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Social Networking for Practice Learning

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Introduction

Social networking is a core characteristic of Web 2.0, and supports sharing and interaction around resources created, identified and managed in various ways by users. O'Reilly (2005) identified harnessing collective intelligence as a key feature of Web 2.0, with hyperlinking of resources underpinning the networking and cumulative effects of user interaction.

Social networking covers a wide range of tools, including blogs, forums, wikis, social bookmarking, syndicators, affinity systems such as Facebook, and so on. It is also referred to as social software, defined as software that supports group interaction (Owen, Grant, Sayers and Facer, 2006). It presents challenges to both students and practitioners, including concerns about privacy and safety, lack of new pedagogic models, and time constraints through learning new technologies and maintaining their effective use (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008). While social networking is being applied within schools and universities, this tends to be in 'hotspots' and limited to innovators rather than being widespread (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008), with the possible exception of computer mediated conferencing, a technology with at least a decade of wide availability and use. It has been used at scale at The Open University (OU) since 1989, but while there is also increasing use of wikis and blogs, there is little use at the OU of commercially available tools such as Delicious, Facebook, Google Reader or Twitter, for teaching and learning.

This paper describes a project set up to use these social networking tools as a way of exploring how they might be designed into future courses and learner support. The project, Social Networking for Practice Learning (SNPL) was funded in March 2008 by the Practice-Based Professional Learning Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (PBPL CETL) at the OU and is still underway. It is led from the Institute of Educational Technology with contributions from the Department of Communication and the Library, and involves both faculty and tutors, (known in the OU as Associate Lecturers or ALs) who teach for the OU.

SNPL: The Project aims and activities

SNPL uses methods pioneered in a previous project where a small group of staff and tutors used a similar set of tools (Scantlebury, Brown and Thorpe, 2008). SNPL launched in March 2008, with a small group of tutors, (four from the Business School and five from the Faculty of Health and Social Care), working approximately two days a month, learning how to use social networking tools and completing reports on their experience. They worked from home, communicating with each other and the project leaders using a closed Facebook group set up for the project, a wiki, audio-visual conferencing (FlashMeeting) and email. The nine tutors were successful in forming a supportive online group, working together on various tasks and completing both individual and joint reports which they uploaded to the wiki.

The project used video and text explanations delivered via a dedicated wiki for how to create accounts on Delicious, Facebook and Google Reader. Flashmeeting was used approximately every two months so that members got to know each other better and share views. At the heart of the activity was the wiki, which built up through tutors adding their reports on how they used the tools, offering advice on resolving difficulties and contributing suggestions for how to use the tools.

All the tutors contributed effectively to the project, gaining fluency in the use of the four main tools and completing shared and individual tasks. This demonstrated that it is possible to use video and text explanations successfully with a distributed group so that they make effective use of tools that are new to them. Key to getting tutors involved and committed was the provision of practical activities for the group to undertake and complete within a defined period. This gave the group a focus for what to do at each stage, with some tasks done individually and some collaboratively.

Shared Tagging

One of the early tasks gave tutors a positive sense of the potential of Delicious for teaching. We agreed to search for resources about social networking, and to use the same tags when we saved them to our Delicious account. Thus a resource that was about Delicious would be tagged 'SNPL_Delicious', a resource that mentioned or was directly relevant to the OU could be tagged 'SNPL_OU' and so on. In effect this was to replace a folksonomy approach with something closer to taxonomy, with the group using the same set of tags, not only for saving items but for searching to see what others had found using the same tags. The benefits of working together as a group were also enabled by explaining how to create a network using our Delicious account names. Each tutor could then see all the bookmarks of their fellow tutors on the project, could follow up interesting items and thus benefit from the shared activity. They also elected to follow other users whose bookmarks they found interesting, thus potentially widening their frame of reference well beyond our group.

Designing Delicious into a course

Once familiar with the tools, tutors were asked to design an activity using Delicious that would contribute to students' achievement of the learning outcomes of a course that the tutor was familiar with. All chose to exploit the shared tagging facility of Delicious and to use it to maximise the benefits for a defined student group, as the example in Figure 1 from the Business School illustrates.

Figure 1: An activity relevant to a Business course in the area of Managing Knowledge

The course team and tutor group use Delicious before students start the course. Tags relevant to the course are defined in advance. Tutors and course team create Delicious accounts, save and tag (using the agreed tags) relevant resources for each of the units in the course. Students begin their course, then use the guidance on setting up their own Delicious account and shared tags. They tag at least ten resources that are relevant to the course, thus making them available to the whole cohort of students. They use the notes field in the Delicious tag pop-up box to explain what each resource has contributed to their understanding of managing knowledge/the course. The course assignments will include a requirement for students to use some of the resources they find on Delicious, in addition to their course materials, to address assignment questions.

Delicious can be used to keep students up to date with current practice. Articles in the knowledge management journals can be tagged on Delicious and thus made more accessible. Many are available free via the OU Library but students need encouragement to explore them. The benefit for each cohort of students is that it can see the resources that previous students have found most useful and thus use Delicious to develop their own knowledge management skills.

