After looking at the reality of a Tin Can API world, Megan Bowe urges L&D to challenge the status quo by giving learners ownership and control of their personal data.

DESIGNING FOR
CONSCIOUS DECISIONS

What drives most of us into the learning profession is a desire to help people to learn, to get better and to grow. In light of the possibilities that Tin Can Application Programming Interface (API) now opens up, we need to reframe how we might approach designing interactions; why and how we encourage people to be conscious about making decisions regarding personal information.

None of us want to bore learners with irrelevant courses, or offer information repeatedly on tasks they already know (looking at you, **Clippy**). Personalising learning, matching it to a person's skills and needs, and driving the search for information are the areas we want to get into. While **Tin Can API** (a.k.a. Experience API) is a new specification, the technology inside is not, as it is already in use in many of the applications, systems and social tools we use every day.

PARALLEL PRACTICES

How consciously do you consider what's happening when you authorise services like **Mint.com** or social networks like **Twitter** to access your data? For example, a news site asking permission to access your Facebook account before you start reading. Does it explain why it needs this access? Does it say what data will be harvested or how it will be used? Does it allow you to collect the data about your interaction, other than posting back to Facebook?

Good interaction designers have the skills to make fairly complex technology accessible to the less technically savvy. However, the more complex the connections between tools, the more we need to take responsibility for ourselves in this web.

Many people authorise access, and good interaction design keeps them from having to think too hard about it. Often the objective is to make a profit – we get personalised ads in return for sharing our personal data. The simplicity of the interaction doesn't challenge a person to consider what they're consenting to, or how the technology works. This discourages people from making conscious decisions about their privacy. In fact, they are hardly aware they're making decisions at all.

PARALLEL EVENTS

The TimeHop application reminds you of events that occurred exactly a year ago – happenings on *other* social networks. TimeHop uses Twitter, Facebook, FourSquare, and Flickr's APIs to search for day-by-day reminders. The same networks then allow re-sharing, with new comments. As a learning professional, I would love to see this on the cognitive front, to remind people of an accomplishment and ask what they still recall a year later.

Think about how much brands would pay to see changes in product opinion over a year-long period, but with the added value of reflective comments from consumers. *Present Shock* author **Douglas Rushkoff** writes: "If you're not the customer, you're the product." If you benefit from a free service, it's worth considering what you are giving up, to create profits for others.

Since social networks, and retail, advertising and marketing industries are less than altruistic in their use of this technology, we in L&D must choose the higher road. Personalised advertising mines data in social networks and is no longer dependent on what's submitted to a search engine. Taking our cue from this, we must add conscious decision-making. We must nudge awareness about how shared data will be used; and encourage people to decide if that's what they want.

TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

Learning and performance information is extremely high-stakes data. Learners need obvious ways to escape filter bubbles and turn off the personalisation – and we need to lead the charge. We must give our work more grounding than any other industry by weaving conscious decisions into each interaction we design. Two things need to be apparent when someone is asked to make a decision about their personal information; when, for example, signing up to something new or connecting applications to existing accounts. They are:

1. What data will this service collect? Will it end up with the initial company only or with a third party? If the service shuts down, what happens to the data?

2. Can you own the data created through your interactions with the service? ...and how?

People are not yet asking these questions because they don't realise they should. They're not considering the reality of authorisation because it's so well obscured. Amazingly simple interactions for complex processes have led to unconscious decision-making. A designer's job is to help people to recognise this knowledge gap, to ask

questions or hunt for information. We need to surface this gap.

Consider how **Evgeny Morozov** describes the contrast between how humans approach technology and how scientists must approach experiments: "Science [of course] does have a moral code, which would be apparent to anyone who's ever tried to conduct experiments involving humans. Many such experiments would need to be approved by various human subject panels and institutional research boards. Scientists don't just spontaneously try things; they are forced to think through social and political consequences of their work, often well before entering the lab."

This concept holds true when using Tin Can API – everyone needs to consider the impact of a plan before jumping into it.

SECURE AND CONSISTENT

All applications and services have some sort of data storage model. Many use similar protocols (REST) and formats (JSON) for their APIs, they move data from one place to another). An API is invisible on the surface. If you could see the API working and had to manage it directly, as the user, the interaction would be complex and time consuming. The Tin Can API has a few moving parts, most notably:

• Statements record data about any activity a person or group has done in a standard way

• Learning Record Stores (LRSs) collect statements and share them with other systems: an LMS could have an LRS, Yammer could have an LRS, SharePoint could have an LRS. Also, one LRS can be fed statements by the LMS, Yammer, and SharePoint

Tin Can defines specific ways in which statements represent data and how an LRS should send and receive data securely. This creates consistently formatted data capable of moving between systems. The specification doesn't discuss sense-making (reporting), and nor should it. A technology specification isn't responsible for defining a quality metric or measurement; that's the designer's responsibility. The Tin Can API's purpose is to provide a means to combine data from many tools to measure, find patterns and evaluate feedback loops.

THE BATTLE FOR OWNERSHIP

Statements are fed to LRSs that can share them with other LRSs. Imagine if you could take your learning history from one employer to the next! Well, now you can. But this might lead to privacy concerns, and for good reason. Can you think of anything scarier than your data being

moved around easily? One answer is to blindly volunteer large amounts of your personal data for someone else to own. Your data moved where you can't see it or make use of it. With a standard for how data can be securely moved, why *shouldn't* you own and control your own data?

We've become accustomed to others owning our data. We lack proof of our experience with systems, of educational institutions we've attended, and of knowledge we've gained outside the traditional channels. We're still listing our accomplishments in CVs or digital résumés like LinkedIn. We must start routinely asking for what is ours. We can't wait for companies to volunteer our data – there's no value in that for them.

Before consenting to a new service ask: how your data will be used? What you can own? And how you can do that? We can then look at ourselves analytically and review our performance against our goals. Often referred to as a Personal Data Locker, this concept allows us to choose what to share with organisations and others. In a Tin Can world, a personal data locker could take the form of learning record store owned by an individual.

The technology is already here. It is up to us learning professionals to rise to the challenge.

Control your own history

Why shouldn't *you* be the one to control your own information, rather than every company or app you authorise to access your data? The technology is already here.

• 'Watershed' uses an emerging experience language called the Tin Can API and is a prototype

• You can collect learning experiences and accomplishments from inside or outside the workplace, and store them in a single space

• The data belongs to you. You can see what you've done across many systems and decide how it should be used. You can share it with colleagues, employers and schools – or not.

Create a beta profile here:
http://watershed.ws

Megan Bowe is a Tin Can API strategist at Rustici Software
http://scorm.com/
Twitter: @meganbowe @projecttincan