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Social Networking for Student and Staff Learning

Abstract

A project involving university tutors is using social networking tools to enable them to explore their benefits for both their own knowledge management, and for student learning. The value of a tool such as Delicious for accessing information through shared tagging and the use of networks was readily seen by tutors, who applied this approach to activities they designed for students. Working together in a defined group using detailed activity guides completed in cooperation by target dates, was also essential in moving the group beyond mere registration with particular tools, into regular use within each tutor's practice. RSS feeds, a closed Facebook group, a project wiki and email have all played specific roles in supporting the group and individuals. Resources created by the project, together with examples of social networking tool use generated by these tutors, are feeding forward into continuation of the project with an expanded group of staff.

Social Networking for Practice Learning

Social networking is used to refer to the many tools and applications that enable Web users to interact with others, to generate content and to access information in ways they can personalise for their own needs. It is sometimes used synonymously with Web 2.0 (Armstrong and Franklin 2008). It is widely claimed to challenge existing ways of teaching and institutional provision of education (TLRP-TEL 2008, NSF 2008). However, the potential for these tools to support higher learning requires exploration and testing in practice. Their use for social and work purposes does not necessarily transfer to the context of accredited learning in universities. Armstrong and Franklin comment that 'the technologies are evolving very rapidly and our understanding of their value in education is still limited...we are going to need much experimentation and therefore we can assume that mistakes will be made and over-enthusiasm for some of the technologies will get in the way of realistic evaluations of use.' (Armstrong and Franklin 2008, p11)

The core aim of the project reported in this paper is to undertake experimentation in order to arrive at realistic evaluations of the use of a limited range of tools for a particular university teaching context. The project uses social networking tools in order to support staff in learning how to develop practical strategies for the use of the same tools in their own teaching. By virtue of using the tools themselves and recording their views and experiences, tutors are also engaging in a form of staff development. This is an appropriate strategy in a context where how best to design tool use for course study is not established and requires creative application and review.

The project has been funded by one of the centres in the university whose remit is to develop learning from practice. Social networking tools do indeed offer the opportunity for tutors to develop their own practice, and in so doing, to offer practical activities to their students using social networking tools.

Why Social Networking?

The university concerned already has extensive experience in the pedagogy of using some social networking tools, notably online forums for student learning (Goodfellow 2005, Hewings and Coffin, 2007). It now also uses blogs and wikis across many of its courses, and thus is refining its experience of these tools and how best to use them. This project has focused on areas of social networking where the university has very little practical experience with students, namely social bookmarking, RSS feeds and feed readers. These are tools which have potential for both staff development and for student learning. Although their benefits are widely claimed, translating such in-principle potential into actual

learning activities that will work with staff and students requires direct experience of the tools combined with reflection, resources and support for development of practical activities. How this was achieved is outlined below. First we draw attention to the rationale for using RSS feeds and social bookmarking specifically.

RSS feeds provide a means of feeding regular updates of sources selected by the user, into a reading area on their desktop that they have chosen for this purpose. Thus a user can aggregate all their preferred sources of information into one place, where they can be scanned and filtered in a time efficient manner, according to the needs of the user. RSS thus facilitates access to relevant information efficiently and is a means of accessing personally selected and up to date information from the internet. It can form part of a personal strategy for managing information by reducing the possibility of overload, which tutors recognised as one of the risks attendant on setting up feeds. Tutors worked collaboratively to identify a limited range of feeds for their own updating purposes.

Social bookmarking enables users to save bookmarks and access them from any computer, unlike browser-based 'favourites'. With a tool such as Delicious, bookmarks can be tagged and organised for efficient searching. The benefits of accessing tags that others have also made public offers the possibility for using the network to access resources that others have saved and to follow particular users whose selections prove interesting or useful. Users therefore not only have an efficient way of retaining resources important for their work, but of benefiting from and contributing to the efforts of others. Tutors on this project also set up a network of their colleagues on the project on their Delicious page and followed their choices and tags. They also learned how to explore any Delicious user's bookmarks and to search on particular tags. This might mean sorting bookmarks by popularity in order to identify high quality resources and thus exploit the 'wisdom of the crowd'.

