Chapter 1.7
Web 2.0 and Professional Development of Academic Staff

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the latest wave of Web 2.0 technologies has the potential to transform online learning. To realize this potential, universities must rethink the way in which they develop academic skills in online teaching. The current emphasis on training academics to teach online using learning material and learning management systems has yielded mixed results. Too much of the focus has been on "top-down" models of change. Web 2.0 technologies favor "bottom-up" approaches to staff development, approaches that leverage the power, ease of use, and flexibility of Web 2.0 technologies. These have a better chance to produce the constructivist, student-centered online learning that is now widely regarded as the ideal. The authors use fictional accounts in order to capture some of the issues involved.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the implications of Web 2.0 technologies for academic staff development. It argues that the cheapness, ease of use, and speed with which Web 2.0 tools can be deployed empowers academics as well as students. These new technologies provide university teaching staff with alternatives to "shovelware" (Morrison & Anglin, 2006) approaches to online learning. Web 2.0 technologies call for new models of staff development and training—approaches that suit decentralized, collaborative learning within academic communities of practice. As in a previous discussion (Barnes & Tynan, 2007), the authors of the present chapter draw upon fictional accounts and characters in order to capture some of the issues involved.

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THE CONCEPT OF WEB 2.0

Web 2.0 has received tremendous attention since 2005. As the origins and history of the Web 2.0 concept have been discussed in other chapters, there is no need to repeat this material here. Following O'Reilly (2005), Anderson asserts that Web 2.0 "has, at its heart, a set of at least six powerful ideas" (2007, p. 2). These are:

- Individual production and user-generated content;
- Harnessing the power of the crowd;
- Data on an epic scale;
- Architecture of participation;
- Network effects;
- Openness.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, these ideas are crucial for universities. They provide an alternative to current approaches to online learning that depend on "one-size-fits-all" models.

LIVING AND TEACHING IN A CONNECTED WORLD

Today, we live in a connected world. Nothing demonstrates this more forcefully than the increasing flood of mobile phones. There are over 3.3 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide ("Mobile phone users reach 3.3bn," 2008). This is almost three times the number of fixed landline phones (1.3 billion). More than 2 billion people send or receive SMS messages, and at an astonishing rate—for example, the Gartner group predicted that over 2.3 trillion SMS messages would be sent in 2008 (Gartner, Inc., 2007). In addition, over 825 million mobile phone subscribers across the globe use their mobiles to connect to the Internet (Ahonen, 2008). Accessing online content—movies, video clips, music, and podcasts—has driven an explosive demand in mobile devices. According to market research company iSuppli, 163 million MP3 players and other personal media devices were sold worldwide in 2007 (cellular-news, 2007).

Along with the increase in the number of mobile devices, there has been a rapid growth in personal computer (PC) ownership. In countries such as Australia and the United States, PC ownership is reaching saturation point. According to Ahonen (2008), at some time in 2008, the number of PCs on desktops around the world would exceed the 1 billion mark. Partly as a result of the growing ubiquity of PCs, the global total of Internet users has reached a staggering 1.4 billion (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008). Although ownership is concentrated in the developed world, falling unit costs and cheaper telecommunications are expected to result in an explosion in third-world computer ownership over the next few decades.

Even more remarkable than the spread of modern communications has been the rapid growth of Web 2.0 applications. MySpace (http://www.myspace.com/), one of the two largest social networking sites on the Web, is an example of social computing on an unprecedented scale. In early 2008, the number of active users on MySpace allegedly was in excess of 110 million. The MySpace community reads billions of pages every day—as many as 4.5 billion MySpace pages over a single 24-hour period in January 2008, for instance. More than 300,000 new users join MySpace daily. Every day, 8 million new images are added and 60,000 fresh videos are uploaded to the site (Owyang, 2008).

Despite this activity, MySpace is not alone. Archrival Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/) advertised that it had 60 million active users and 6 million active user groups in early 2008 (Owyang, 2008). MySpace and Facebook are only part of the picture. There is also a very long tail. Outside the U.S., other social networking sites claim significant market shares. These challengers include Badoo, Orkut, Friendster, Bahu, Hi5, Faceparty, and Habbo, to name but a few. Collectively, the