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Using Web 2.0 Technologies to develop a sense of community for emerging LIS Professionals

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Summary

This paper reviews five Web 2.0+ based strategies that have been used in the Department of Information & Communications at Manchester Metropolitan University to enhance the student learning experience and develop a sense of “community” for its members.

The activities undertaken were:

1. Using Blogs to help develop student reflection & employability
2. Using WIKI's for collaboration and assessed presentations in student seminars
3. Using Second Life to facilitate community for students undertaking an online Community Information course
4. Creating a graduate “contact” site with Facebook
5. Using Web 2. 0+ to create a Community Network for UK LIS Students - a feasibility study

The intention is to illustrate the positive and wide-ranging impact that the use such technologies can have within an academic community.

Background & Context

The Department of Information & Communications at Manchester Metropolitan University (<http://www.hlss.mmu.ac.uk/infocomms/>) was formed in 2002 by the amalgamation of a pre-existing Library & Information Science (LIS) Department and a section of a Sociology Department involved in social Informatics.

The department currently runs both undergraduate and postgraduate courses as follows:

Undergraduate:

BSc (Hons) Information & Communications

BA (Hons) Librarianship

BSc (Hons) Information Management

BSc (Hons) Digital Media and Communications

BSc (Hons) Web Development

Post Graduate:

MA Library and Information Management

MSc Information Management

MSc Informatics

We are also home to CERLIM (The Centre for Research in Library & Information Management), part of MMU's Information Research Institute (TIRI) Group and are a HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) designated Centre for Excellence in Teaching & Learning (a CETL). Our CETL specialism is in Information Literacy as part of the LearnHigher Learner Development Consortium. We are also members of the (largely) USA based WISE Consortium of Online Masters LIS Programmes.

As a Centre for Excellence in Teaching & Learning and as a Department working in Information & Communications we strive to be at the forefront in using new technologies in our research & teaching. We were one of the first departments in Manchester Metropolitan University to engage with document delivery systems, then Virtual Learning Environments and now a range of web 2.0+ technologies.

This paper will describe five strategies that we have used (or will be using) in the 2007/ 2008 to enhance teaching and learning and to help foster a greater sense of community for both staff and students inside (and in some cases beyond) the department.

I have been involved in each of these developments in some way or other, either as the prime developer or as a supervisor/ supporter.

Activity 1 - Using Blogs to help develop student reflection & employability

All stage three (final year) undergraduate students are required to undertake a compulsory twenty credit unit (course) called Learning & Professional

Development (LPD). Their total credit requirement for this stage (and indeed all stages) is one hundred and twenty credits. LPD

This unit provides students with an opportunity to review, reflect on, analyse and evaluate their experiences in Higher Education. There is a clear focus on preparing participants for the next stage of their development through the application of a Personal Development Planning component and in the provision of support with issues relating to employability in the workplace.

The taught element (term one) provides students with a useful toolkit for career planning, job searching and self-promotion in written and oral forms.

The non-taught element (term two) allows student to review and reflect on their recent experiences. This part of the unit includes work based & professional developments as well as academic and personal activities.

The intention of the unit learning outcomes attached to this course are that on completion of the unit a student will be able to:

1. Reflect on and critically analyse their academic and work-based development experiences.
2. Identify and demonstrate development of a range of skills for enhancing their employability.
3. Create an action plan for future personal and career development, including evidence of their understanding and application of Personal Development Planning (PDP).

The assessment is 100% Assessed Coursework, based on two items. Firstly, a twelve-item Portfolio assesses learning outcomes 2 and 3 (value 50%). Secondly, a 3000-word report, - The Learning and Professional Development Report - assesses learning outcome 1 (value 50%).

This is a new unit for 2007/2008 and has been developed around six MMU Careers Department created career/ employability WebCT modules for the taught element. Students are guided through the modules during class sessions and are expected to provide evidence-based responses for their portfolios.

