Community Online
Reviewed by
Jon Aleckson

THE RECENT POPULARITY of blogs and other new technologies has inspired trainers to take another look at how community and learning can be synonymous. This review examines an independent public learning community, www.learningtimes.org.

What is it?

The LearningTimes Network is made up of about 30,000 registered members participating in 50 communities, both public and private. Half of the site membership comes from higher education institutions, a quarter from K-12 schools, and a quarter from corporations and not-for-profits.

Members can interact and network with peers around the world online (synchronously and asynchronously) and face-to-face. The network also sponsors live events on the Web, such as online versions of conferences (Training 2005, for one) for people who can't attend in person. One-hour Webcasts are also recorded and archived for access anytime.

If you build it, will they come?

That's the historic challenge of communities of practice, and in this case, the question remains to be answered. My weekly visits to learningtimes.org didn't reveal vibrant activity.

LearningTimes:
A Learning Community
Online, 2005
www.learningtimes.org
Free

Recommendation
I highly recommend that corporate trainers join this technologically advanced community of practice.

We liked…
● the ability to interact with peers around the world
● the online versions of in-person conferences
● the opportunities for professional development
● the "mayor" certification that demonstrates an understanding of online community building.

Could be better…
● Activity on the site could be greater.

Site producer Jonathan Finkelstein considers about 75 percent of the community members to be active users. "We have three categories of community: one type is time-based [and] is busy for short periods because of an event, another type is the closed community … for professional objectives, and the third type is open playgrounds …."

The site spins off many subgroups. The New York City Department of Education uses an associated private community to provide weekly development sessions to its 11,000 professionals. A community of scientists is using a closed community to collaborate on improving nutrition in developing countries.

Furthering the community

People who participate actively in Learning Times have the opportunity for leadership roles and to help set new rules and rituals for members. The community offers a formal certification program for becoming a community "mayor." That designation ensures that a member understands not only the tools and technology of community building but also the best practices of "creating a vibrant collaborative online environment."

Several members have met online and then agreed to co-present at upcoming conferences. Corporate trainers have established spin-off communities to hold fee-based training programs. Workshops held online enable people around the world to be exposed to the teachings of Sivasailam Thiagarajan, known as Thiagi.

| LearningTimes product rating	
Ease of installation	★★★★
Interface	★★★★
Production quality	★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★
Value of purpose	★★★★
Documentation/support	★★★
Overall rating	★★★★

Jon Aleckson, owner and CEO of Web Course-works, assists companies in developing customized technology solutions for education and training initiatives. He also speaks and writes on e-learning project management and e-course quality standards; jonaleckson@webcourse works.com.

Author in a Flash
Reviewed by
Steven Hancock and Garin Hess
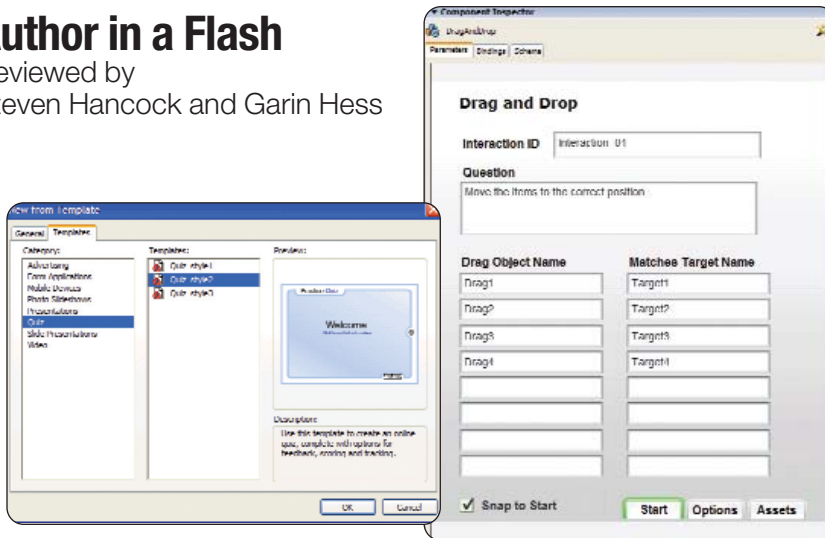
WITH ALL MAJOR WEB BROWSERS now incorporating the Macromedia Flash player, Flash content has become almost as commonplace as HTML. Thus, there's little reason to exclude the software as a viable method for developing and delivering e-learning.

