Chapter 77

Social Bookmarking Pedagogies in Higher Education:
A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares two projects that adopted social bookmarking (SB) technology in different educational contexts at the same institution, a large, research-intensive university in the north of England. The first study used social bookmarking in a multicultural postgraduate class to increase interactivity within the whole class and to produce an archive of course-related online resources to engage potentially isolated students. The second study used social bookmarking to support first year undergraduate students' independent research activities, to facilitate collaboration and to aid the tutor's preparation for seminar classes. The paper provides an outline of the two studies, including a description of the pedagogic approaches adopted in them, developments in the pedagogy over time and evaluative and usage data that were collected. The discussion focuses on five main issues: SB literacy; SB benefits; SB costs and risks; SB pedagogy; and SB alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady increase in scholarly interest in the relationship between technology and pedagogy over the past two decades. Although the potential of new technologies to improve (or sometimes to inhibit) learning has been a topic of

interest to educators and social commentators for decades, as the pace of technological innovation has quickened so too have efforts to reflect on, to understand and to maximise its educational impact (e.g. McLuhan, 1962; Eggers, 2005).

The emergence and development of the 'social web' – also known as Web2.0 – is one of the

most significant social and cultural phenomena of the new millennium. Web2.0 technologies – for example, blogs, wikis, and social networking services – allow users to become producers of content for the internet by enabling them to generate, display and share content with other users (O'Reilly, 2005). The phenomenal success of services such as MySpace (www.myspace.com/) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/) depends to a large extent on their ability to facilitate the creation and sharing of content and the construction and maintenance of social relationships. Given the potential of these services to enable interaction and creativity, it is hardly surprising that educators across all levels and disciplines have experimented with them enthusiastically (Alexander, 2006; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). A number of meta-analytical surveys have sought to bring together studies on the adoption of Web2.0 technologies in higher education and analyse their impact on student learning (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008; Minocha, 2009).

Some Web2.0 technologies may be better suited to supporting student learning in higher education than others (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008). For example, some educators have suggested that social bookmarking (SB), a method for internet users to store, manage, share and search resources on the web, could be a useful method of supporting student learning (Saeed, Yang, & Sinnappan, 2009). In SB services users save links to web pages that they want to remember and/or share. The resources themselves are not shared, just the bookmarks that link to them. These bookmarks are usually public, although they can be made private or shared with selected groups of people. Most SB services encourage users to organize their bookmarks with informal tags instead of the traditional browser-based system of folders. The advantage of SB services over browser-based systems for storing bookmarks is that they are stored and shared on the web rather than on individual browsers. A number of studies have shown that the carefully-structured use of social networking

tools and in particular SB to enable students to record their research process on the internet and to share their findings with tutors and other students has the potential to improve students' information literacy and research skills (Porter, 2011; Rempel & Davidson, 2008; Saeed & Yang, 2008; Wood, 2011). Despite the acknowledged potential of SB to support and improve student learning, investigations into its educational impact and on its optimal usage have not been as widespread as those into blogging, for example.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research acknowledges the potential of Web 2.0 technologies for enhancing the teaching and the learning experiences of students and staff in higher education (Birney, Barry, & Ó hÉigeartaigh, 2006). There is, however, only minimal consensus about how such technologies relate to specific learning theories and pedagogies such as inquiry-based learning (IBL) (Smith, n.d.), activity theory (Kuswara, Cram, & Richards, 2008) and Laurillard's conversational framework theory (Birney et al., 2006). It has been suggested that the research-like activities that are common in IBL and active learning have the potential to impact positively on students' disciplinary knowledge, transferrable skills, disposition towards lifelong learning and capacity for 'self-authorship' (Brew, 2006; Hodge Haynes, Lepore, Pasquesi, & Hirsh, 2008). Given student familiarity and engagement with social networking sites and other such technologies outside of formal learning situations (Thelwall, 2008), the use of Web 2.0 may minimise the uncertainties and anxieties that sometimes mark students' first experience of more independent forms of teaching and learning in higher education (Brew, 2007). The basic functionality of SB services means that they are potentially useful for collaborative work such as sharing internet resources between groups of students. The social aspect of SB means that students

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