Both tools therefore offer potential in relation to information access and management, for staff and students, and for learning from others, whether in direct collaboration or simply through networking across users of the tool. The use of Delicious and RSS was driven by the popularity and currency of these tools, which tutors had also responded positively to on a predecessor project (Scantlebury, Brown & Thorpe 2008). Facebook and a project wiki were also built in to the project from the beginning, to support networking and create a site where tutors could publish their reports. One of the purposes of the project was to explore particular tools and to check out their merits with our particular users. We wanted to see for example whether Facebook could provide a single point of access for several tools, including RSS feeds and Delicious tags, or whether a closed site on Ning would be better. Trying out particular tools and evaluating them as a group was one feature of the project as it developed.

Implementing the Social Networking Project

First the organisational context for the project was set up. A steering group brought together representatives from the university departments for Educational Technology, Communications and The Library. They were joined by representatives of the two faculties from which tutors were selected, namely Business and Health and Social Care. Each Faculty invited volunteers with an enthusiasm for ICT and a team of five tutors from Health and Social Care and four from the Business School was established. These tutors worked from their home base, reflecting their role for the university as part-time faculty who support student learning on courses taught at a distance.

Resources

Tutors learned how to use the tools working independently and accessing a set of videos produced for the project, showing exactly how to set up accounts for Google Reader, RSS feeds, Delicious, Facebook, the project wiki and Flashmeeting. Tutors are also advised to set up a browser such as IE7 or Firefox, with tabbed browsing, in order to take advantage of running multiple tools at the same time. All the videos are accessed via the project wiki, which has been set up using MediaWiki.

Tutors have also received regular guidance on what to do with these tools, and invited to develop their own resources and to network with each other and the project leaders, while they explore the tools and the tasks each month. Facebook has been used to set up a closed group where tutors can share experience, discuss the tasks and build their support for each other. In addition they publish their findings and advice on using the tools on the project wiki, where titled pages have been set up for them to use in drafting their responses. A Helpdesk page, which includes hints and tips, has a growing number of responses and 'how to' information written by tutors. The wiki was designed to be used as a focus point for discussion and reflection on this project, but also to be eventually re-versioned as a resource for those new to social networking. For example, the article page on using Delicious in education is relevant to course teams and tutors from any of the faculties in the university. Tutors used the discussion page to collaborate on creating the final version of this article, thus gaining valuable experience themselves in effective publishing to a wiki – a strategy which students are being asked to use increasingly.

Activities

It has been key to the success of the project that tutors have worked on a set of shared tasks and activities each with a defined end point. These have been communicated by email and have provided step-by-step guidance and specific tasks for tutors to complete. These tasks have ensured that they have engaged with the tools and learned from each other's experiences. Over the course of the project duration, they have integrated use of social bookmarking and RSS feeds into their own practice as discipline tutors who need to stay up-to-date in their discipline and also develop new skills for supporting students. The activities have been defined for tutors to achieve in periods of four to six weeks, during which tutors would allocate two to three days spread across the period. A flavour of the activities is outlined below.

Activities set out for tutors to complete during March 2008 initiated the project. Tutors used the video guidance to set up their own Google Reader account, RSS feeds and Delicious account. They were also provided with a number of tags to use so that they would share the same set of tags – at least initially. This meant that they could quickly see each others' resources tagged using the same tags. Although they were also shown how to set up a network on Delicious using all the account names of the tutors on the project, this early sharing of tags immediately clarified the potential for quick and easy sharing of resources via Delicious. During this period they also each set up a personal Facebook account (though some already had one) and accessed the restricted group set up for the project on Facebook. Tutors also produced comments on use of the tools in this period using a page set up for this purpose on the project wiki.

During April tutors 'met' online using Flashmeeting to discuss activities and their reactions to them. They also used email to contact the project manager when necessary. The activity asked them to search for useful texts on social networking and each tutor constructed a collaborative wiki page on 'Using Delicious effectively for teaching and learning', with links to key texts in support of their arguments. They also set up their own network of project members on Delicious and subscribed to tags using the subscription facility.

