

Chapter 10

Using Blogs to Traverse Physical and Virtual Spaces

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ABSTRACT

The development of physical and virtual learning spaces is prominent in the current higher education context, however a preoccupation with the design of these environments must not be at the cost of the learner. This chapter proposes that new ways of thinking need to be adopted and new strategies for collaborating need to be developed to enable students and teachers to traverse the physical and virtual environments. In traversing these spaces, learners must use them to best advantage, both within the higher education context, and then later in the professional arena in which they will be operating. Specifically this chapter will examine the use of one collaboration tool—blogs—to bridge the gap between the physical and the virtual, the formal and the informal learning spaces. Strategies for using blogs will be presented as a tool for students and educators to enable and promote knowledge creation, and to develop a habit of reflective practice both during and after formal study.

INTRODUCTION

A recent trend in Australian higher education has been the creation of physical learning spaces that are claimed to be flexible, engaging and efficient, and which will attract students and teachers to them. Concurrently personal and social technologies are prominent within society and it is inevitable that these physical spaces will incorporate

these social collaboration technologies based on assumptions of improving the learning experience for students.

It can be argued that these environments are not being designed with the view of supporting students in the variety of learning environments in which they find themselves from day to day (Wilson et al, 2007; Attwell, 2007; Mazzoni & Gafurri, 2009). For some students, the learning

space will be these physical spaces provided by, and at, the University campus. For others, the physical spaces will be of their own choosing—the lounge room, the train, the tea-room, the café, the office or the playground. For many it will be a combination of spaces and learning strategies, and the supportive technologies provided will need to traverse these spaces.

The consistent element in the traversing of spaces is the student. In order to negotiate the challenges inherent in this variety of learning spaces, both the educator and the student will benefit from a shared space which transverses the physical and virtual and is arguably most easily facilitated in the virtual space.

The virtual learning space is today commonly conceptualised by reference to Web 2.0, so named as it is said to represent the second generation of web software. Web 2.0 refers to social software such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, Real Simple Syndication (RSS), social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious.com), and media sharing software (e.g. Flickr). In the educational context McLoughlin and Lee (2007) suggest that the essence of Web 2.0 is “about linking minds, communities and ideas, while promoting personalisation, collaboration and creativity leading to joint knowledge creation” (p. 668). Mazzoni and Gafurri (2009) suggest that Web 2.0 technologies are less restricted by and to formal learning than were the Web 1.0 technologies. It is generally accepted that Web 2.0 technologies provide enhanced opportunities for online collaboration, peer assessment, individual and group reflection, and development of e-portfolios (for examples see Table 1).

This chapter examines the ways in which blogs have been conceptualised and strategies to enable blogs to place the student in the role of ‘knowledge prosumer’ (Farmer, Yue & Brooks 2008; Klamma et al, 2007; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Wilson et al, 2007). This is discussed in the context of an Australian university with a number of national and international campuses that have embarked on a number of physical learning space redesign

projects. In particular, this chapter will discuss the use of blogs as a key tool in enabling the learner to effectively integrate the physical, virtual, informal and formal learning spaces to take advantage of the significant investments and interest in both these areas.

BACKGROUND

Traversing the Physical and Virtual: One Case Study of a Large Global University

Monash University provides one case study where the traversing of the physical and virtual space is presenting challenges to conceptualising the next development of its virtual environments. Monash is an international institution with eight campuses across three culturally diverse countries, with research and teaching centres across the world. Monash is focused on providing a dynamic environment that allows students and educators to engage with their peers, their community and their learning, a focus encapsulated in the Monash Passport. The Monash Passport is “a master-key for experiences in plural campuses, countries and disciplines ... a passport to employment; to engagement; to course and unit flexibility” (Shoemaker, 2008). Fundamental to the Monash Passport model is “the marshalling of technology by pedagogy: learning to impart knowledge in vastly different ways; visualising futures through E-Research and E-Learning” (Shoemaker, 2008).

To ‘marshal technology by pedagogy’ Monash has established a Learning Spaces Taskforce which is charged with developing “a strategy for future learning space design, upgrades and refurbishment” (Monash University, 2009). Within the scope of their stated strategy, the Taskforce has been involved in redeveloping existing teaching spaces to facilitate the student-centred approach. The Earth Sciences Teaching Laboratory enables learning across four domains (fieldwork, wet

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