

## Chapter 6.1

# Exploring a Professional Social Network System to Support Learning in the Workplace

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out to explore how professionals can network, collaborate and capture informal learning in an online work-based environment. It addresses the pedagogical approaches that underpin emerging Web 2.0 technological trends and provide recommendations for future use of such online environments. Existing Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are primarily content driven with little provision for social engagement and stakeholder-generated material. Similarly, many organisations have little or no structure for facilitating online interaction in a work based learning context. Since 2006 Emerald Group Publishing and the Middlesex Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning have been partnering to develop, test and implement an online platform that will support collaborative, interactive learning. This link between Industry and Higher Education is critically reviewed. The

InTouch (2008) platform was incorporated into the syllabus for MCEWBL’s work-based Professional Practice BA Honours programme in 2007 to support newly trained professionals as they worked through a professional development work based learning programme. The pedagogical underpinning of the course was reflective, self-directed learning and the blog, Wiki and profiling tools provided had the potential to either contribute to this aim or become a major part of how students construct their understanding of themselves in their professional practice. Emerald and MCEWBL have been monitoring the adoption, use and challenges associated with using Web 2.0 technology to support work based learning in order make recommendations about future pedagogical frameworks and approaches. This platform and related online pedagogic principles fills the gap between informal, free tools that provide little security or structure and heavyweight VLEs that offer tutor-made content, but do not naturally support social interaction for learning. The chapter provides some ideas and strategic options about implementing

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similar tools in other organisational settings and provides frameworks to evaluate these options in line with existing resources and capabilities. It concludes with an in-progress web-based learning design or ePedagogy that unifies the threads of the online learning experience.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Middlesex University work based learning (WBL) has been operating for over ten years at the time of this writing. Its original distance learning design was a paper-based correspondence model which relied heavily on the content in the handbooks and one-to-one (1-2-1) tutorial support from WBL Learning Development Tutors predominantly through email and phone feedback. Over the past few years there has been a steady transition into the use of a commercial virtual learning environment (VLE) in the form of Blackboard/WebCT.

At first this system matched the WBL teaching and learning design since there was a strong reliance on the course handbook for information and guidance. However, as student numbers increased the student-teacher ratio meant this model was not sustainable for the future. The 1-2-1 pedagogic model would need to expand into a triad that would promote and support peer involvement. Students were growing in their ICT confidence and capability with the increased use of Web 2.0 social network systems such as Facebook and YouTube. This was evidenced by student representatives at the WBL Board of Studies sighting the need to continue to improve the VLE for the future (BOS, 2007).

Cohorts of WBL candidates identified the need for a shift from a content-driven eLearning system to one which could support the type of peer review that WBL was growing into. The WBL programme structure has three main stages. First, students construct a portfolio of their prior professional knowledge. This Recognition of Accredited learning (RAL or a.k.a. Accreditation

of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)) stage benefited by candidates sharing professional experiences in constructing their areas of learning claims (Armsby, 2006). Next, WBL students would formulate an individual learning agreement that would guide the construction of the degree programme based on how much Higher Education (HE) credit was attained in the RAL stage. In conjunction with this activity they would learn about methods of conducting research in the workplace which would prepare them for the final stage of the degree. Lastly, research systems would be carried out in the workplace to amass enough credit to complete the programme. The nature of this learner-managed-learning approach to WBL meant that as the candidate progressed through the programme peer-support became increasingly beneficial (Stephenson, 2007).

In a work based learning context, then, there can be both a *formal* and *informal learning* scenarios. The traditional formal learning setting might be one of the blended learning tutorial sessions for WBL candidate getting an induction on how to compose a prior learning accreditation portfolio. Here the training pedagogy would be teacher-led and supported by on/offline discussions. But it could be argued that the 'real learning' transpired informally after the 'taught session'. Informally the students may meet to debrief with each other at the café over coffee. There they would compare their interpretation of the learning event which would lead to the formation of learning partnerships. This learning support network would communicate to provide peer-review of draft work for the portfolio. An online system was needed to facilitate this evolving professional social network for practitioner researchers.

It was at a conference at University College London (2006) that a dialogue opened between the MU-WBL group and the Emerald Publishing InTouch contingent. The open source Elgg Social Network platform being developed by Emerald would be the new approach to address these needs.

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