LEARNERS – NOT SYSTEMS – ARE THE VALUE CREATORS

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Conventional approach to value creation

The high-quality course development process for eLearning has been often viewed as a value chain, which is tightly defined and structured, and covers various stages from needs analysis until evaluation. The value chain approach introduced originally by Michael Porter in the mid-1980s (1985), and they value chain approach could nicely capture the essential elements in businesses based on manufacturing.

The economic benefits of the design, production and delivery of effective eLearning solutions have often been based on the ideas of effective manufacturing and its economic parameters, as one of the economic promises of eLearning has been to alter the economies of learning "from handicraft to mass production". The economic discourse of distance education and eLearning has adapted terms and ideas of the manufacturing metaphor, such as economies of scale and economies of scope (Morris, 2008) and cost effectiveness and efficiency (Kasraie & Kasraie, 2010).

Based on the Porterian thinking, the operational goal of the eLearning providers have been seen to be to streamline the actual eLearning course production process by using the well-tuned consecutive steps of needs analysis, course design, course delivery, course interaction, and assessment. The value has thus been understood to stem from efficient course provision and effective facilitation of various interactions. Furthermore, the Porterian thinking has highlighted, that entities must examine each activity in the value chain to see if there is a competitive advantage to concentrating and/or coordinating the activity (Porter, 1986).

However, another way of creating value is through co-creation, through interaction among faculty, learners and the larger society. Also value should be viewed from a new perspective - value should be measured only as direct learning outcomes, but also as participation and involvement of the learners, co-learners, teachers, and supporters. We claimed together with my colleague Tom Smith in 2012 in our conference paper "Value Co-Creation in Online Education", that the novel idea of creating value in online education is particularly important in courses of professional development (Auvinen & Smith, 2012), and this discussion was widened by George Moerkerke in his paper at the EADTU conference in 2014 (Moerkerke, 2014).

Changing value creation mechanisms

Some ten years ago the understanding of value creation took new, important steps, which are also essential in understanding the value creation mechanisms of eLearning courses. The new discourse of service-dominant logic (SDL) challenged the conventional thinking of value creation. The main argument of R.F. Lusch and S.L. Vargo in 2004 was that services behave differently from goods (and "goods-dominant logic") and thus the mechanisms in producing and consuming services do not follow the mechanisms of physical goods (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus also the value creation happens differently – not by the effective production and provision mechanism only, but rather by the value creation within the interface of the producers and customers. If Porter in his work in the 1980s could capture well the value creation mechanism in manufacturing industries and describe it with the value chain conceptualization, so Lusch and Vargo were able to widen the understanding of value creation mechanisms and emphasize the role of the customers in the value creation process.

The value co-creation was emphasized also by C.K. Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy in their seminal work of co-creation also in 2004 (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Their main argument was that the market had been becoming a forum for conversation and interactions, and that the management and facilitation of this dialogue was the key in value creation process. Their view of the market means that the market had been becoming instead of a seller-buyer-market rather the environment for co-creation of value.

Furthermore, they defined that the key building blocks for the interaction between users and providers of services could be defined as dialogue, access to important information and resources, risk-benefit assessment by the users, and transparency of work and working methods. Their essential argument was that the dialogue focuses on issues that interest both the users and the providers; that there had to exist a forum in which the dialogue can occur; and that there were clear rules of engagement that make for an orderly, productive interaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In particular, the aspect of "dialogue" is the essential element for learning in all its forms. In the academic discussion of the nature of services, it has been emphasized for many years that the users participate to the actual service production. This is often mentioned also as key characteristics of services (Grönroos, 2000).

Furthermore, access is also critical – access covers information and tools, but as Prahalad and Ramaswamy note, access can also transform the capacity for self-expression. Risk is understood to refer to the probabilities of harm and disadvantage for the user and the users´ appropriate means to assess the risk and work according to his/her best interest. And finally, transparency means that the working methods and the working principles of operations are visible for the users. (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004)

Changing learning metaphors

The understanding of value creation as a process as well as the understanding key actors of value creation has been developing during the last ten years, but so has also the understanding of learning been entering new areas. In contemporary environment, adult learners are highly self-directed, as learning does not only take place in institutions, but everywhere, during the course of one's whole life in a number of different episodes, in learning communities and social networks, using social software and individually compiled contents (Ehlers, 2008).

