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E-LEARNING: FANTASY OR REALITY?

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Abstract

Web 2.0 technological developments have mainly drawn the interest of young people recently, due to the social aspects, and have played an important part in supporting various activities at Edge Hill University. The use of this technology can help educators create effective online learning communities. Teaching and learning in any subject can sometimes become mundane but in order that students are motivated it is sometimes necessary to use an innovative approach. The methods adopted at Edge Hill University (EHU) are to use a baseline VLE (Blackboard) at module level, virtual learning groups (Moodle) for collaboration to enable learners who would otherwise physically be unable to meet to come together in cyberspace, and Web 2.0 technology to explore the potential of social and virtual worlds (Second Life^{TM}).

Key words: Web 2.0 technologies; VLE; Blended Learning; Collaboration

1 Introduction

Web 2.0 is a term that means different things to different people. To some, it is the revolutionary change in the way that we use the WWW, whilst to others it is just another 'technology fad'. There have been numerous attempts at defining what Web 2.0 actually is (Alexander, 2006; Anderson, 2007; Franklin and van Harmelen, 2007; Crook, 2008;) but there is no real consensus on an underlying definition. However, there are a number of key themes that emerge, which collectively, should give us a working definition:

- Web 2.0 represents a change in how people use the WWW, it is now seen more as a place for publishing content and making it available to the masses, rather than just using it for information retrieval.
- Users now have the power to contribute to the content available on the WWW, rather than being dependent depending on content generated by others.
- The WWW is now seen as a platform as opposed to a system; users can create applications and services which harness the power of the Internet.
- Content and data is now more valuable than ever; not only is it being generated, but is being manipulated and re-used to provide a new set of services and applications, in many ways that were never first intended by the author.

2   Motivation for using Web 2.0

When making a decision on whether to use Web technology within education, Boling and Frick (1997) suggest that a number of questions should be answered first before any attempt at using technology is made. These questions include:

- what is the problem that needs to be solved?
- how will the use of the WWW be of benefit to the students?
- what does the use of this technology offer?

It is only when suitable answers have been derived, that a decision can be made on what particular technologies are going to be used.

Web 2.0 technologies are especially attractive to young people, due to the social aspects which allow for easy communication, collaboration and expression of personal identities (Crook and Harrison, 2008). Likewise, it has been noted that some characteristics of Web 2.0 fit well with initiatives that are currently being discussed within education. Crook and Harrison (2008:11) argue that some of these characteristics seem to:

- Offer new opportunities for students to be able to take control of their own learning and have the ability to access customised information, resources, tools and services.
- Encourage a wider range of expressive capability.
- Help facilitate more collaborative ways of working, sharing knowledge and dialogue.
- Help 'furnish' a setting for students to achieve as well as attracting an authentic audience.

Students need to be able to interact with content in a way which will help them to learn more easily, so the design of such an environment plays an important part. Downes (2005) supports this by arguing students need to play a more important part in their own learning and need to have more control over what they see and do. It is no longer enough to consider the differing learning styles of students, nor is it enough

to just allow them to change the colours and sizes of text or backgrounds. Crook and Harrison (2008:11) argue that the developments in Web 2.0 technologies can be linked to initiatives in education and state four areas of impact that they can have: enquiry, literacies, collaboration and publication.

Taking into consideration the cognitive aspect of education, Web 2.0 technologies allow students to become more confident in new forms of enquiry and literacy. Users need to 'acquire the skills that are necessary to navigate and interrogate this new knowledge space' (Crook & Harrison, 2008:11). Users also need to be able to become more literate in digital formats for the expression of content that go above and beyond the medium of print. On the social side, Crook and Harrison (2008) argue that 'effective' Web 2.0 users need to be comfortable with collaborative engagement, must welcome new opportunities for publication and the added attention from other users that this brings.

3   Baseline VLE at EHU

In August 2008 the Faculty of Arts and Sciences mandated that each department introduced a 'baseline entitlement' for students in regards to its Blackboard VLE. The Business School, which consists of a technical computing team and non-technical business management team, devised a baseline where each student would have access to all relevant module and course information. Each module had a separate area within the VLE, but all modules would be consistent in both 'look and feel' as well as information. Due to the mix of skills, the initial baseline was simplistic in terms of functionality and almost self managing once initially configured. The baseline consisted of:

- A learning schedule, outlining the content and structure of the module including the rooming details for lectures and seminars.
- Module information (module handbook, assessments, reading lists and learning outcomes).
- Lecture slides/notes and seminar tutorial work.
- Resource folder containing web links, electronic books and journal articles, etc.