Some of the advantages Flash offers over traditional HTML include the abilities to
- create interactivity with minimal file sizes
- develop applications with reusable components
- play applications online or as stand-alone programs
- deploy on multiple platforms, including all major operating systems, many PDAs, and some smart phones.

Ease of use

Macromedia has recently made changes to Flash that make it a better choice for an e-learning authoring environment. For example, the company provides several quiz templates that make it easy to get started with basic interactivity. Using those templates, you can create an online quiz that includes several interaction types in just minutes.

In recent versions, Macromedia has added support for animation, video, and audio. That makes Flash versatile for media-rich learning experiences. With broadband Internet connections becoming more common, instructional designers can create the kinds of engaging online learning experiences that were previously impractical.

One of the difficulties most e-learning developers run into with Flash is the question of how to assemble an entire course. How do you combine individual interactions and animations into a cohesive unit?

Flash offers several ways to approach course architecture. You can
- use separate HTML pages to link multiple Flash content pieces together
- use Flash's built-in Presentation templates or Flash Professional's Slide Presentation templates
- create a sequential navigation system inside of Flash, then pull content movie clips into a presentation area
- create an architecture based on an external text file, such as an XML file.

Flash product rating	
Ease of installation	***.5
Interface	***.5
Production quality	***.5
Ease of use	**
Value of purpose	***.5
Value for the money	***.5
Documentation/support	***
Overall rating	***.5

Steven Hancock and **Garin Hess** are principals of Rapid Intake, a custom e-learning courseware supplier and organizer of the annual E-Learning Developers Conference. Hancock and Hess are also the authors of *Using Flash MX to Create E-Learning* (Rapid Intake Press, 2004); stevehancock@rapidintake.com and garinhess@rapidintake.com.

Senge Sound Bites
Reviewed by Deanne Bryce

WHAT CAN YOU GAIN from watching a man sitting in a chair talking to a camera? When the man is Peter Senge, you can be challenged to think deeply about leadership, learning, and change.

One on One: Senge on Leadership and *One on One: Senge on Change and Learning*
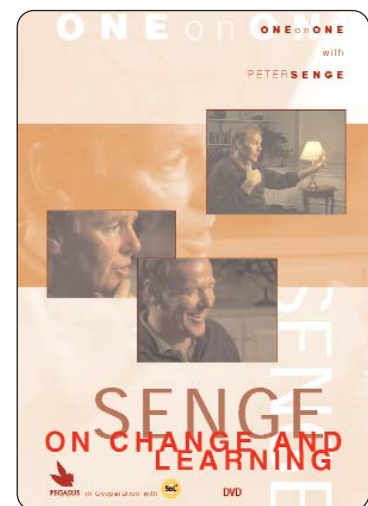
One on One: Senge on Leadership and
One on One: Senge on Change and Learning
Video/DVD, 2003
Pegasus Communications
www.pegasuscom.com; 800.272.0945
US$395 each, $595 for both
Included material: note to facilitators

Recommendation
Peter Senge is engaging on camera as he explains how to interact with organizations as living systems. The concepts are intriguing and the brevity holds the viewer's attention.

We liked…
- the intriguing ideas presented with brevity
- the content from a recognized expert.

both have a simple format: a short DVD or video broken up into discussion segments. An included note to facilitators offers questions for each segment.

One on One: Senge on Leadership has four parts: The Leader's New Role, Leading Change, Leading Through Trust, and Creating Leaders.

One on One: Senge on Change and Learning includes five sections: Change Through Learning, Obstacles to Change, Releasing Genius, Change Begins Here, and Achieving Results Together.

If you have the money to invest, I recommend that you buy these simple but compelling videos. Because program design-ers divided each video into sections that cover different topics, you can use them as stand-alone presentations to generate discussion or as assignments between training or coaching sessions.

One on One product rating	
Holds viewer interest	***.5
Acting/presenting	***
Production quality	**
Value of content	***.5
Value for the money	**
Overall rating	***

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