We decided that a key element of the portfolio, and an activity that would underpin a number of other activities, was for all students to create a personal blog. Our selected host was www.blogger.com. Interestingly only two of the 68 students taking the unit really knew what a blog was (I found this amazing), and no student had a personal blog of their own. With support and guidance students we encouraged to work together (and with tutor support) to create their personal blog from week two of term onwards. All students were taught blog etiquette, security issues were discussed and clear guidelines were provided regarding the blog structure and the information needed. The purpose of the blog content was twofold:

to record and reflect on activities in the LPD module

to record and reflect on academic, social, professional and employability/ workplace activities for the second assessment, the LPD Report.

Additionally students were required to personalise the blog background template, add a photo (of their choice) and provide a short paragraph to introduce themselves.

Initially students were told to make the blog editable and viewable only to the tutor and themselves – other access was a possibility later if they wished (and many have now provided this).

The activity proved to be an extremely popular and creatively rich exercise for all involved – both student and tutor. It also proved to be one of the highest rated activities of the unit and had ramifications for other work that they were studying at this, their final degree stage. Academically and in a “community” sense the blogs were very successful indeed. With a wide range of degree routes on offer (and a range of varying unit options for students), it can often be difficult to create a sense of “community” within cohorts that we have. Creating personalised, diary type blogs appears to have helped overcome this issue. Almost without exception, students created really interesting and personal sites and shared them extensively within the group and tutors. As one of those involved I was amazed at the abilities, interests, activities and the sheer diversity of my student group. There are whole other, really creative, lives going on out there which are parallel to individual’s university courses and which fellow students and tutors usually have no idea about. I was both proud and very impressed by what I saw. To watch students creating and sharing their information and activities created a real buzz in the sessions and has helped to develop friendships and collaborations, which I am sure, will continue long after graduation.

Activity 2 – Using WIKI’s for collaboration and assessed presentations in student seminars

A stage two (year two) technical undergraduate unit called Network Technologies is available to most of the department’s students. Typically 25 to 30 students take the course each year. The content is largely about how computer networks operate, the activities are split between theory classes and lab based practical sessions. The unit offers mixed mode assessment – there is a fifteen minute group presentation on a set topic (value 10% of the marks a linked individual essay (40% of the marks) and an end of year examination (50% of the marks). The presentation and the essay are inextricably linked. In the past students used Microsoft PowerPoint to create and share their topic plan for the assessed presentation. Group work can often be a contentious issue for students (for example in getting together, sharing out the work, submitting and delivering the completed presentation, etc.). For this reason we decided this year to use a WIKI to facilitate the group working process and to deliver the final presentation

in front of the tutor and the rest of the class. After a brief selection process (part of which was cost related) Xyz was chosen as the platform.

Using a WIKI for the first time (both staff and students) can create some challenges and it did so. There were a few technical and registration issues initially. Also, WIKIs are great for collaborative work but an interesting challenge to use as a vehicle for giving (projected) presentations. It should be remembered also that the WIKIs and the presentations were to be produced to strict guidelines and would be assessed as part of the individuals unit performance measurement.

Generally this innovation worked well. All students managed to create and develop their WIKi sites and to put together an effective presentation. The key variables in achievement related to title versus content issues, adherence to the instructions of the brief, WIKI navigation (how logical and clear was it?) and the final look and feel of the presentation made using the WIKI. It was clear that the presentation element was the hardest element to get right – this is fair enough given that the central orientation of a WIKI is as an individual to screen based communication technology.

Student reaction to the WIKI project was very positive. Collaborations were generally successful, topic communities developed well and the activity of using Wakes (partly because it seemed innovative and new to students to be creating in this way) seemed to produce a number of genuinely positive collaborative efforts. One key advantage of course is that a WIKI can overcome one of the main difficulties of group work, that is the geographical distribution of the group members. It also overcomes time constraints with its 24/7 availability to members. Unit feedback indicates that this activity, though challenging, was a very popular and valued part of the activities undertaken. A number of students said that they would adapt the idea to use in other units and a stage three, their final year. WIKI's will be used again for this activity in the next academic year.

