

Chapter XXXI

Destructive Creativity on the Social Web: Learning through Wikis in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The use of group oriented software, or groupware, encourages students to generate their own content (McGill et al, 2005) and can foster supportive and dynamic communities of learning (Shaikh & Macauley, 2001). One form of open architecture groupware known as the Wiki is freely available online in several versions, and enables tutors to quickly set up online spaces which can be edited by students, at any time and from any location. Online social spaces of this nature can be used to encourage creative writing and to engage students in critical discourse through focused discussion, but Wikis also have disruptive potential and can cause dissent and disharmony within the group. This chapter aims to highlight some uses of the wiki as a social writing tool, reporting on student perceptions of the limitations and benefits. The chapter also focuses on the tension between creative and destructive uses of wikis and concludes by offering recommendations on the effective use of wikis in mainstream higher education. The use of interview data gathered from a study conducted with a group of student teachers in 2007 is included to support the key messages of this chapter.

'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SOCIAL WEB

In recent years the social Web has emerged as a distinct and significant reiteration of the World Wide Web and is focussed more on people than on content. Predominantly known as 'Web 2.0', the social Web offers an emerging set of tools that afford exciting new opportunities in education and according to some commentators, places the Web back where it was originally intended to be – in the hands of the people (Kamel Boulos, Maramba & Wheeler, 2006).

The advent of Web 2.0 is particularly apposite for today's net generation students, whose desire is to interact with online resources, broadcast themselves and create their own content. This shift in emphasis is a result of a need to deepen the social dimensions of the Web, and to circumvent long standing problems of usability. A potentially useful and relevant Website can be marred when some piece of vital information is missing, inaccurate or out of date. The natural reaction is to wish that the content can be edited or added to so that the site can be improved. Most Web 1.0 sites have the tendency to be 'sticky', meaning that they are content secure and can only be updated by the Webmaster or owner. There are issues here of ownership and control, where for some time, the content of sites was controlled centrally. Web 2.0 signifies a shift away from central to community ownership, where individuals can alter the content of Web pages (O'Reilly, 2004). One social tool, known as the wiki, enables visitors to change the content on a Web page, participate in discussion with other users and create new links to other resources. Wikis are an important aspect of the social Web – an open network type architecture that enables users to participate in creating and occasionally destroying Web based artefacts.

IMPACT ON PEDAGOGY

Although relatively new, the exponential and rapid growth of the social Web is beginning to impact upon post-compulsory education, compelling some academics and teachers to repurpose key aspects of course development and delivery. For example, the social affordance of multiple-user generation of content is challenging previously accepted mores, not least the traditional primacy of the tutor role. Students are beginning to take greater responsibility for their own learning, whilst the role tutors have enjoyed as the sole source of specialist knowledge is rapidly waning.

It is not only the role of the teacher that is being challenged. Popular Websites such as Wikipedia are premised on the principle that all users have the freedom to generate their own content, and this presents a significant challenge to the traditional status of knowledge. Moreover, the exponential upsurge in student activity on extra-institutional social networking sites such as MySpace and FaceBook raises the stakes in the teaching and learning game. Not all students are ready to generate their own course content and learning materials, but increasing numbers are familiar with the concept of a shared digital space and they pursue it with vigour. Student reactions will vary, but recent studies report that students of all ages comment positively about content generation using wikis (Richardson, 2006; Wheeler, Yeomans & Wheeler, 2008).

There is little doubt that the social Web is making a significant impact on traditional forms of pedagogy by promoting a stimulating and creative environment where readers can become writers, and consumers can become contributors (Kamel Boulos, et al, 2006). For the first time, all users are able to exploit the capability of Web 2.0 tools to air their message to a world wide audience. The 'read/write Web' exhibits an openness and accessibility that enables users to become their own producers, directors, publishers or broadcasters. Popular social networking tools such as Bebo,

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