

Microsoft Office 365 and SharePoint
as an Educational Platform

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Certificate of Approval

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Abstract

This study looks at social constructivist learning theory and andragogy as a means of evaluating Microsoft Office 365® and SharePoint® as a platform for delivering online classes in the basic use of SharePoint to an audience of adult learners (New York State employees). The already wide access within New York State agencies to Office 365 and SharePoint makes it a good candidate for examination. If successful, online learning utilizing Office 365 would help to eliminate the geographical and existing software barriers to delivering occupational training to the more than 130,000 employees.

Social constructivist and andragogical learning theories were examined, and key elements identified to establish criteria to aid in evaluating Office 365, and potentially other platforms not specifically geared toward online education. Means of facilitating reflection, metacognition, sociocultural learning, prior and authentic experiences, and generative learning strategies were looked for in addition to support of Malcolm Knowles' andragogical assumptions.

Through prototyping and pilot testing of Office 365's functionality and features, several affordances were able to be made in support of criteria gathered from the literature review. Areas of strength and weakness as a platform for the delivery of online learning were identified in this process. Its success would vary based on the type of learning. Technical courses and corporate training would be more successful than a soft-skill or creative subject. Out of the box SharePoint provides most of the needed functionality to deliver content but, lacks elements such as a grading system.

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Method

The goal of this study was to assess the potential of Office 365 and SharePoint as a platform for delivering online instruction. Social constructivist learning theory and andragogy were used as benchmarks for the evaluation of Office 365 and SharePoint as a potential educational platform. The pre-existing features and functionality available were examined for their individual and wholistic value for affording or supporting social constructivist learning. It was then looked at for its ability to provide support of the andragogical assumptions of an adult centered learning program. Having taught online classes at an undergraduate level and taken them on a graduate level, I am keenly aware of the needs of both the student and the instructor. Providing a satisfying and valuable experience for the student and minimizing the administrative tasks of the instructor to allow more time mentoring and guiding students.

In the evaluation of Office 365 features were looked at for the support of social constructivist learning principles. More perceivable principles such as sociocultural learning rely on the affordance of communication methods. Communication can be supported by elements such as the discussion boards, Skype, or WebEx, and newsfeeds. Less observable, such as self-concept seen in andragogy, can be supported in other ways afforded by the platform itself. Distinct sections of content can be built to allow learners to focus on desired topics at their own pace, and to meet both personal motivations and motivations via learning goals.

The mock-ups for this study were produced using Microsoft SharePoint. Pages were created and examples of instructional material developed using built in features such as content areas and embed media options. Some HTML, CSS, and JavaScript were integrated into the site as a means of improving user interface design. These changes are minor and used only in the left-hand navigation to add collapsible headings for content sections.

Videos for office hours and instructional content were recorded using Cisco WebEx and Skype for Business, exported as an mp4 file, and hosted in Office 365 within the Video Portal. Annotated screenshots were created using Jing. Composites were created using Adobe Photoshop when a full page could not be captured in a single screenshot.

Introduction

The types of courses this was geared towards are both introductory and technical in nature. There is currently no option for a flexible class schedule, geographical, or on demand learning program covering basic technical skills in office productivity software, collaboration platforms, and cloud based solutions available to NY State employees. By creating a solution using existing resources, a wider audience can be provided with the necessary tools and skills for performing their job duties and in seeking career development or advancement. The subject matter chosen for this study was an introductory class covering Microsoft SharePoint. I would consider this an optimal subject given that the primary platform within Office 365 for content delivery is SharePoint itself. It is a unique opportunity to both teach on a subject matter while also using it as the delivery platform for the learning process.

The benefit of using Office 365 in the delivery of this type of training is the affordance of an authentic experience throughout. Learners will have the opportunity to work within the platform, receiving knowledge and learning directly from the software they are seeking to gain experience with in many instances. Several key elements of constructivist learning theory and andragogy are afforded via the platform in these types of online training. The analysis section of this study will go into further detail on how the platform can afford support of constructivist learning and andragogy.

Literature Review

This review is focused around social constructivist learning theory and andragogy. After an examination of both and their key components, conclusions will be drawn about their relationship to one another. I see these principles and assumption as being broken into two distinct categories.

1. *Internal Learning Influencers/Actions*, the learner performs thought actions or considers reactions as an individual in response to these influencers.
2. *External Learning Influencers/Actions*, the learner is influenced by peers, teachers, or other external stimulus from the learning process and produces a tangible action or response.

Social Constructivist Learning Theory

Social constructivist learning theory was selected and evaluated to establish criteria for evaluation of Office 365 and SharePoint. Social constructivist learning theory emphasizes several key elements to the learning process. *Reflection, metacognition, sociocultural learning, prior and authentic experiences, and generative learning strategies* (Malcolm S. Knowles, III, & Swanson, 2005).