Activity 3 – Using Second Life to facilitate community for students undertaking an online Community Information course

This use of web 2.0 technologies was particularly apposite. A stage two undergraduate unit called Community Information, (value 20 of 120 credits available and one of six units for the year) is taught online using the WebCT Vista VLE. Assessment is by assessed course work and comprises four essays. There is no terminal examination.

Whilst a number of “face to face” sessions are offered for student support the unit is taught (by and large) via the use of a number of topic based learning

modules within the VLE. Use is also made of the discussion Board feature of the VLE, online chat appears to be disabled with the University VLE roll out at present.

This unit tends to be taken by students taking LIS based degree routes, many of whom are studying on a part-time basis, have full-time employment or other commitments for most of the working week and may live a considerable distance from the university. Attending “face to face” sessions proves difficult for many of these students. Discussion boards can help but still leave a number of students without a complete “community” feeling and sense of inclusivity in the unit. For this reason we felt that there should be additional opportunities for students to meet, greet and relate to each other both socially and in terms of the unit activities and assessments.

It was decided to try to enhance the student sense of “community” and the ability to collaborate by using the website Secondlife.com (www.secondlife.com). Myself and an LIS colleague already had some experience of using the website and it was decided to see if registering with and then using the site would help students taking the Community Information Unit.

As a non-assessed, class- based activity, students were guided through downloading the required software to run Second Life, setting up their individual accounts, designing their characters (Avatars) and learning about site navigation. The intention was that once they had undertaken these activities on university computers that they would repeat the appropriate steps needed to access the site on their own computers at home. It should be noted that the students had a mix of technical and non- technical backgrounds and (with only one exception) none of them had ever used second life before.

The results were very interesting. There is, it must be said, a rather steep learning curve when starting to use Second Life. How steep the curve is depends on the individuals IT competencies, general confidence with technologies and familiarity with the “Second Life” context. Nevertheless, all the students were enthusiastic to take part and in general most liked using Second Life as a vehicle to facilitate communication. Setup took place in a very low key, non- threatening and very supportive way with the tutor leading the students through the steps required via a large monitor in real time. It proved to be a lot of fun and all students engaged with the site and created an Avatar for themselves. The activity seemed to create a really good sense of new “community” and raised a number of scenarios relating to possibilities of interaction remotely for the students. We managed to produce a fairly long list of ways in which the technology might be used within the group.

Technically however, things were not as successful as hoped. Many students found installation and access at home more difficult than at university. Passwords and IDs were forgotten, setup took a very long time, home computers (or the site) crashed, students “got lost” in Second Life world, etc. There appeared to be as much frustration and disappointment as pleasure and success in using the site. The steep learning curve mentioned earlier proved to be most pronounced outside the classroom situation. Probably not more than half of the sixteen students were able to use the software at home – rather defeating the

object of the exercise. Having said this, student reports for the Community Information Unit identify the Second Life experience as an enjoyable, useful and lasting one. In fairness to Second Life it is still a site under development by Linden Laboratories and is being enhanced all the time. At the same time computer functionality and broadband access is also being constantly enhanced. Also, practice makes perfect and perhaps if students were given more extensive support some of the issues might have been resolved.

We will attempt our experiment again next year, with some modifications in support and monitor the results. In the meantime, as part of the LearnHigher CETL Information Literacy Development Plan we soon hope to build an Information Literacy Information Café in Second Life to provide a community meeting place for our students and an information resource for anyone who is interested in Information Literacy in Higher Education.

Activity 4 - Creating a graduate “contact” site with Facebook

The Department of Information & Communications has been in existence for well over sixty years in one form or another. Countless undergraduates and post graduate students have entered, graduated and gone to work in the local, national and international LIS, ICT (Information & Communications Technology), Teaching and similar communities. By way of providing (compulsory) undergraduate and post graduate student placements and engaging with interest group networks (for example the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals and North West Academic Libraries), we have kept in touch with a goodly number of former students. However, there has never been a formal attempt to provide a vehicle to develop links with and for former students (and staff) or create Alumni like presence. As a “new” UK University MMU does have a small central Alumni site, but this is in its infancy and is not, in any case, department centred. What we wanted to achieve was a one stop, two way interactive, news and contact site between the department and former students.

