

Supporting students' learning with web 2.0; near-distance learning, social media and student choice in higher education

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Abstract

This paper concerns the use of technology to support students through “near-distance learning”; that is, informal moments and modes of study which happen at a distance from campus. Our case study concerns a small cohort of students, several of whom took up their final job offers before the completion of their studies. This created a number of issues around group work, the development of lesson content and the provision of useful support, feedback and tutorials for students. These problems occurred during the course and thus required an immediate response; Web 2.0 technologies and the institutional Virtual Learning Environment seemed to afford solutions. Students were allowed the opportunity to develop their own processes to manage the issues, leading to innovative uses of social media services such as Twitter, Google Wave, Skype and email.

Keywords

Web 2.0, e-learning, social media, distance learning

Introduction

In September 2009, the Birmingham School of Media at Birmingham City University launched a new postgraduate degree, the MA Social Media. As the first course of its type, the programme attracted a great deal of media attention. The small cohort of students in the first intake also attracted the interest of employers and by March 2010, most of them were living and working away from campus. The course was not offered as a formal distance learning programme, but students informally negotiated their own distance learning, allowing them to complete the taught elements of the course through a “near-distance learning” approach.

The tendency to approach the MA Social Media through a near-distance mode created a number of issues for staff and students. These problems occurred during the delivery of taught modules and so had to be addressed immediately; Web 2.0 technologies and the institutional Virtual Learning Environment seemed to afford solutions. Additionally, students were allowed the opportunity to develop their own

processes to manage the issues, leading to innovative uses of services such as Twitter, Google Wave, Skype and email, while staff sought to support them as best as they could.

Our examination is informed by previous research at Birmingham City University into the uses of web 2.0 technologies within teaching and learning, based on a concern that new technologies are often adopted because of their “newness” rather than their contribution to the learning and teaching process (Hickman et al, 2011). This work highlighted the importance of the student voice in determining the best use of technological innovation and the problems of imposing normative uses of technology within teaching and learning. In this paper, we examine the effectiveness of allowing students to design their own framework for the use of technology in support of near-distance learning. The paper will consider how, within the context of a new media based programme of education, Web 2.0 technologies can be selected and used to support learning in a flexible manner. This is set against a wider discussion of the development of e-learning within Higher Education.

Near-distance Learning

We use the phrase “near-distance learning” to describe time or place-shifted class based learning activities within an otherwise co-present, campus based programme of learning. In this sense, a student on a campus- based course who follows all or part of a programme of learning (for example a whole module, an individual taught session) without joining a physical class is using near-distance learning, in the same way that the students in our case study were near-distant because they were not based on campus. We see this as distinct from independent learning, which can be done at a distance; near-distance learning uses technology to allow students to engage with tutors and peers in learning activities, in an attempt to compensate for the lack of co-present learning contexts.

Technology, e-learning and the changing landscape of HE

The focus on e-learning in higher education has corresponded with a period of significant change for universities. Harvey and Knight (1996) noted that “The sector has to deal with significantly increased student enrolments with comparatively reduced resources, while still delivering on quality”. Technological advances, government imperatives and changes in students’ demands all compel universities to revise their offer (HEFCE, 2006; HEFCE, HEA and JISC, 2005; Russell, 2008). In this context new learning and teaching technologies have been enthusiastically promoted, but several commentators have recommended that caution be exercised. Kirkwood and Price (2005), for example, argue that innovation should not be driven by technology and “consideration.... given not only to the characteristics of technologies, but also to (a) the pedagogic models and processes they have to serve; and (b) the contexts within which learners engage with ICT” (Kirkwood & Price, 2005: 270).

It has also been noted that one of the purposes of online technology is to stimulate offline activity, not replace it. As Bradwell (2009) notes: “Students not only value the face-to-face experience with teachers, the peer discussions, they also require a

sense of belonging to the institution. Technology does not do away with that" (Bradwell, 2009:57). Regardless of the medium being used, it is unlikely that students will make use of materials and activities unless they are embedded in the course pedagogy.