Through reflection upon learned information or skills the learner internalizes knowledge. This process also encompasses the self-evaluation of one's strengths and weaknesses regarding a subject. By doing so the learner can focus on becoming more capable in areas of weakness (Jonassen, 2011). Many forms of reflection are structured into a cycle of thought. "*What, So what, Now what?*" is a popular learning cycle used to prompt the learner to describe, analyze, and construct knowledge about an experience (Borton, 1970) as a form of metacognition. Through this cycle of inquiry into the experience, learners critique their own abilities and seek ways to improve. While reflection may be reachable as an action for individuals, it is not an intuitive act and most are not taught reflection as a structured skill (Watanabe, 2016). Providing learners with opportunities for reflection does not mean they will make a valuable practice of it. Facilitation and creation of process awareness by the educator is needed.

Educators themselves should act as models for good reflective practice. Modeling correct forms of reflection and defining the process for learners can help ensure the contextualization of knowledge for the learner.

Reflection has the potential for many outcomes. Facilitation of reflection should be performed with consideration of the possible outcomes and with an end goal in mind. Depending on how broad the goals for reflection are, the facilitator can shape or prompt discussion of related topics (Reed & Koliba, 1995). There are many methods for prompting learner reflection. Questions or discussion topics that require the individual to comment on their own thoughts, progress, and experience. What makes sense to you? Was there a concept you found difficult to grasp? How can this apply to you? In online environments, this most commonly happens via discussion boards or live audio and video interactions. This type of facilitated reflection begins to draw on sociocultural learning to help strengthen the process. The use of Borton's three-part reflection cycle can be adapted for many topics. Within context of this paper and project's goal it might look something like the following:

What? What did we learn? What are the functions of the platform features examined?

So what? How are these features useful? What possible solutions do they provide?

Now what? How can we apply these to our daily business operations?

Development of proper reflection skills will require creating an awareness of the process in learners and fostering development of positive methods for doing so.

All successful learning requires a bit of metacognition. Thinking about thinking. A learner that understands and recognizes how they learn best means they can take internal actions to aid themselves where the educator cannot (Peña-Ayala, 2014). When learners engage in thought regarding strengths and weaknesses in their learning ability, they are employing metacognition. "My difficulty with grasping

this concept means I should take extra care with this similar concept." This self-awareness changes with intellectual growth. As we become more capable, our methods of learning change.

Cooperative learning activities such as discussion or collaboration help the learner to evaluate their own experience and knowledge against that of others. The construction of knowledge via sociocultural learning builds context through interaction with external sources (Gajdamaschko, 2015). This is also part of the process of seeking support or acknowledgement from others for experience and knowledge gathered. In corporate settings group discussion, collaboration, and problem-solving help to construct a group knowledge. This leads to acculturation into communities of practice (Cunningham & Duffy, 1996) where likeminded learners with similar goals form a body of working knowledge. This body of knowledge is used as a means of discovery through group discussion, group problem solving, and sharing of new knowledge. These communities of practice also become platforms for the learner to turn educator should they be so motivated. Through the process of teaching the learner can also gain better understanding of their own knowledge and process of thought. This can provide new metacognitive awareness and topics for reflection.

Prior experience has a noticeable impact on the adult learner. Learners with previous university or college education experience show a higher level of critical thinking skills and ability to take on new information (Bethune & Jackling, 1997). Prior experience also offers points of reference to draw upon in forming associations with new knowledge. This strategy of forming relational connections from past events helps to construct baselines for comparison with more recent information. Because each student is different, past experiences are also varied and impact comprehension of new information (Resnick, 1989). To quote Maria Baretto, *"...we cannot identify and recognize what we don't already know."* Without a foundation of knowledge or experience to build upon, the learner must start from the bottom and work their way up. Additionally, relational information and experience can be applied to shorten the

learning curve. It stands to reason that once you know how to read music and play the flute, moving forward to learn the saxophone will be much easier.

Through authentic experiences learners implement newly attained knowledge or practice skills. These experiences are best when they occur within context of the learner's environment in which they function. Having learners apply what they have learned to a real-world scenario increases retention by requiring them to find an application in their day to day activities. Learners may find benefit in looking for business needs or problems and developing a solution using newly attained knowledge. Promoting authentic learning experiences should be the focus of the educator. Educators as facilitators of the learning process encourage the process of creating useful solutions with knowledge worth sharing within a community of practice (Miller-First & Ballard, 2017).

In the process of drawing on experience, learners who actively create associations while learning will have a better wholistic understanding of the new knowledge. This generative learning strategy is a real-time implementation of many factors from metacognition, past experience, and reflection (Reid & Morrison, 2014). As an ongoing event, the learner takes an active rather than passive role in the educational process. This active role takes many forms from notetaking, underlining, asking questions, reiteration for clarification, and many other actions seen in classroom environments (Bobrow & Bower, 1969).

