

Aliveworld: emergence of an e-change platform

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Introduction

E-learning, the computer-assisted electronic delivery of instructional materials, has undergone several significant developments since its introduction in the mid '80s. The most important of these is the Web-based delivery of learning materials beginning in the mid '90s. Today, corporate training departments and academic institutions are the focus of most Web-based e-learning activity.

In the last few years, the Web has also undergone significant developments — from static sites to “Web 2.0” social networking applications such as YouTube and MySpace. Web-based e-learning is now poised for a similar development into what can be called “e-change.”

E-change, in distinction to traditional e-learning, has a personal rather than corporate or academic focus. Every day millions of people around the world look for advice on how to change their lives. They are concerned about losing weight, physical fitness, financial independence, cutting fuel consumption and waste, stress reduction, spiritual development, and many related needs. Indeed, the aspiration to a better, more fulfilling life is essential to the human condition, a fact demographic research has confirmed. (See: www.worldvaluessurvey.org.)

E-change uses Web 2.0 technology to broaden e-learning's reach and scope into the field of personal life change. Specifically, **Aliveworld** is a global platform, designed to facilitate such change, which includes and extends currently available e-learning technologies. The following will take a closer look at e-change, first investigating conventional e-learning, then seeing how it is being extended into the area of personal growth, and finally outlining how the Aliveworld platform applies and instantiates e-change principles and technologies.

E-learning

E-learning is a term coined by Jay Cross, former CEO of the E-Learning Forum and a prominent consultant in the field. It refers to any training or instruction delivered by computer technology. E-learning was conducted largely through CD-ROM until the Internet went mainstream in the mid '90s. Now most e-

learning is either delivered entirely through the Web, or has a significant Web component.

Businesses and, to a lesser extent, academic institutions originally adopted e-learning for its cost-saving benefits. It reduces “offline” classroom costs and allows instructors and subject-matter experts to reach greater numbers of learners with less time and effort.

While e-learning’s primary drawback is the absence of “same-space” contact between instructor and student, it has been found to have significant non-financial advantages. Not only can e-learning help subject-matter experts reach larger audiences without the inconvenience of travel, but learners also find that e-learning makes it easier to pursue studies “anytime, anywhere” – on their own schedules and in their own homes or workspaces.

E-learning can be either asynchronous or synchronous. That is, learners can pursue a course of study entirely on their own schedule, independent of others taking the same course, or a group can all meet on-line with an instructor in “real time.” Even in synchronous e-learning, both learners and instructors are freed from the necessity of traveling to meet in a single location.

Another significant advantage is e-learning’s capacity to incorporate multimedia elements into instructional materials. Instructors and instructional designers can integrate not only text but graphics, animation, audio, video, and interactive elements such as questionnaires, quizzes, and even games and simulations, into their programs. This allows specific subject matter to be presented through the most appropriate medium and in several different ways – e.g. charts, graphs, images, and demonstrations – more easily than is possible in a “live” setting. Multimedia is also able to address different learning styles (visual, auditory, etc.), thus engaging learners’ attention more effectively and aiding subject-matter retention.

Corporate e-learning focuses primarily on job training and skills acquisition. Its main interest is enabling employees to do their jobs better and develop new work-related aptitudes. It is also used to provide certifications needed in industries like health care. Academic institutions use e-learning to teach traditional curricula and to extend the reach of their degree-granting capabilities, especially in fields such as business, accounting, and law.

In both the business and academic environments, e-learning is primarily cognitive in focus. Its main concern is to increase learners’ intellectual knowledge, their grasp of information or certain skills. Large corporate training departments frequently develop e-learning programs based on “Bloom’s

taxonomy," a template developed by educator Benjamin Bloom that breaks down the cognitive process into six graduated categories, such as comprehension, analysis, and evaluation.

In just two decades, e-learning has become a vital part of the global business and academic culture, particularly in more developed and technology-conscious countries. It is now poised for its next major development: e-change.

E-change

E-change incorporates all the characteristics and components of traditional e-learning while adding new features and functionality made possible by rapidly developing Web 2.0 technology. However, e-change differs from e-learning not only technologically but in its purpose and nature.

The motivation for most e-learning is outer-directed. People take e-learning courses because they are required to do so by their work or in order to get a degree or certification from an academic institution. Whether or not they find the subject matter intrinsically interesting or meaningful is, in a sense, beside the point.