A number of factors have been identified that encourage institutions to implement e-learning, such as flexibility and efficiency (Sharpe, 2006; Lefevre, 2010) and the notion that institutions are able to transcend their physical environment (Barnett, 2000; Bradwell, 2009). Russell, in her 2008 study of UK campus universities, notes an increase in e-learning generally "as a way of meeting student needs more effectively and efficiently" (Russell, 2008:26) but also observes that it is often implemented through ad-hoc approaches, which may lack a coherent institutional strategy. Lefevre emphasises the adoption of e-learning to enhance quality but fears that, as a consequence of impending cutbacks in university funding, "technology will be used less to enhance the learner experience and more to teach existing numbers of students with increasingly fewer resources" (Lefevre, 2010). A possible corollary of this is a dip in student satisfaction in relation to the quality of provision; ostensibly the very thing that was to be tackled by the adoption of e-learning.

Use of Web 2.0 technologies

Armstrong and Franklin (2008) identify that Web 2.0 is used in all areas of higher education, but take-up is characterised by "early adopters" trying out new technologies, a conclusion also reached by JISC (2009).

Web 2.0 technologies are shown to have both advantages and disadvantages. Many Web 2.0 tools are free to use and come without the institutional restrictions found in many HE systems, but products can quickly disappear and tools can change so quickly that it is difficult to keep track of the latest developments. It is also difficult for institutions to have any control of spaces outside the university, which raises issues of privacy and safety (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008:3).

Near-distance learning: uses of web 2.0 and e-learning tools on the MA Social Media

The MA Social Media class of 2009-10, and their tutors, employed a number of Internet technologies to enable them to learn at near-distance. These included: the University's virtual learning environment (or VLE, which in this case was an implementation of Moodle), Skype, Twitter, Google Wave, and email. Tutors used Moodle as a platform for dissemination of class materials (notes, copies of assessment briefs, PowerPoint slides and audio recordings of lectures) and Skype for tutorials. Students were asked to consider the most appropriate tools to allow them to communicate with one another effectively in achieving their learning objectives. As part of the module "Social Media Practice," students had to organise a conference about their work, on campus in Birmingham, UK. This required a high degree of peer interaction and was therefore a focus for much of the online activity undertaken by the students.

Methodology

The teaching of this module was not initially considered as an object of study for pedagogic research, but the changes that were made to the teaching and learning approach presented an opportunity for investigation. As this was not designed as a teaching and learning experiment, there was a limitation on methodological choices available to us. The most appropriate response was to adopt a case study approach.

Case studies are particularly useful for "preliminary, exploratory stage(s) of a research project" (Rowley, 2002:16). This article discusses just one case study, and as such we cannot claim that the results can be generalised, however we offer it here to stimulate debate and encourage further investigation of this mode of learning; this case study may be used not in a positivist sense but as an indication of a working hypothesis (*ibid*:25). The approach taken to collecting research data is replicable with other groups of students and further case studies will indicate the extent to which this material might be generalised.

In order to understand how the students negotiated the process of near-distance learning, the six members of the cohort, which comprised three male and three female members with ages ranging from 21 to 44, were interviewed by one of the authors who had no previous contact with the members of the group. The interviews allowed students to discuss *their* approaches to learning technology, and as such it seemed appropriate to foreground their experiences and thoughts, for that reason it was important that it was not a course tutor who conducted the interview. Another advantage of using an independent interviewer was to negate reactivity that might have occurred if they were interviewed by a course tutor. An interview schedule was devised, which covered a number of topics including:

- Reasons for engaging with online tools;
- Problems as a result of such engagement;
- Technological preferences;
- Development of skills;
- Reasons for using online tools;
- Use of personal online tools compared with institutional online tools.