Andragogy

Andragogy encompasses the methods and principles of adult learning. It is centered around the student, experience, problem solving, and requires both educator and learner to collaborate (Dunn, 2002). As is not uncommon with theories and principles, there is a degree of relation between these andragogical assumptions and the principles of social constructivism. Andragogy became the umbrella under which many separate principles and practices were gathered to help explain adult learning

practices (Saunders, 1991). The term andragogy with Alexander Kapp, a German educator in 1833. Kapp used andragogy to describe elements of Plato's learning theory and as a contrary term to pedagogy, the principles and methods surrounding the education of children (Thorpe, Edwards, & Hanson, 1993). Roughly 134 years later, Malcolm Knowles, an American educator would become aware of the term and would eventually lead it to popularization in the United States during the 1960's. Knowles used andragogy and his ideas about adult learning to form a set of assumptions that explain the motivation behind adult learning. The number of these assumptions varies, having been revised and edited over the years with Knowles himself even adapting and changing them as he gained more understanding of adult learning. Andragogy can be explained in six assumptions on the motivation of adult learners (Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, 1984).

1. Need to Know
2. Foundation
3. Self-concept
4. Orientation
5. Readiness
6. Motivation

While the total number of assumptions varies and can be subject to debate, all seek to explain the difference in learning during adulthood compared to childhood (pedagogy). The unique aspect of adult learners is that motivations are often not concrete depending upon changes of situation in life. External elements can have a drastic impact on the internal motivation that drives adult learning. When an adult enters into an educational sphere they do so voluntarily and knowing all other responsibilities of adult life (parenthood, employment, social activities, etc.) remain (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006).

Need to Know: Why something is being learned or taught? Adults seek reason or rationale for their investment of time and energy. The educator should be able to offer a compelling case for the learner's investment in what is being taught.

Foundation: Positive (and negative) experience provide reference points for learning. Adults learn best by doing. This provides a foundation for the application of information. Hands-on experience with practical applications or exercises increases retention of new information. During this process adult learners may also be able to find relationships between the new information and previous experience. This foundational experience relates in many ways to the authentic and past experience principles of social constructivism.

Self-concept: Adults desire to take responsibility for their learning path and engaged in the organization and evaluation of their instruction. Because an adult brings all aspects of responsibility and self-direction of their life into the classroom with them, they predictable seek a level of control and responsibility over their learning as well (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006). One of the more successful methods of educating adults is through self-directed instruction. Putting the learner in control of their education, and the educator taking on a role of facilitation and guidance to enable the learner in assuming control of their education.

Orientation: Problem-solving oriented exercises help solidify the skills or information being learned. Content without context decreases retention and value for the learner. Information has a high value and is more likely to be retained when it is seen to have practical application to solve a problem or help preform a task (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). By letting the learner take the new information and engage it through problem-solving, they find a practical application for the information and begin to reflect on other applications for it.

Readiness: Subjects of immediate value or relevance are of the most interest to adults. Learning that provides instant value in professional or personal activities are the most sought after. As mentioned previously, high value information is desirable to adults. Adults are often left to figure things out or solve problems on their own. They seek out information that can assist them in the problem-solving process and help to make informed decisions.

Motivation: Adults have a better response to internal motivators than external ones. As adults, we are more receptive to learn or experience something new because we want to, and less receptive when this process is forced on us by external sources. While external events do put pressure on adults, it is the internal desire to seek a means of mitigating the pressure of the external event, self-satisfaction, and goal attainment that prompts action in adults (Means et al., 2009).

Conclusions of Literature Review

Learning is a fluid and multi-faceted process. Just as no two learners are alike, no single theory can fully capture the complexity of the learning process. In this examination of both social constructivist learning theory and andragogy we find areas of relation, overlap, and alternative considerations. I find the principles of constructivist theory mesh well with, and reinforce the assumptions of andragogy well in several areas.

Social constructivism's prior and authentic experiences principle work well with the foundation and orientation assumptions of andragogy. Hands on experience with practical application of knowledge not only shows the value of the information or skill, it also helps to create points of reference and connection to existing skills or knowledge. Retention increases as the learner sees the knowledge in action, relates it to an immediate need they have, and find an orientation for it through problem-solving.

Likewise, Self-concept and metacognition can be tied together. The learner, now an adult, has experienced many forms of education and by this point, usually knows best how they learn. By letting the learner take control of their learning they can more successfully implement what they already know about their learning process. SharePoint as a learning platform can provide the learner with control of when, what, and how they learn. A course can be built out to contain all the needed learning resources (text, video, quizzes, exercises) for self-motivated learning. A learner may already have a level of aptitude in a specific area of knowledge and need only a short video to confirm their understanding, rather than an in-depth reading assignment. SharePoint's ability to host both learning material mediums affords this. This also all allows for more accessible learning for multiple levels of familiarity with a given topic.

