Chapter 5.5

Bridging the Gap Between Web 2.0 and Higher Education

Martin Weller
The Open University, UK

James Dalziel
Macquarie University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at some of the areas of tension between the new social networking, Web 2.0 communities and the values of higher education. It argues that both the granularity of formal education and the manner in which the authors formalise learning are subject to change with the advent of digital technologies and user generated content. The gap between higher education and Web 2.0 could be bridged by, amongst other approaches, a sort of flickr for learning design, which allows users to share activities and sequences, thus meeting the diverse needs of learners and utilising the best of social networking approaches.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of internet technologies that can be grouped under the web 2.0 heading has generated a good deal of interest in education, as witnessed by the number of conferences that now have web 2.0 or related approaches as a main theme, the number of educational technology bloggers, and the interest of commercial web 2.0 start-up companies such as TeachThePeople.com.

This is because the popularity of sites such as flickr, facebook, MySpace, wikipedia, etc is interesting of itself, in terms of what drives users to these sites and why they keep returning. But more significantly it is their potential as tools to facilitate learning that has caused much discussion. Their implications for learning can be summarised as:

- Technology – with most universities now possessing a virtual learning environment (VLE) (OECD 2004, Barro and Burillo, 2006), the extent to which some of the technologies could form a learning environment has been discussed. For example Downes (2007) highlights Facebook's educational heritage, and Kemp and Livingstone (2006) have integrated the virtual world SecondLife with the Moodle VLE.
- User generated content – wikipedia is the most famous example, but through formats such as blogs, podcasts, vlogs, wikis, slideshare (shared presentations), splashcasts (video clips that combine different media formats), screencasts (slideshows with synchronised audio), and webcasts there is a good deal of material that is both useful for students, and is generated by them.
- Pedagogy – learning as it occurs in web 2.0 communities tends to be informal, and socially oriented. If we look at open source software communities as an example of where learning takes place in such communities there are a number of differences with higher education. For example, these communities are very flexible where roles are not stagnant. Although hierarchies and formalised roles exist, they are not as rigid, with advancement or promotion through meritocracy, with a selection of individuals earning the right to make decisions based on merit or past contributions. A number of researchers, such as Bacon & Dillon (2006) have suggested that open source communities might serve as an example for future educational structures and processes.
- Content and resources – there are a variety of educational sites offering a range of resources. These include open educational resource repositories such as MITs OpenCourseWare and the Open University's Openlearn project, and also

audio and video lectures and talks through providers such as iTunesU. Students thus have access to a wide diversity of high quality material to supplement their studies.
- Philosophy – this is probably the most significant, and one we will explore further below. There is a fundamental difference between the principles that the web 2.0 world enshrines and those within higher education. At its simplest this can be summarised as bottom up versus top down.

The last point in the above list suggests that there are differences between the cultures and values found in the web 2.0 community and those in higher education. It is worth examining these in more detail as they hold the key to the central question, both of this article and for education as whole, which is how do we bridge the gap between these two worlds? In this chapter we wish to explore some of the differences, consider their implications for higher education and lastly to map possible benefits for the learner that such approaches may have on to the existing higher education structures, through the process of learning design.

DIFFERENT CULTURES

Firstly, let us examine the values of the web 2.0 community. Web 2.0 can be seen as both a set of technologies (such as the use of particular programming languages) and also a set of values. In his essay 'What is web 2.0?' Tim O'Reilly (2005) sets out a number of key features. The first of these principles is the notion of web as platform. This was an idea that first surfaced with much of the initial dot.com hype. That didn't come to pass, but O'Reilly suggests a crucial difference this time around, which is personified by Google. Whereas Netscape was based around a software product, Google is based around a service. He summarizes it thus:

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