Tutors from Health and Social Care also found no difficulty in designing a similar activity using Delicious in their area, as the example in Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2: An activity relevant to an introductory course in understanding health and social care

Tutors use Delicious before students begin, saving resources using an agreed set of tags relevant to the course and set up by the course team. When students begin they use videos and explanatory guidance to set up their own Delicious account, learn how to save and tag items and to set up a network of their tutor and fellow students, exploring the resources saved by their tutor. Students post their Delicious user name to the tutor group forum so that others can add them to the tutor group network. Students search websites relevant to the first block in the course, starting with these suggestions:

www.communitycare.co.uk; www.dh.gov.uk; www.guardian.co.uk/society

They should save, tag and describe relevant resources from these sites. Sharing experience in the tutor group forum will be encouraged. Students are also asked to compare any differences of approach between the Community Care journal and the government websites. Students are encouraged to keep searching and saving relevant items and the final assignment asks them to use these resources to answer a question about policy and regulation in health and social care.

One tutor on the project had had success already in getting students to use social bookmarking on their course, quoting some enthusiastic student feedback:

"I love this bookmarking thing!! My computer has a habit of crashing and losing "my favorites" which has been annoying me for a long time, now I won't have that problem!" However others had not been so successful, because use of the tool was not built into the course. There is an undoubted time commitment initially in setting up

an account and using it on a regular basis. Students need to see social bookmarking tied into their course content before making this commitment. Tutors were asked to say which learning outcomes could be delivered by using social networking and they identified outcomes such as the following, where it would be beneficial:

- Locate information relevant to current issues in health and social care

- Evaluate the reliability of different sources of evidence

- Use a wide range of study skills, including social bookmarking

- Demonstrate an understanding of the potential and problems of ICT for managing explicit knowledge

- Understand that good information sharing and communication skills contribute to better outcomes for service users

- Discuss strategies for engaging family, community and professional support networks

Other tools and activities

Tutors also worked together in discipline-based groups to select RSS feeds they would recommend to their faculty colleagues as a good basis for keeping up to date. They drafted a collaborative report and justified their recommendations. Tutors were very aware of the overload problems of subscribing to more feeds than can be realistically reviewed and read. They were also invited to draft general advice to help any tutor to start using the same tools and offered many realistic pointers such as the following:

- Sometimes the amount of bookmarks to read can be overwhelming. I now think carefully about whether the bookmark will add value or just take up space.

- Avoid adding sources without careful tagging, description and use of bundles (groups of tags) because you will never look at them again unless they are signalled as relevant and in what way they are relevant.

- Avoid adding people to your network list impulsively as you can end up with hundreds quite quickly – be evaluative and cautious and ensure they add value to your network.

The project team also considered whether Facebook might offer a single platform from which to access Delicious and other tools that can be added as applications to an individual's Facebook page. The benefit of this is simplicity and ease of access but the full functionality of each tool is not available via a Facebook API. One alternative was to make use of the enhanced functionality of gadgets that could be embedded in a 'white label' (user-generated and customisable) social network like Ning. These gadgets – and the possibility of adapting them easily, using WYSIWYG Flash-based tools like Sproutbuilder – offered a more complete reproduction of each individual tool's function. However, two problems dissuaded us from their use. The first was that a 'closed' group like Ning which was separated from a much larger social network such as Facebook might suffer from not becoming integrated into daily practice. Second, having to embed a gadget into a Ning page (an <embed> code is required) creates an unhelpful hurdle for many tutors. In addition, our judgement in the end was that the benefits of each tool could only be realised through setting up an account for each tool.

The future

The project has begun a new phase which aims to expand our user base to include members of faculty and to communicate the potential of social networking across the university and beyond. A new site is being created in the content management

system Drupal, drawing in all the resources from the project wiki – the videos and guidance, the designs for use of Delicious and RSS in courses and discipline areas, the hints and tips. Although the videos and explanatory material for how to use the tools have been produced by specialists, the other materials are the product of tutors themselves and have an authenticity that will communicate effectively to their colleagues and to faculty who are new to these tools.

Conclusion

The tools we have explored in this project represent only part of what social networking has to offer, but they do offer 'quick wins' for teaching and learning that we have now demonstrated in practice. One of the challenges of adopting new technologies is seeing how to design the use of the tools so that they really do deliver the promised benefits within a teaching and learning context. '…all pedagogies necessarily involve technologies of communication and thus the history of pedagogy is inextricably linked to the history of media.' (Cousin, 2005). This requires more than just understanding the affordances of particular tools, important though that is. By using the tools and developing short pedagogical scenarios set within current courses, we have created exemplars embedded within realistic practice, that will be used as the project expands during 2009, using the new project site on the Drupal platform, combining resources with discussion. We have already faced the ever-present challenge of sites not being under the direct control of the University. The interface for both Facebook and Delicious has changed, entailing updating of the videos. We anticipate this will be a continuing requirement and we will consider expanding into new tools such as twitter, depending on their promise. Also users have to adopt back-up strategies where possible, to ensure that vital resources are saved, in the event of failure of a particular tool. Although institutions try to control the

environments their students use so that they remain robust and reliable, it would be counter productive not to make good use of tools that are available off the shelf, and with a large user base. Our interest in creating effective uses of a limited range of social networking tools within our own institution, is that we need to develop skills and motivation among our students to continue to use them beyond their studies, as lifelong learners. In that context they will need good strategies for how to use tools that are freely available on the internet, and to build up their own learning environments, even where such tools change or are replaced by others. We have created an imaginative project site that has demonstrated how that might be delivered through course teaching and which offers an environment in which staff can learn both how to use the tools and what kind of activities might best deliver their benefit for our students.

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