This led me to conclude these principles and assumption drive toward a division of learning elements, or influencers and actions in the learning process, and ultimately, learning resolution. These influencers and actions can be broken into two categories, internal and external, and often intermingle to varying degrees. These internal or external learning elements always exist in learning environments and processes. It should be noted that, the external being more tangible, is the more easily observed of the two. I feel the internal however, has more weight as it firstly, directly, and repeatedly impacts external learning elements.

Internal and External Learning Influencers/Actions

Internal learning influencers and actions are largely intangible. These happen in the mind or consciousness of the learner and often lead to external action on the part of the learner. Internal influencers come in the form of motivation, self-concept, and prior experience. An example of internal actions in response to these internal influencers would be reflection, metacognition, and generative learning strategy. Motivation as an internal influencer is continuously active throughout the process.

This drives the discipline to perform such internal actions as reflection upon new information and concepts. The need of an adult learner to take responsibility and control through self-concept can prompt the learner to plan and analyses their learning process through metacognitive activities and generative learning strategy.

These internal learning influencers lead to an internal learning action or resolve, which in turn leads to an external learning action. From motivation to reflection to discussion with peers about the results of the reflection via sociocultural learning principle. This in turn can lead back to an internalized learning element. External influencers/actions such as motivation, readiness, and sociocultural learning become part of this cyclical process of influencers and actions. This process can interweave and circle back on itself in a variety of ways based on the learner's path. Ultimately, this path leads to learning resolution. The point where the learner is satisfied with the learning process, the knowledges value, and application for it. Or, where the learner is dissatisfied and abandons the learning altogether or moves to seek other knowledge to fill their need.

Analysis of Office 365 and SharePoint

Using the analysis of social constructivist learning theory and andragogy as guides, O365 and SharePoint were examined for elements or features to reinforce the findings of the literature review.

Discussion Boards, Newsfeed, and Announcements

The facilitation of self and group reflection can be accomplished through implementation of the discussion board lists feature. As seen in dedicated online education platforms, the discussion board is the workhorse for written and platform centered communication between all parties directly involved with the class. Instructors can prompt students to reflect and respond on various topics covered by educational material or activities. The creation of subject or section categories allows the instructor to

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provide organizational structure to the discussion board that follows the curriculum progression. Discussion boards also support sociocultural learning by affording the students a platform for communication. The ability to attach or insert image, video, and file content further expands the capabilities for communication and collaborative efforts among students. An instructor could create several dedicated sections for collaborative problem solving, eliciting feedback, or general discussion among students. This can give students a way to reflect (Jonassen, 2011), and implement metacognitive practice in regard to their experience (Borton, 1970). This can also allow for affordance of andragogical elements such as self-concept. These discussion areas can be structured in a way that guides, but does not hinder the need for the learner to take control/responsibility of their learning (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006). Giving the learner a way to freely express through writing their opinion, assessment, etc. on a topic.

Discussion Board posts afford communication with students through written conversation. This feature can be used to enforce both reflection and sociocultural learning.

Students can engage in conversation through nested replies or the creation of new Discussion Board posts. Formatting tools and the ability to insert various media formats further enriches the potential communication methods to reinforce sociocultural learning.

Figure 1: Discussion Board in Microsoft SharePoint

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The Announcement list, while one directional in communication, could also be utilized by the instructor to prompt individual reflection or consideration of a topic prior to, or following key aspects of the course.

The Newsfeed can also be used for discussions and fostering sociocultural learning. Its informal structure is like social media feeds. Students can use the “@” symbol to mention other participants in posts in addition to hashtags to categorize and connect related information and discussions. Students can also include images and use the “Like” feature to express their approval or agreement. This shows yet another way that the use of prior experience (Bethune & Jackling, 1997) can be reinforced. Learners familiar with some of the more universal features of social media platforms will easily be able to implement that experience here. Encouraging the use of this functionality among learners can also bolster the sociocultural learning principle of constructivism (Gajdamaschko, 2015).

