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25 Research Things @ Huddersfield: engaging researchers with social media

Graham Stone and Ellen Collins

A growing body of research from around the world has demonstrated that uptake of social media and web 2.0 tools and technologies is not yet embedded within the research community^{1,2,3} One important reason for this is that researchers often feel bewildered by the array of technology available to them, and struggle to understand how it could support their professional activities. This article reports on a recent project, undertaken jointly by the University of Huddersfield and the Research Information Network (RIN), to enable a group of researchers to engage more effectively with social media tools. It will consider the efficacy of the '25 Research Things' model as a way of engaging researchers with social media, and will suggest how others could experiment with the project in their own institutions.

In 2010 the University of Huddersfield and the RIN collaborated in writing and delivering '25 Research Things', an innovative online learning programme which gives researchers a structured way to engage with selected web 2.0 tools.

The course took inspiration from RIN report, 'If you build it, will they come?', to give it a distinctive research flavour and is based upon a previous course run at Huddersfield for its library staff⁴, which itself borrowed from 'Learning 2.0'⁵, developed by Helene Blowers at the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County, USA.

The course ran with two cohorts during 2010/11 via a WordPress blog⁶. The 'thingers', ranging from 1st year PhD students to professors, were given specific tasks which encouraged them to take control of their learning through exploration and play. All participants established and maintained a blog of their own to report on their experiences with each tool. This approach helps to build a supportive community, with participants commenting on each others' blogs. As a result, they not only receive peer support on the various tasks, but also begin to understand the benefits of being part of an active online social network.

A number of web 2.0 tools are introduced each week around the themes shown in table 1.

Themes	Tool
Blogs & RSS Feeds	Wordpress Technorati Google Reader
Organising your favourite content	Diigo LibraryThing Mendeley CiteULike
Social Networks	Twitter Lanyrd LinkedIn
Sharing content you've created	SlideShare and Prezi Google Documents

	Creative Commons
Images	Flickr Mashups Online Image Generators
Play week	MyExperiment or arts-humanities.net Wikipedia
Audio-Visual	You Tube Podcasts

Table 1. Themes covered in 25 Research Things

As Figure 1 shows, participants' familiarity with these tools varied, with some much more familiar than others. The named services such as SlideShare and Google Docs were less familiar than most of the generic tools such as blogging and photo sharing. The high level of inexperience with tagging is particularly interesting, as this is becoming an increasingly important way of organising information on the web.