During May and June tutors tackled an activity that required them to apply their experience and ideas gained thus far. They designed an activity using Delicious for students on a course they knew reasonably well. They each produced a report on a specific course in their own faculty, specifying the learning outcomes that were to be supported by social bookmarking/tagging, describing the learning activity, the study weeks during which it would take place and its duration, resources students would need, the role of the tutor, links with assessment and any risks the course team ought to be aware of. Nine such reports were produced and are available on the wiki.

During June and July the activity was to evaluate RSS feeds as tools which can support personal updating and knowledge management for tutors. Tutors worked together with others in their faculty

group to identify sites with RSS feeds giving access to regular good quality information that would be relevant to someone in their faculty. Some distinguished between feeds for general relevance across Business or Health/Social Care and areas of relevance to subject specialisms. Tutors searched for relevant blogs, websites, online journals/resources and set up tagged RSS feeds to those they judged to be really useful for tutors in their faculty. They used Facebook and the wiki discussion page to decide on a priority list of 5/6 sites and made an agreed list of sites with reasons for their choice on the wiki.

During July and August tutors reviewed the possibility of using Facebook as a platform for use of Delicious and RSS feeds. Both tools can be set up on Facebook as an API and tutors were given instructions for how to do this. Each produced a report on their experience of accessing the tools from this social networking platform and in the main, concluded that the limitations of accessing via Facebook outweighed ease of access in the longer term. They have also accessed two university-specific sites on Facebook which have been set up for students primarily, and offer communities where students can list courses studied, log their reactions to study, and find others studying the same course. Tutors felt these spaces were not comfortable for them as tutors but did suggest that a Facebook space might be constructed for them. This has now been done and guidance given to tutors on how to install APIs for RSS and Delicious to their profile page on Facebook.

During autumn 2008, tutors continued to use their selected set of RSS feeds and have written personal reports on how they are managing the updating and information sifting this requires. The project has also moved into a new phase, seeking to increase the number of tutors using the resources and tools, drawing upon the support of the existing group of tutors for that purpose. A second tier of around twenty tutors has been recruited

Defined Groups, tasks and time scales

Reflecting on the benefits derived from the project thus far, the task focus and early work as a closed group proved to be key. Dron and Anderson (2007) have suggested that we recognise the different potentials of varying scales of interaction through social networking. What can be achieved working within the closed group differs from the network and beyond that, the collective. Tutors were not initially oriented towards using the collective and it was their membership of a known small group that shared both a task and a communication space that enabled them to integrate the tools into their own practice. Once this had been achieved, tutors were more willing to explore the potential of the network and collective in their exploration of resources. This was also the approach they themselves used when designing an activity for students studying a course. All recommended that students share tags and draw on the bookmarks of other students studying the same course.

As has often been reported, making effective use of new tools – even ones that are user friendly and robust – requires time and, in the case of the tools we are working with here, some regular commitment. The assumption has to be that students will only use these tools if they are built into the learning outcomes of their course and with time specifically accounted for their use. Tutors themselves tended to under-estimate how much time students would need for the activities they themselves designed, and this emphasises the importance of reviewing and revising pedagogy in this area. Some tutors had prior experience of using Delicious with their students and while one had had success, two others specifically had not and emphasised the need for social networking to be a course requirement, not an add-on or optional activity. It was felt important for the tutor to model the use of these tools and indeed for them to have working knowledge of what they offer and why it is worth persisting in using them.

The resources that tutors themselves have generated using the project wiki will feed into a toolkit that can be made available to tutors generally. This will also include the videos and guidance on how to use tools in ways that are time efficient and offer practical benefits. The overall aim is to build on the success of a small tutor group by opening up these resources to anybody in the university, and providing support for those who want to incorporate social networking into their own practice.

Discussion and question and answer areas will be maintained via a combination of Facebook and the project wiki. Other tools, such as Twitter, may be added for those interested to explore further.

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