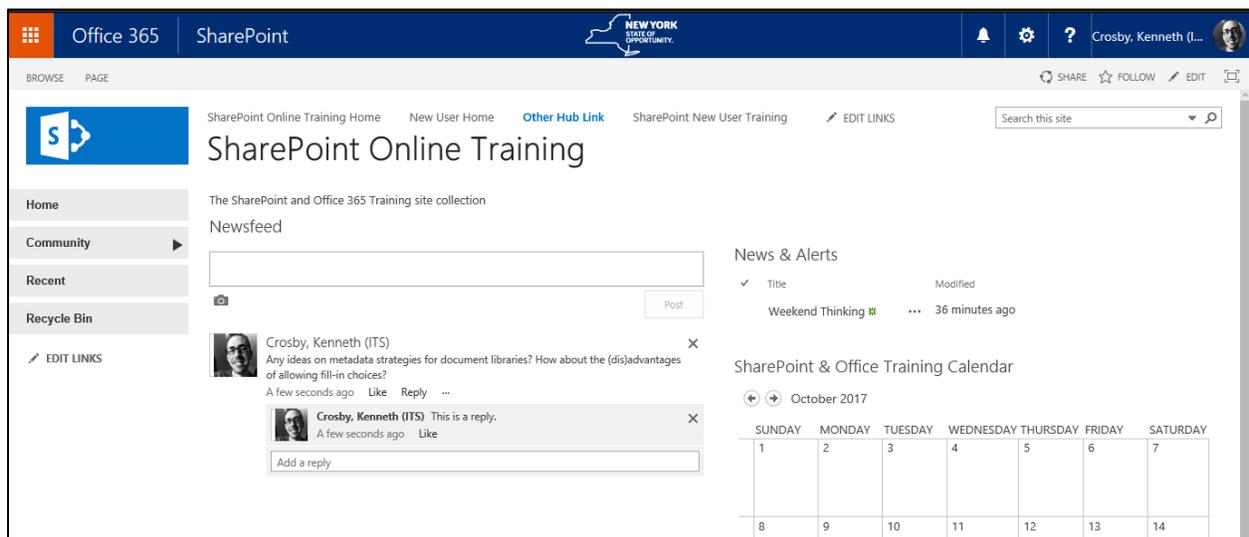


Figure 2: SharePoint Newsfeed with Posting and a Reply

Surveys

Survey lists could be used as a means of assessing student’s retention and understanding of core concepts and material covered. These assessments can provide context for metacognitive processes.

Knowing what one knows and does not know provides the framework for beginning to think about strengths and weaknesses in the learning process. Assisting students with self-evaluation by providing them a means of doing so without the act being chastising results in a more constructive learning experience. Learners will be encouraged to revisit areas of weakness to shore up gaps in knowledge or skills. This can also be a means of encouraging reflective thinking and actions with the potential for aiding the learner in developing generative learning strategies (Reid & Morrison, 2014). This along with practical application exercises and assignments, can also help to provide foundation for the new knowledge (Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, 1984).

List and Library Exercises

To promote authentic experiences and draw on prior experience of learners, the use of potential real-world scenarios using relevant data can aid retention and reinforce application of knowledge in meaningful ways. Learning exercises in both the lists and document library can be tailored to mirror a variety of real applications. By way of example, the task list is often used as a project management tool to inform and track progress of a project. Showing students, a potential usage and engaging them to interact with the list in that manner, then beginning conversation on other potential adaptations for it. The addition of calendar functionality would allow for recurring tasks to be scheduled. With assignments of task and alerts a notification system could be created to inform users of events or changes needing their attention. This also enables orientation (Means et al., 2009). The hands-on experience of working directly with a list or library is attainable within SharePoint via permissions. Several instances could be set up for learners to troubleshoot of work with key elements to gain experience working directly with the subject matter.