Learners are motivated to enter e-change programs primarily because of personal interest or need. They recognize that they need to change in order to improve their lives. They also realize that because real change is often difficult they need support to change effectively and maintain the changes they make. Nor is simple self-interest the sole motivation here. Concerns for family, friends, community, and the earth as a whole are also strong motivators.

This focus gives e-change far greater market potential than conventional e-learning possesses. Intentional change touches on a wide variety of concerns, which taken together affect a broad spectrum of the population worldwide.

These concerns include:

- Health and wellbeing
- Religion and spirituality
- Career, work and calling
- Family and relationships
- Psychological growth and development
- Money and wealth
- Energy and the environment

Where e-learning is mainly cognitive, e-change also works on the behavioral level. While knowledge acquisition has an important part to play, behavior change is ultimately more and other than an intellectual process. The distinction

is between knowing and doing. As an interactive medium rather than a passive one like television, the Web has an inherent capacity to support “learning by doing.”

E-change programs incorporate three principal means of supporting the often difficult change process: expert guidance, interactive tools focused on managing change, and social networking. Expert guidance comes in the form of multimedia instructional programs that differ from traditional e-learning programs in both intent and change-oriented features and functionality. Web 2.0 social networking provides the community support frequently critical to successful change.

Social networking sites such as YouTube and MySpace have become among the most popular sites on the Web by enabling interpersonal contact and the sharing of information and personalized content. When properly utilized, these features can also become highly effective e-change tools.

To understand why this is so, it may be helpful to look at social learning theory, Stanford psychology professor Albert Bandura’s extremely influential analysis of the prerequisites of behavior change. Social learning theory deals specifically with learning’s social context and how people learn from one another.

Two of the most critical factors for promoting change that Bandura singles out are modeling and self-efficacy. “Self-efficacy” simply means that people are much more likely to be able to change if they have confidence that they can do so. They are also far more likely to believe they can change if they see others able to change and serve as models of this possibility. This modeling both provides and sustains the motivation that is critical in overcoming the difficulties inherent in any effective change process.

Here is where Web 2.0 technology can be applied most productively in extending conventional e-learning into e-change. E-change leverages this technology to cultivate peer-based, change-focused interaction and collaboration. Through online social networking, people can find others who have faced and overcome similar challenges and can now share what has worked most effectively to support and maintain change in their lives. Members of change-oriented online communities serve as models for others by communicating their successful strategies and telling their stories.

E-learning pioneer Jay Cross has made the observation that only 20% of actual learning occurs during direct instruction, with the other 80% occurring in informal, day-to-day interaction with peers. While traditional e-learning focuses almost entirely on formal instruction, e-change builds a bridge between informal

and formal learning. It broadens e-learning's focus to include the informal instruction inherent in peer communities constellated around specific change modalities, such as weight loss, dealing with depression, time-management strategies, and so on.

Cross has also applied the scientific concept of emergence – the arising of new structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems – to e-change. “Emergent learning” is a process in which the open sharing of information changes that information and creates new learning. A change-oriented social networking community is a collaborative effort in which the common knowledge bank is continually enhanced. In an effective e-change network, evolutionary change occurs on both the individual and collective levels, interdependently.

Aliveworld

While e-learning now has a well established market space, e-change is a recent and still evolving innovation. Many Web 2.0 social networking applications, such as the previously mentioned MySpace and YouTube, incorporate features and functionality that are also integral to e-change systems. Other Web 2.0 applications, including Zaadz, the photo-sharing site Flickr, and recent offerings from such industry leaders as Google and Yahoo, also feature components relevant to e-change.

None of these, however, are fully integrated, functioning e-change networks. Such a network must include two critical components:

- The system as a whole must be developed and organized around e-change principles; its primary intent must be to promote personal change.
- The system must incorporate features and functionality specifically designed to facilitate effective life change.

Aliveworld is a Web 2.0 platform that Aliveware Ltd has developed as a dedicated e-change network fulfilling these two criteria. Aliveworld is a system built around change-focused social networking that includes:

- Aliveguides: “formal” change-oriented guidance in the form of multi-media learning programs adapted from the work of change leaders and other subject-matter experts.
- “Informal” learning in the form of member-driven change communities and member-generated learning content.
- Unique tools and features designed to support life change.

