

Chapter 4.4

Exploring the Role of Social Software in Higher Education

Yoni Ryan

Australian Catholic University, Australia

Robert Fitzgerald

University of Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the potential of social software to support learning in higher education. It outlines a current project funded by the then Australian Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, now the Australian Learning and Teaching COuncil (ALTC) (<http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/go>) to explore the role of social software in supporting peer engagement and group learning. The project has established a series of pilot projects that examine ways in which social software can provide students with opportunities to engage with their peers in a discourse that explores, interrogates and provides a supplementary social ground for their in-class learning. Finding creative ways of using technology to expand and enrich the social base of learning in higher education will become increasingly important to lecturers and instructional designers alike. This project represents one small step in testing the applicability of social software to these contexts. While many of our students are already using various technologies to maintain and

develop their personal networks, it remains to be seen if these offer viable uses in more scholarly settings.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the Web in the 1990s saw a parallel development of commercial Learning Management Systems (LMS) and, by 2001, the widespread adoption of the latter in Australian universities, in response to growing demands for flexibility or convenience for students. Yet much of the research indicates that in the main, LMS have been used more for administrative purposes (Dalsgaard, 2006; Hedberg, 2006; OECD, 2005; Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, 2004) and educators themselves most frequently use LMS as a content management system rather than exploiting the interactive potential of digital media (Boezerooy, 2003; Fiedler et al., 2007). With the official emergence of Web 2.0 in 2004 (O'Reilly, 2005), and the explosion of activity in social networking applications afforded by the technology, it is timely to consider whether the LMS, and the static learning environments

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they have typically modelled, should at least be complemented by (and perhaps even give way to) more interactive applications.

The original intention of Berners-Lee ‘was all about connecting people’ (Anderson, 2007). However, the Web was quickly colonised by vendors intent on using it for education purposes as a tradeable global commodity (Cunningham et al., 1998). LMS vendors promised a universal ‘Economics 101’ subject developed by the best professors in the world, and accessible - at a price - to all (Cunningham et al., 1998). Educators and the instructional designers who developed online materials were paradoxically complicit in this static model, recreating in their online materials the transmission model of pedagogy they inherited as ‘the university teaching model’ (Laurillard, 2002). Berners-Lee was not alone in his vision for a different technological future. In his book *Mindstorms*, Seymour Papert (1980) developed a compelling case for the potential of technology to mediate thinking in ways that reveal, enrich and expand learning. The prominent educator Paulo Freire (1985) argued that transformative education can only be achieved through a pedagogy that values learning as a process of *asking* questions not just *receiving* answers. The dominance of the administrative functions of e-learning has already been noted, with its preference for *content* over *process* most frequently achieved through one-way (vs. two-way) models of interaction. In these applications the *answer* seems much more important than the *question*. Papert (2000) argued that transformative shifts in the way we use technology will only be possible when educators have time to rethink both the *why* and *how* of its use. Given the widening gap between formal education and Internet culture, and the rise of the millennial learner, it is clear that we can no longer afford not to take time to reconceptualise technology-mediated learning. This will involve the design of a pedagogy that connects and engages learners in activities that value the question as much as the answer. Finding creative ways of using technology

to expand and enrich the social base of learning in higher education will become increasingly important to academics and instructional designers alike. However, it is not clear that even the experts in higher education and e-learning can envisage such a pedagogy, with Guess (2007) assessing discussion at the Seattle Educause conference as producing ‘more questions than answers’ about capitalising on the contemporary enthusiasm for social networking in educational settings.

The project reported in this chapter represents one small step towards testing the applicability of different technologies to higher education contexts. While many of our students are already using various technologies to maintain and develop their social networks, it remains to be seen if these offer viable uses in more scholarly settings.

BACKGROUND

There are a multitude of Web 2.0 services that are readily available to students and educators such as blogs (e.g. Edublogs), wikis (e.g. Wikispaces), collaborative word processors (e.g. Google Docs), syndication and aggregation using RSS (e.g. Bloglines, PageFlakes and iGoogle), social bookmarking (e.g. del.icio.us), shared calendars (e.g. Google Calendar and 30 Boxes) and creative content exchange (e.g. Flickr for images, ccMixer for audio, and YouTube for video). The project reported here arose as a result of intense interest in the use of Web 2.0 technologies in higher education by a group of teacher-scholars. Although some of the group were using several applications successfully in their own teaching, predominantly in the area of media studies, they had little in the way of comprehensive research studies to support their belief that Gen Y students would be more engaged in their learning if formal study programmes incorporated Web 2.0 modalities, with their potential for more interactive construction of knowledge, skills and values.

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