Ulf Ehlers has been summarizing the key alterations in learning metaphors to the five essential trends, which are:

- from reception of learning content to active participation of learners;
- from inspecting the learning outcomes to active reflection;
- from planning education and training for the learners to planning education and training by the learners;
- from "push" of learning content towards "pull" of learning content;
- from individual intelligence domains to collective intelligence domains (Ehlers, 2008).

The elementary trend in the changing learning approach is the active participation of the learners to their learning process in every stage.

One interesting trend is the growing importance of peer-produced eLearning content, which is practical terms shows the power of the co-creation of value. Not only are the learning individuals essential as learning content providers, but also the importance of the peer groups is growing. In eLearning content area the impact of the peer group is essential, as the members of the peer groups can take different roles and as the members of the peer groups also possess different competences. The peer group members can be willing to share materials, re-edit existing ones and create knowledge and they should have a clear and explicit objective to support each other in order to grow together (Auvinen, 2009). The "group emphasis" is also highlighted in the discussion of "informal learning" – e.g. Jay Cross states that informal learning is strongly fuelled by the communication of peers and that this communication is the critical element in informal learning (Cross, 2006).

The modern eLearning environment also enables the learners to utilize available resources and visualize their competence e.g. by ePortfolios and collaborative project work. The eLearning environments provide usually such fora, where not only the users and the providers can meet, but also the users can meet with another. The importance of peers in modern contemporary learning is growing – not only due to the growth of user-generated content, but also due to the importance of various peer networks. Vital examples of peer networks, which can also be of great importance for learning, are communities of practice (Wenger, 1999).

The learning provision directed to professional development is, in particular, in major changes. Professional development opportunities are surfacing in social networks. An elementary part of professional communication and problem solving is taking place in the

online world using the mechanisms of "crowdsourcing" and thus the "wisdom of the crowds". Contemporary authors, such as James Surowiecki (2005) and Charles Leadbeater (2008) have shown that "many are wiser than few" and that the knowledge creation and knowledge assessment processes in the Wikipedia age are different than former knowledge creation and assessment processes.

eLearning and value co-creation

As stated earlier, the planning and implementation of eLearning courses, in particular in professional development, has relied strongly on the Porterian value chain approach. This approach has had its clear benefits by providing clear consecutive phases of work, and systematic method in planning and implementing successful eLearning courses. However, the Porterian thinking in eLearning belonged to a time when the learning environments were closed and the faculty was providing – even dictating – all the learning resources. In the contemporary eLearning environment, the learners have access to a wide selection of various learning resources and options and also a wide array of various eLearning providers.

In conventional approach to distance education and eLearning, three major methods of learner interaction have been emphasized: learner interaction with learning materials and learning resources, learner interaction with teachers, tutors and supporters, and learner interaction with other learners (see e.g. Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The importance of other learners – co-learners, if you like – is increasing rapidly especially in professional development courses. Thus the eLearning courses should be regarded as arenas for value co-creation with learners. Thus the value is not created by effective provision and planning, but rather through a continuous dialogue with the learners. Other learners – co-learners – are becoming important actors in the value creation process. The role of the faculty is changing and becoming more challenging, as they become a part of on-going and ever evolving dialogues.

Value co-creation in eLearning is a challenging approach. Many contemporary examples of the utilization of "wisdom of the crowds" and thus value co-creation by numerous users show that such work must be well planned, facilitated and supported. The modern encyclopaedia Wikipedia is a solid example, and its development shows also that value co-creation "does not just happen" (Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Lih, 2009). Value co-creation requires thorough planning, organization, implementation and continuous improvement.

However, for effective value co-creation there are a number of good mechanisms and tools already available. For instance, the learners within an eLearning can develop their own wikis, which can create a sustainable resource for professional work also after a single eLearning course. The work with ePortfolios can bring also novel energy to value co-creation, if the content of ePortfolios can be shared. The developing mechanisms of eLearning content peer production are provided interesting novel opportunities for content development. The easy opportunities to set up own communities-of-practice can be attractive.

Conclusions

We are moving in eLearning – in particular, in courses of professional development – from closed learning environments towards open learning environments. The learners are able to identify, assess and utilize good learning resources and content from the wide provision on the Internet. Simultaneously the role of the faculty (including the teachers, tutors and learning supporters) in professional development is also changing, and their new key role is the facilitation of learning, knowledge creation, assessment and sharing.

At the heart of the new strategies for eLearning in professional development is the understanding of value creation: is value created by a well-planned and well-controlled educational provision or is value created with the users in continuous communication.

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