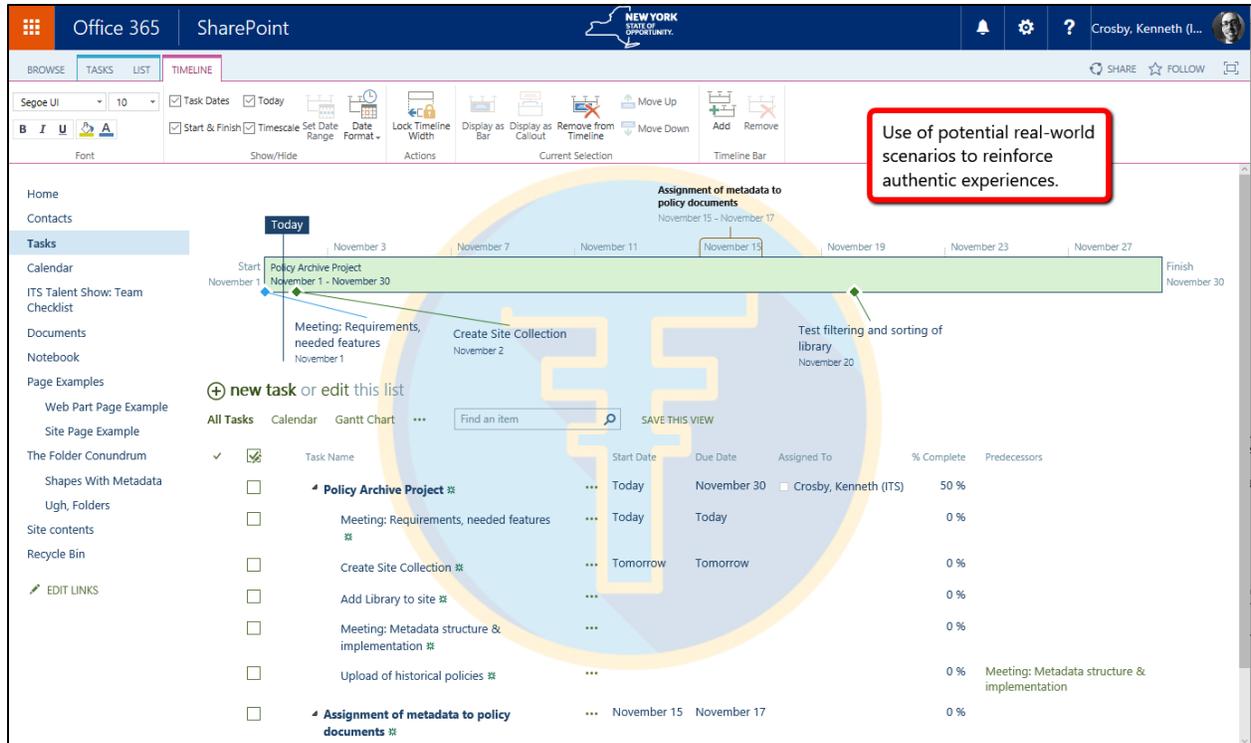


Figure 3: Authentic Experiences Facilitated by Emulating Real-World Scenarios

The additional benefit of providing learners with assignments and exercises that simulate real applications is the justification of why a specific skill or subject is being taught as expressed through the need to know in andragogy. In providing working examples, learners experience first-hand the functionality within SharePoint. Discussion and demonstration of file and folder systems versus metadata and filtering, for example, shows the benefit of organized metadata over folders when structuring a document library. These examples along with exercises gives further context for knowledge being acquired and shows the readiness of the knowledge (Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, 1984).

Office 365 Video Channel and WebEx/Skype for Business

Integrated into Office 365 and SharePoint is the ability to host video content. Video demonstrations or lectures can be hosted in a video channel and easily embedded into SharePoint pages for viewing by learners. The need for synchronous communication with video and audio is addressed by Skype for Business which is also integrated into Office 365. Multiple meeting participants can share

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video, audio, and screen activity. Written chat functionality is also available and meeting hosts can record the meeting for later availability if needed.

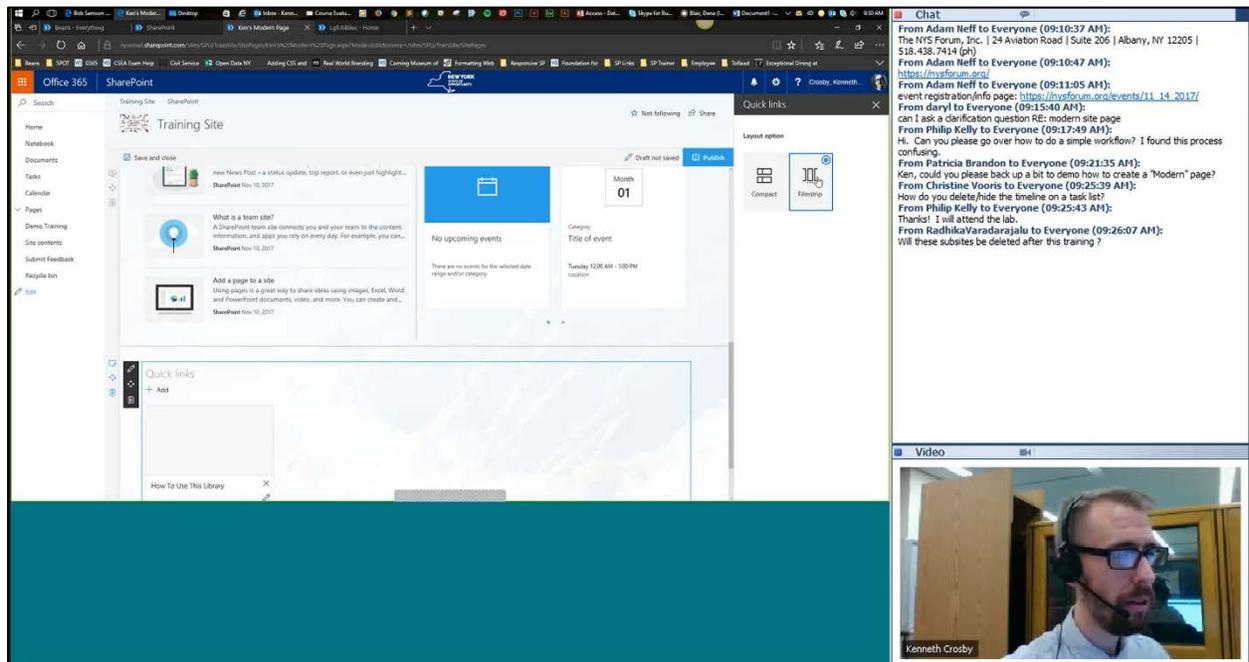


Figure 4: Synchronous Multimedia Communication Using WebEx and Office 365

Page Creation

Structured modules can be created using pages in SharePoint. Just like creating any other web-based page, content can be added to create dedicated resources for specific topics. Pages are the workhorse for delivery of multiple content types in single locations. A page can be built out with written instructional content, video demonstration, and embedded features such as a list or library for students to interact with to reinforce concepts delivered in the page's instructional content. More defined pages can also be built out to fill instructional needs or student learning accommodations. Structuring pages out with distinct subjects and content would also allow immediacy of access to specific knowledge. Learners would be able to jump to content they deem most valuable to them. There are multiple page types and layouts to be chosen from as defaults within SharePoint.

