been established – either by you, you and your co-advisors, the learners, or through a mutual effort – you must create a learning agenda for how these pre-defined goals



will be achieved. The fact of the matter is that people who are participating as learners in your group know they want to learn more, but they are likely unsure of how to go about the learning that will need to take place to get them to their desired proficiency (which is why they've asked you to advise). This means that as an advisor, you should begin to think about and plan how you are going to expose the group to the topic or your skill/expertise area, and then what activities and resources you will use to help reinforce that learning. Some of us are mega-planners and some of us prefer to be a bit more flexible (I tend to fall more into the latter category), but the idea here is that you at least give some thought to how you will approach advising the group around the learning topic at hand.

An easy way to get started is to write three to five questions that you can ask the group over the first few weeks to spark discussion. Maybe it's about why they want to learn more on this particular topic, or perhaps it's about what their experience with the topic has been up to this point.

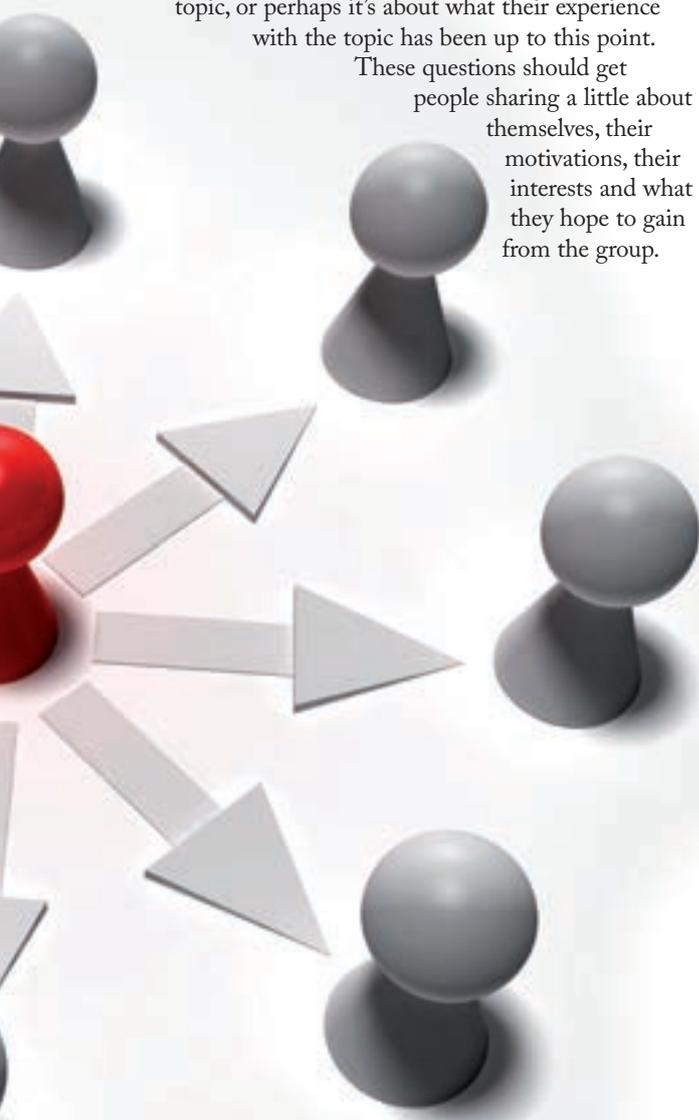
These questions should get people sharing a little about themselves, their motivations, their interests and what they hope to gain from the group.

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Establish expected behaviours. As the advisor of a social learning group, you must set the behavioural expectations of your social learning environment. Upon creation of the group, tell people how you expect them to participate. Express to the group that all members will need to exhibit active learning and sharing behaviour in order for collective learning goals to be met. Post your expectations to a place that the group can easily reference. Encourage people to start sharing by doing a welcome exercise to kick-off the group's discussion. For instance, ask each participant to introduce himself/herself to the group and comment as to why he/she is interested in the learning at hand (which can be one of the questions you created while you set up your learning agenda).