All interviews were carried out on a one-to-one basis with the majority conducted via Skype as the students were geographically dispersed; one, for example, was in China, one in France and another in the United States. Interviews were recorded with the subjects' permission and transcribed. Key themes were then identified from the responses under the broad themes listed above.

Students' approaches to designing near-distance learning tools

There was recognition among the group that they were geographically spread but required to work closely in a team to produce their conference. They saw Internet tools as enabling them to share information and collaborate on course tasks:

“(The Internet technology) was a central point where we could all share information at once. It was accessible to all in the group and it was there immediately.”

Most of the cohort had prior experience of the use and application of a number of online tools including Skype, Twitter, Google Wave and Moodle. They were actively using such tools both for work and personal uses. They felt that their course necessitated the exploration and use of a number of online tools, describing their engagement with these technologies for learning as “a natural move for us”. This position allows us to consider them as experimental early adopters, as described above. Moodle was offered to the students, but not as a directed choice as it usually would be within institutional policy; the VLE was offered as one option amongst many. The students’ process of experimentation and free exploration rejected the imposed ICT structure of the University in favour of a looser set of self-initiated tools drawn from free to use Web 2.0 services.

Respondents were asked to comment on the group process involved in selecting a particular tool for a given task. Some disparity of opinion existed, but it was evident that negotiation had taken place and decisions reached via a democratic process:

“We’d all had experience of them in other projects – there were a couple of instances when people said ‘I’ve never used that’ but it was very democratic, the way the decisions were made. If there was a majority of the group that said, ‘I know how to use this, I’ve used it before... it seems quite good and I can recommend it’ then that’s what we’d do. There were preferences, but it was dictated by what the majority of the group thought was a good idea. It was quite an easy process.”

Respondents were asked to comment on their opinion and use of the University’s VLE Moodle. Opinions among the cohort were polarised on this question; there was recognition that the system was useful in some respects, but usage was conditioned by the time needed to familiarise oneself with the system, guidance by lecturers and previous experience:

“I don’t think Moodle is the issue – it’s staff! Moodle can work perfectly well if it’s set up correctly. The problem I think is with a lack of direction in terms of what to do – we had to log in twice for example, which was a pain and there were restrictions such as how much content you can upload. If there is no willingness to open it up – then it’s problematic.”

“I only used Moodle when I had to – it’s a terrible implementation of technology and the University’s provision is piss poor.”

Respondents were asked to comment on what encourages them to use specific technologies; most highlighted that any technology must have a benefit or offer something significantly better than the application currently used:

“It would depend on what the benefits are; if all my networks are starting to use something new then I would be foolish not to. However, if it didn’t do the job that I needed it to then I wouldn’t use it.”

“...it’s a kind of use case for me; anything new needs to be significantly better than something that I’m currently using.”

Respondents were asked to specify their favourite technology. Although some personal favourites were promoted, there was a general recognition that different tools serve different purposes:

“I would say Dropbox was most useful...Moodle was useful for me because lectures were recorded so I could revisit them – that was really helpful. Google Wave was good for bouncing ideas – it became a long-running archive of ideas that we were working on.”

Respondents were asked if they felt they had acquired new “soft skills” as a result of using online technologies. The majority agreed that they had developed new skills and understanding with some providing specific examples:

“Yes probably – communication skills are an on-going process and you are learning all the time. There is a lot of patience and flexibility that you have to have when you are distance learning. I couldn’t expect an instant answer. You develop patience and adapt to a new tool, especially online.”

“Yes, every time you use something you develop a soft skill. For me personally, it’s not so much about the technology anymore because I can pick these things up quite quickly. It’s more about benefit and efficiency now. In my job, it’s about how can I use those tools to ease the process of online learning – how can I be creative with it. It’s not about the tool, it’s about how can the tools can be used.”

One student indicated that the process of using Web 2.0 tools in their learning practices had informed the position they wished to carry into professional practice:

“The thing I’ve developed is more patience, just because I understand something quite quickly, doesn’t mean that my clients will pick it up as easily as I have. That and an understanding of different skills I think.”