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The screenshot shows a SharePoint page for a training course. The page has a blue header with the Office 365 logo and the user's name, Crosby, Kenneth. The main content area is titled "SharePoint New User Training Course" and includes a search bar, navigation links, and a "What is SharePoint?" section. The section contains a video player with a play button and a list of instructors. The video is titled "Video Portal - training video" and has 4:28 duration and 290 views. The instructors listed are Crosby, Kenneth (ITS), Passinault-Caputo, Cassandra (L...), Cruz-Neal, Karim (DMV), and Class, Colton (ITS).

Figure 5: A Page Containing Text, Video, and Instructor Contact Information

Andragogy

One benefit Office 365 offers is the immediate availability of learning material. A learning site can be created and made available quickly to learners. Most learners in this environment will already have experience with spreadsheets, word processing, etc. Learners bring this experience and have the freedom to experiment and learn a new means of integrating this knowledge in a practical way. Exercises can also be structured around real-world business needs and problem-solving to afford orientation. Real-world business scenarios and solutions also illustrate the readiness of the learning (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006). Demonstrations of functionality such as version history, security

provisions, etc. only further illustrate the immediate relevance and use of the knowledge in a business environment. Finally, by structuring content in a manner that builds one skill or knowledge point atop another, the need to know can be satisfied. For example, a basic understanding on working with a list is needed before you can begin to learn how to build custom electronic forms. Knowing how to setup metadata is needed before you can create views to help organize content.

As motivation plays a large role in adult learning, SharePoint can be used to satisfy the immediate need with open access to learning content and resources. Motivation via occupational needs could be quickly satisfied through distinct learning sites and open access to all employees. The access and availability of the content gives power to the learner. When motivated to learn or continue learning, they simply need to log in and start.

Additional Affordances and Future Topics

Additional affordances outside of the scope of this paper include the administrative elements of an online class. These items could be future points for exploration of the platform. Regarding access, content delivery, and structure. Microsoft SharePoint is widely accessible for New York State employees within the Office 365 tenant. A site collection could be created to house the individual training sites, deliverables (video, documentation, etc.), and learning resources outside of the immediate training scope. The top-level (root) site would act as a resource center for all deliverable content associated with offered training topics, a space to trainers to communicate and collaborate on further curriculum development, and location for scheduled training classes.

The level one subsites off the top-level site could each be dedicated to a specific training topic. These level one subsites may act as knowledge centers for learners to refer to for additional information and content covered in training sessions. It is off these level one subsites that individual training sites could be created. By using the site templates functionality of SharePoint, a training site can be created

with a few clicks and keystrokes and deleted after the conclusion of the class just as easily. This would allow trainers to generate a fresh training site complete with the necessary documentation, files, quizzes, and exercises.