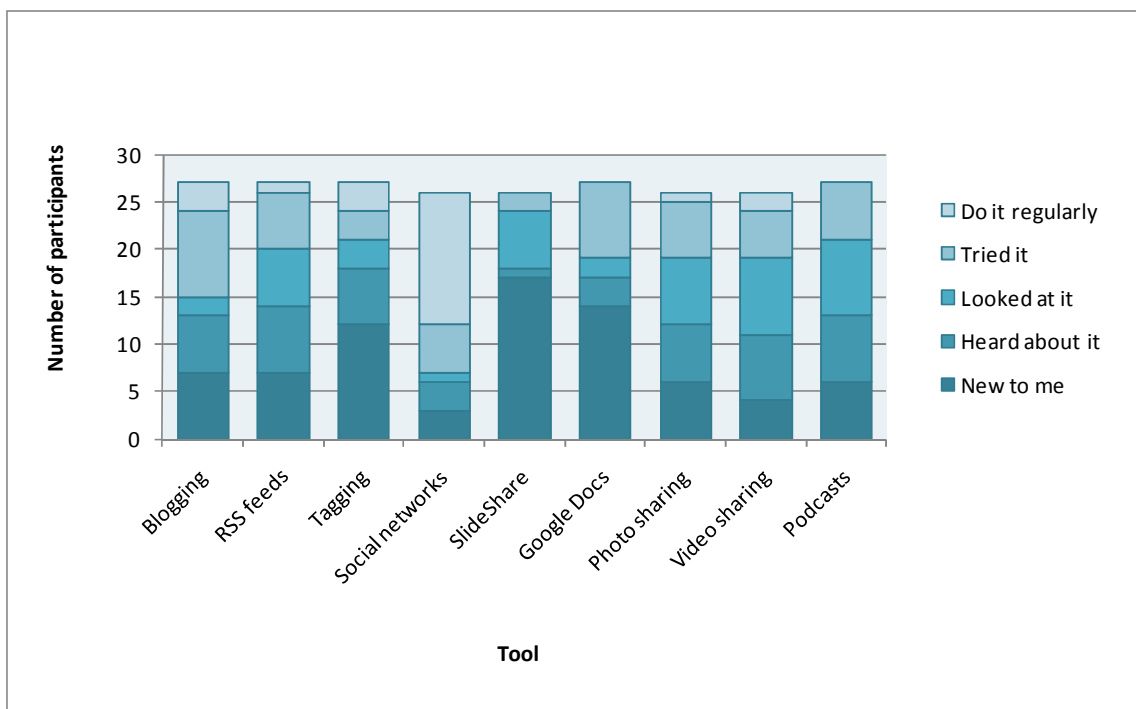


Figure 1: Participants' familiarity with different web 2.0 tools

All 'thingers' complete a survey before and after the course. The preliminary results of these surveys, along with analysis of the blogs, suggest that researchers have found the course to be useful. For many, it has increased their confidence in using web 2.0 tools, and every participant has found at least one new tool which they will continue to use after completion of the course. Many have also commented on the engaging and stimulating nature of the course, suggesting that the interactivity and structured learning are welcomed by researchers.

What motivated researchers to join?

Most researchers joined the course to learn something useful, but also to enjoy themselves in the process. Both these aspirations were taken into account when designing the course. While the primary focus of each 'thing' was the tool's potential research application, a light-hearted use was also shown. Comments in the weekly blogs suggest that these 'fun' elements were important in keeping participants motivated.

Researchers' experiences

Course structure and process

Unfortunately, many participants did not make it beyond the first few weeks; from their blogs, it seems that they struggled with the first few exercises and then gave up. More support at this stage from the 25 Research Things Team may have helped, including an initial face to face launch event.

However, most of those who completed the course enjoyed it and felt it was pitched at the right level for their needs. In particular, they enjoyed reading each other's blogs – both to get a different perspective on the tools they were trying, and also to get to know other researchers at Huddersfield.

Learning

Even those participants who already had some experience with web 2.0 tools found the course useful, either because it introduced them to services they had not previously encountered, or because it gave them dedicated time to explore and experiment with the full capacities of services that they already used.

Most researchers who finished the course found some tools that they would continue to use, some that they did not find useful now but may return to later, and some which they will not continue to use.

Many of the researchers said that being able to discriminate between the useful and less useful tools was very important. In this respect, the course has broken down the somewhat daunting concept of 'web 2.0' into different and more manageable techniques which can be adopted, or not, according to the researcher's individual needs.

Outcomes for teaching and research

Researchers identified several ways that web 2.0 tools will enhance their existing research processes. These included:

- finding resources
- managing references
- ways of communicating findings
- working with collaborators in other departments
- or institutions on articles and grant applications

Some researchers also mentioned the potential value of web 2.0 tools in building their professional networks, finding collaborators and possibly also new jobs.

Web 2.0 tools also added value to teaching and learning, as many participants used ideas from the course with their students. Some used the tools covered in the course – using CiteULike to compile reading lists or Prezi to deliver presentations. Others took their learning a step further, and used the 25 Research Things blog approach to help trainee teachers keep in touch with each other on a six-week work placement. The blog format, linking tasks with other bloggers that have undertaken these tasks, was felt to be really useful, and more flexible than the University of Huddersfield's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for this particular method of communication.

Conclusions

25 Research Things successfully helped researchers to understand and engage with web 2.0 tools and services. More support from the 25 Research Things team throughout the course, but particularly in the early stages, would have helped achieve a higher completion rate. Researchers valued the opportunity to explore a range of tools, and in particular the chance to identify the useful ones and reject those that were less useful. The course helped participants to incorporate web 2.0 tools into their research and their teaching and learning. It also reinforced the findings of the RIN report, and helped address some of the barriers identified

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