Aliveworld is a “community of communities,” each organized around a specific change modality. Most feature one or more Aliveguides, and are hosted by the change leaders upon whose work those guides are based, or by their associates. Aliveworld is in fact a Web 2.0 infrastructure intended to provide leaders in the field of intentional change with the tools and support to develop their work online in ways that enable them to reach a larger and more diverse audience and help that audience make and maintain life change more effectively.

Individual community members will experience Aliveworld, upon first logging in, as a personal space or portal called “My Aliveworld,” from which they can easily access each of the communities to which they belong. Current and popular community resources and activities are prominently featured. Users can also view information about their personal change projects, community members who have become part of their support network, and communities with which they are not yet affiliated but might be interested in joining.

Several unique interactive tools have been created especially for integration into Aliveguides and Aliveworld communities. Their development has been guided by the simple, highly adaptable “experiential learning cycle” originally proposed by organizational development professor David Kolb. Aliveworld’s implementation of the change cycle also incorporates the innovative work of MIT educator Claus Otto Scharmer, who distinguishes a “type 1” learning cycle, derived from past experience, and a “type 2” cycle, closely allied to the concept of emergent learning, that involves sensing and embodying emerging futures.

The Kolb cycle’s four, self-explanatory phases are: explore, plan, act, and review. These “type 1” phases have close parallels with the stages of Scharmer’s “type 2” emergent learning cycle and also correspond with those of James Prochaska’s highly influential “stages of change” model. Prochaska, the director of the Cancer Prevention Research Center at the University of Rhode Island calls his “stages of change” contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.

Several Aliveworld interactive tools are associated with specific phases of the change cycle. To give a few examples:

- *Ideas*, journal-type tools that help increase user motivation, are part of the explore or contemplation phase.
- *Milestones*, tools to aid users in clarifying and establishing their intention to change, are part of the plan or preparation phase.
- *Practice manager*, a tool to help users schedule and keep commitments to specific change-oriented practices, is part of the act or action phase.
- *Reviews*, another journal-type tool specifically meant to consolidate and maintain change, are part of the review or maintenance phase. The review process can involve either looking back over past experience (the “type 1”

cycle), becoming more fully present to what is emerging in a change process (the “type 2” cycle), or both.

Other Aliveworld tools have been created to work with all phases of the change cycle. For example:

- *Change projects* give community members an overview of their entire change process: where they have been, where they are, and where they intend to go. As such, they are valuable tools for promoting self-efficacy and motivation.
- *Playspaces* are multimedia tools that allow users to envision the changes they want to and are making through images, pictures, and sounds as well as text. They add the highly motivating qualities of imagination and inspiration to the change process, and are particularly relevant to the “type 2” cycle of emergent learning.
- *Intelligent SMS reminders* are sent to cell phones at requested times to promote adherence to tasks and practices, even when community members are offline.

Aliveworld also incorporates more familiar tools such as calendars, contact lists, and the like. These retain their usual functions, but are also integrated into the larger Aliveworld e-change system. Similarly, communication tools such as forums and the sharing of personalized content are specifically focused on supporting the change process.

As on other social networking sites, Aliveworld includes a peer review process that allows community members to comment on and rate content in terms of its value in a change process. The most highly rated and useful resources are then featured in relevant communities and members’ “My Aliveworld” portals.

Aliveguide expert guidance, community-based social interaction, and change-oriented tools all integrate with one another to form Aliveworld, a constantly growing network that is intentionally pushing the boundaries of the emerging field of e-change. In blending and extending existing technology, the power of personal connection, informal learning, peer review, and expert guidance, Aliveworld is making the most useful Web-based e-change resources available in a unified, powerful online system.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, Web-delivered e-learning has become a familiar feature of the corporate and academic landscapes. It has proven to be a convenient and cost-saving form of training capable of presenting material in multimedia formats appropriate to a variety of contexts and learning styles.

Web 2.0 social networking technologies are now poised to develop e-learning into e-change – learning that focuses on personal life change as distinct from job training or academic curricula. Components critical to this evolution include expert guidance, change-focused interactive tools, and the interpersonal support social networking is able to furnish.

While a number of current Web 2.0 applications feature some of these components, Aliveworld is the only Web 2.0 platform that includes them all, having been specifically designed as an integrated e-change platform. Developed by Aliveware Ltd, Aliveworld uses the latest innovations in Web technology to implement both well-established and cutting-edge change methodologies in an integrated solution for change leaders and their diverse audiences.

About the authors

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