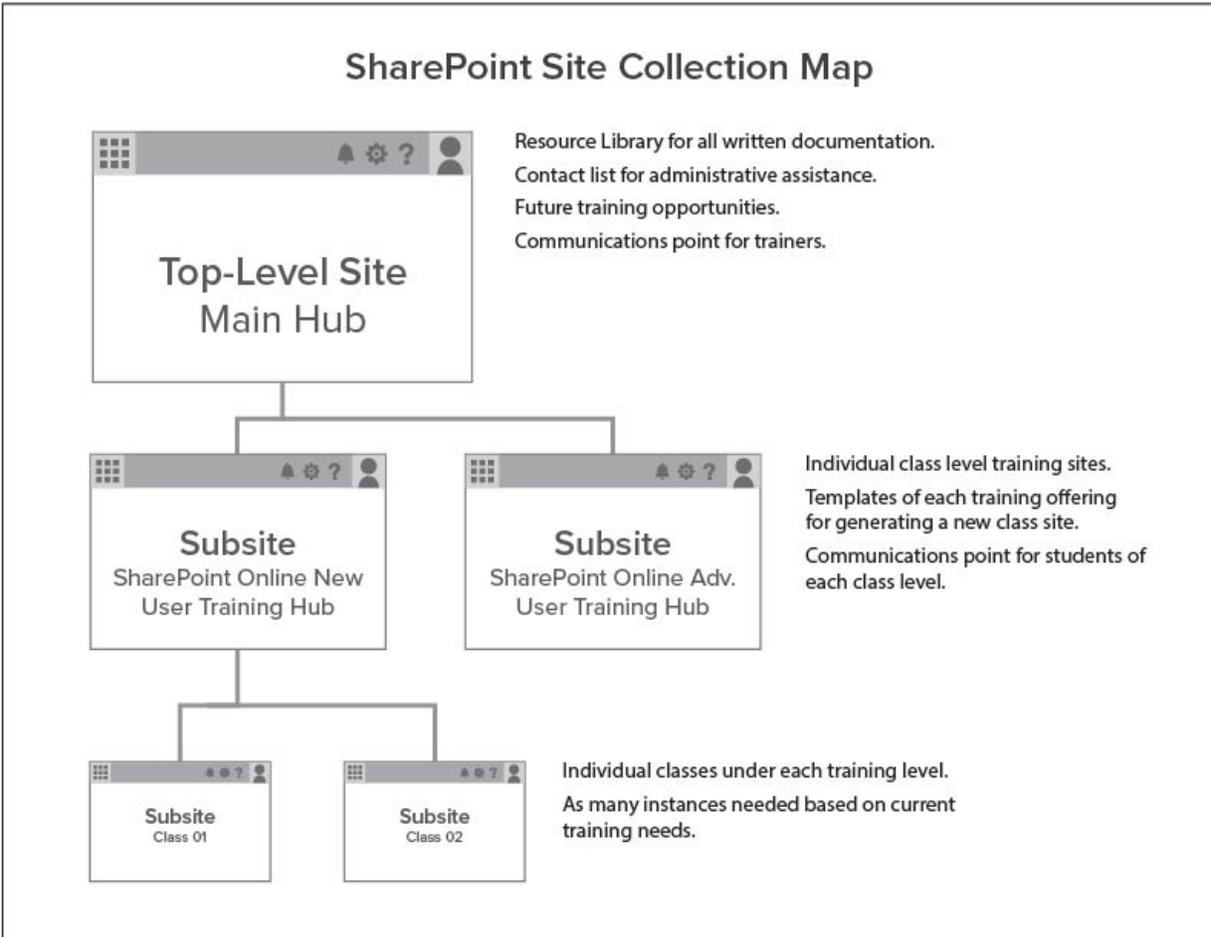


Figure 6: Example of a potential site structure.

Through these training sites students can be provided access to structured learning materials, video instruction, technical exercises, discussion boards for peer and instructor interaction, and quizzes. Instructors will be able to easily evaluate student progress and provide guided feedback to students in a timely manner.

Accessibility is also of concern. The Office 365 and SharePoint platforms have a variety of built in “accessibility checkers” to assess content. SharePoint does also have many areas to include alt tags,

descriptions, and meta data that is readable by assistive software and technology. Microsoft in recent months has begun to address the need for further responsive and accessible content delivery, and we have seen new features to help provide accessibility added in the form of new page and content types. There is still much to be considered to achieve a satisfactory level of accessibility. Combined with some of the quirks of the platform and its recent changes, a manual or guide to accessibility with SharePoint would be beneficial but, a larger and separate effort to develop.

The lack of a grading system also means that SharePoint would be more appropriate out of the box for things like corporate training where grades are not of much concern. A grading system could be developed as a separate effort using custom lists, workflows, and data connections to user accounts.

The next step, I feel, at this point would be to pilot a class to gather feedback. Setting up a series of pilot classes with surveys and interviews with learners engaged with the testing would provide beneficial data on further strengths and weaknesses, in addition to highlighting areas for improvement in the way content can be delivered with the platform. It would also be interesting to see how this would perform in a hybrid learning environment, as a classroom tool, or in a meta learning situation where learners are taught to use Office 365 and SharePoint while learning something else.

Conclusions

Overall Office 365 and SharePoint work well as a platform for the development of online courses or training where the subject matter is of a technical nature, and the learning does not require a grading element. Several standard features are some of the strengths of the platform such as discussion boards, file hosting, synchronous media sessions, and the ability to create pages of content afford many of the necessary items for an online course. Learners would have access from any internet connected location, affording many of the motivational needs adults have regarding learning. The platform would be an acceptable solution for corporate training and open access learning for employees.

As a weakness, the lack of a grading system out of the box limits its deployment for more academic purposes. As a result, it would be more successful for technical subject matter than creative or soft-skill learning. This is to be expected. As a platform, it is geared toward business solutions and not to the arts and humanities. It is possible the platform could be adapted to help afford more non-technical learning subjects. But, I feel it is more likely that it would be successful as an in-classroom augmentation to these types of learning subjects.

Aside from these noted deficiencies, the platform has all the needed tools to stand up a learning resource or deliver a/synchronous learning to 10 or 10,000 individuals, and has strong potential for further application with future development of functionality such as grading and record keeping system.

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