In addition, most people learn well by example, and in social learning spaces, this idea holds very true. Modelling active learning behaviour is key to a social learning experience where measurable learning is attained. If you want people to share their personal stories and experience, be sure to share yours. If you want people to put time into crafting thoughtful responses and questions, you must do the same. A commonly overlooked and easy way to encourage sharing behaviour is by recognising when someone does a good job or exhibits a behaviour that you want others to emulate. Even posting a quick comment that thanks a participant for sharing their story with the group and bringing the topic to life will help reinforce and encourage positive sharing and learning behaviour. It also lets people know that their comments, questions, and insights have been seen and read by others, and that they truly do matter to the group.

Drive the learning conversation. If your group lacks any real learning-centric conversation,



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everyone loses. As an advisor and as the person who has knowledge to impart on the subject, it is your duty to drive the learning conversation and ensure that everyone is actively participating on a continuous basis.

Unlike the role of a teacher, an advisor should not just disseminate information and knowledge to the group. Today's work environment isn't like a maths class, where there is just one answer to any given question. Often there are many different ways to solve work-related problems. When you master a skill or subject matter, you often find that in the work world two plus two doesn't always equal four. As you advance in your mastery, you learn that there are often exceptions to the rules across all subject matters. To address this reality, you want to ensure that you are encouraging people to share, discuss and learn from one another about 'the how' and 'the why' of a particular subject. This means finding the right resources, activities, conversation topics, and questions to leverage to spur group dialogue.

But don't stop there; you should prompt people to share their personal experiences and stories about applying the topic at hand as well (the good and the bad!). Acknowledge that for most people, saying "I don't know" or recounting a failure is difficult. Most people have a career survival instinct that keeps them from wanting to share failed experiences for fear of being seen as incapable or for fear of being somehow punished directly or indirectly as a result (just think of Kara from my opening example). As the advisor, try to foster trust and create a safe environment by first sharing your own experiences – most importantly those when you failed or faced adversity – and then prompt others to do the same.

Leverage active learning exercises. As an advisor, you will know how your particular skill or area of expertise can be best learnt, so be confident in the fact that you can show others

how to conquer your domain the same way you did. That said, keep in mind that most participants have busy schedules, so use common sense when assigning or prompting people to participate in learning activities. Most adults learn best with short five to 20 minute exercises, like engaging with a brief article, conversation, reflection, abstract, video, and so on, that they can do in between projects, calls, and meetings.

To promote active learning, don't just ask participants to read an article or watch a video, but also ask them to respond and react to it with a personal story or practical feedback and questions. This makes the learning activity meaningful and relevant to people. You can also easily create a sense of accountability for participants to engage in active learning exercises by assigning deadlines to when you want questions answered, documents or other supplementary content read and reviewed, posts submitted, and the like. The idea here is to give people a sense of relative urgency, so that they are pushed to do the learning activity before getting distracted by the other tasks on their plate.

Commitment to learning

To achieve meaningful learning, advisors must be mindful of, and committed to the learning that they are leading. This means they have to be more than just SMEs; they have to be leaders, communicators, supporters, and advocates.

In my earlier scenario, Kara faced a game of Social Learning Chicken. But what if the advisor for her social learning group had been more active in the role and led the group in rich dialogue and collaboration? Well, if that were the case, Kara and her fellow learners could have developed budgeting skills, discovered tips and tricks for tackling the process of creating a budget, and found support from one another as they put their new skills to work. Kara would have been able to actively pursue her learning goals through targeted collaboration and participation in group-based learning activities that truly focused on and impacted her daily work life. If all of that had happened, Kara could have created her budget with the support and insights of her group and crossed this to-do off her list. And who knows? Maybe she could even choose to serve as an advisor to new learners struggling with how to create a budget for the first time. She is now in a great position to give back and share her knowledge with others. And since she was part of such a great social learning experience, she would know just how to engage and inspire people as an effective advisor. **TJ**

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