All of the module leaders were encouraged to expand upon the baseline by using additional tools and features, such as electronic submission and marking of work and feedback, class forums, student blogs and self assessment quizzes/tests in order to use the VLE to its full potential.

After a short interim, the feedback elicited a disinterest in Blackboard and it can be concluded that the baseline template alone does not align with O'Hear's argument as it does not embrace the social aspects of Web 2.0 technologies, nor does it facilitate interactive engagement with the module. It is only when the tutor embraces the use of the technology and expands upon the baseline by inclusion of video / audio lectures, class / team and individual forum/blog areas, electronic assessment submission and electronic feedback that O'Hear's argument is accurate in this instance. Without expansion, the baseline template does not promote e-learning, motivation or inclusion but instead is merely acting as a 'content repository' in which students can gain access to content required for the module.

Since Blackboard was an institutional decision and not a departmental or faculty choice, answers to the four questions posed by Boiling and Frick could not be achieved in relation to the VLE itself. However, the questions can be answered in relation to the choice of tools utilised in order to assess the usefulness and possible expansion of the baseline template. The outcome is that in its current form is it not sufficient and should be expanded to include some of the Web 2.0 technologies previously mentioned. Later this academic year we will undertake a series of quantitative information gathering exercises in order to gather the perception of both students and staff about the VLE and what value the web2.0 social tools would bring, if any, to the learning experience.

4   Web 2.0 as part of the blended learning environment

EHU has established virtual learning groups (using Moodle) over the past three years in collaboration with other universities to teach level 6 modules. One of the most interesting aspects of this type of collaboration is the element of fantasy that exists when using any form of e-learning. This has led to the exploration of using this type of experience with schools, as we try to raise the aspirations of young people and are continually striving to forge strong links with schools. This allows us to establish a relationship with pupils who would not perhaps aspire to further study, either at an F.E. college, or eventually at university.

We are currently examining the potential that a virtual educational island setting in Second Life™ can provide with collaboration between EHU and Barnfield South Academy (BSA). This partnership is looking at developing projects that serve to illustrate the positive potential that integration with virtual worlds have to expand the institutional school/campus presence as well as simulate new learning experiences. It is hoped that this virtual world will begin to prepare students for emerging employer expectations.

BSA are using Second Life™ in a project called 'Teen Grid' as a vehicle for student and staff social networking, enterprising learning and curricula-enhancement. This type of multi-user environment lends itself, in an educational context, to learners rehearsing all of the competences, skills and sub-skills that are essential if students are to succeed across the curriculum.

We are aiming to use Teen Grid to develop long distance student collaborations in the next academic year. This virtual world is an excellent environment for simulated development of a virtual business, which could include finance, associated product branding, product development and marketing- in fact all the aspects involved in the real world. Students from BSA would be allocated a student mentor from EHU who could assist them in certain area of their work e.g. creative media, ICT, business enterprise etc. This virtual world will begin to prepare students for emerging employer expectations. Success will not be measured straight away as this is a long term

initiative, but should be measurable by the number of students who continue into H.E. and ultimately F.E.

Web 2.0 technological developments have played an important part in supporting these activities to enable them to become a reality. These developments also give rise to certain approaches that educators need to consider for adoption in relation to teaching and learning, which look at 'the multi perspective nature of knowledge, the reality of multiple literacies, the value of collaborative thinking and learning and the significance for creativity of finding an audience' (Crook and Harrison, 2008:12).

5   Conclusion

We are continually adapting in the context of e-learning and need to think about creating a learner experience that adjusts to various conditions over time, with the intention of increasing pre-defined success criteria.

O'Hear (2006) argues that e-learning initiatives should embrace the technologies of today and present a move away from the e-learning scenario of VLE's. The use of social and virtual worlds can work together to help support an online learning community for students. The added bonus is that the rigid structure of a VLE does not have to be adhered to, and students can engage with the content more interactively.

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