After some consideration about the most practical and effective vehicle to use it was decided in April 2008 to set up a Facebook group for the department (www.facebook.com). Facebook offers the opportunity for individuals to join the group (or not), find new or former friends/ colleagues and join (not join) their groups, access related groups from the parent site, share photos and to use a wide range of communication tools including discussion boards and instant chat.

The site was launched on April 18th 2008 and we called it “Information & Communications Graduates from MMU”. We then emailed all current final year undergraduates, post graduates, academic and academic related staff. to let them know about the launch. Within 24 hours there were 34 members, 50 within a week and by the end of two weeks there were 62. In a further two weeks there were 85 members. Considerable activity took place on the site between

members. Facebook reports communication requests and activities both by email and on the site. Within a four week period I had over 60 “friend requests” and more “pokes” than I can recall. A lot of the members seem to use a device call Superwall for posting information. Some of the photos and discussion comments were really interesting. Plus, what happens when you accept a friend request is that you can see an individual’s own site, related sites and of course they can see yours!

Security and privacy issues are clearly important to bear in mind when working with Social Network sites. Nevertheless, final year students have reacted very positively indeed to the new site giving it unanimous approval and sending “thank you” emails on a regular basis. This is very rewarding. It remains to be seen how this “community” membership and participation will develop over the coming year. Perhaps existing students feel the need to retain a sense of belonging after they have left their academic home of, in some cases five years? Maybe former students want to catch up with their own department and former student friends or rejoin a community that has fond memories for them? Maybe some individuals are just interested to find out how today’s universities relate to new and emerging professionals that they are attempting to create. Whatever the reason, this has already proved to be an exciting and (hopefully continuing) community development activity based on a very popular and accessible Web 2.0 technology. Our next task will be to develop some “value added” content for the site and in doing so to provide interesting and useful information for our new visitors and members.

Activity 5 - Using Web 2.0+ to create a Community Network for UK LIS Students - a feasibility study

Finally, I am currently supervising a graduate student project which is investigating the feasibility of developing a community network via a Social Networking site (probably using FaceBook) for current UK students in LIS. The site will be entitled “Students in LIS –the UK Community Network”.

Work on the project will take place over the summer of 2008 and should be completed by early autumn. The main activity will be as follows:

1. Identify UK LIS Schools and Courses in LIS
2. Identify & make contact with a member of the Academic Staff
3. Seek feedback about the proposals (discuss feasibility and support)
4. Review findings with supervisor
5. If findings positive engage with CILIP and BAILER (the UK’s LIS Department organisation)
6. Develop FaceBook Site
7. Review developments and site content
8. Publicise site

This relatively small-scale intervention, if as successful as the departmental site, could make a real contribution to developing a sense of community for new and emerging students in LIS in the UK.

Will it work? There is considerable “common interest”, low engagement effort is required and (hopefully) students will have the enthusiasm to access and join a site, which has been created for and can be added to by themselves. We intend to publish the results of this survey towards the end of 2008 in the “News” section on <http://www.hlss.mmu.ac.uk/infocomms/>, alternatively I can be reached by email at n.r.glass@mmu.ac.uk.

Conclusion

I hope that the five activities briefly discussed here have been useful in illustrating a number of the wide range of community developing activities possible with Web 2.0+.

The developing technologies within Web 2.0+ offer really rich opportunities for network development and interactivity for both staff and students in higher education. For our department they have contributed greatly to an enhancement of the student experience and to creating a better sense of “community” and involvement.

My advice is to look around, innovate and try some of these networking solutions in your own workplace environment – the benefits will far outweigh the learning curve in most cases.