Reasons for using online technology

Analysis of respondents’ comments reveals a number of reasons for their uses of online technology. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the cohort was geographically dispersed. Their course required them to collaborate on a number of tasks and it was therefore imperative that they were able to contact each other quickly and easily to discuss and share ideas. The majority of the group had prior experience of a range of online tools, particularly social media technologies such as Twitter, Facebook and Skype. It is clear from the respondents’ comments that it was a ‘natural’ step for them to gravitate towards these tools both to stay in touch and to complete group work.

A further reason for the respondents' adoption of online technologies is discipline and experience related. Their engagement with media studies is likely to have exposed them to a range of tools and technologies and, as noted above, the majority of the cohort confirmed previous use of such technologies and consider them as part of their "world". Their adoption of such tools was enabled by staff working in the same environment and using the same technologies. This raises questions relating to the adoption of such tools in other disciplines where knowledge, exploration and use of online technologies are not so widespread.

Attitudes towards the use of technology

It is clear from comments made by respondents that the adoption of online tools is outcome led. The cohort quickly realised that they needed to communicate on a regular basis to share and develop ideas and chose a variety of technologies that suited their needs. These ranged from the use of Twitter for casual chat and to arrange meetings etc, to Google Wave to exchange ideas and keep track of document iterations.

It is also evident that the choice of technology is closely allied to its fitness for purpose. A number of respondents indicated that they would only use technologies that helped them to achieve a specific goal or were more efficient than a tool currently in use. Additionally, tools currently used by communities that the respondents belong to tend to be favoured.

Conclusions

The case study in this project asked students to solve the problem of near distance using digital tools. The solution that they agreed upon allowed them to attain, and to achieve their learning objectives. The interviews suggested some resistance or disappointment at not being 'spoon fed' the technological solution, however this discomfort when set against their success in attaining the learning outcomes is indicative that they have learned something within the module. The project highlighted that digital technologies, particularly Web 2.0 technologies, are transient. If this is the case, critical reflection on technology and the ability to construct a digital workflow through informed choices are key transferrable skills for this particular student group and so the activity would appear to be pedagogically sound. The requirement to design tools and processes for near distance learning was framed through problem based learning, with suitable support and a planned structure to signpost opportunities.

The students were critical of the university's Moodle implementation and this seemed to inform their choice of tools. The eventual solution for near distance learning was a combination of Web 2.0 technologies that were all free at the point of use, along with email and Skype calls. Moodle is not an inappropriate technology to solve the near distance problem but the students were frustrated that they couldn't do the things they felt they needed to do with it: this highlights the problem of imposing fixed outcomes and bureaucratic control on learning environments.

This work suggests that there is a tension between institutional control and flexible approaches to e-learning within the HE environment. The way that systems are

designed and procured is of interest to us as we seek to take this work forward. We suspect that the limitations on uses of digital learning tools relates to internal policies and we further hypothesise that, from a policy point of view, the use of tools such as Google Wave would be unacceptable as they cannot be controlled, preserved or managed. This policy driven ICT procurement approach might be argued to hold validity as some of the tools used in his case study, i.e. Google Wave, have been shown to be unstable platforms (Google Wave has been discontinued by Google). However, we might ask why a platform needs to have a supposed permanence? After all, the tools worked within the currency of the project.

We feel that this work can be further informed by policy document research and interviews with learning technologists, ICT staff and procurement teams. Such an investigation might help to understand the ways in which formal and informal digital learning tools are understood within the HEI context.

While this paper does suggest that students are able to construct their own digital learning support using accessible technology, we must consider the extent to which this group were a special case. Further work therefore, should explore the application of these technologies within other subject areas. Similarly, comparing results from a number of HEIs will add to our understanding of the various processes that shape procurement, promotion and take-up of digital tools and technologies.

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