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Original Citation

Tinker, Amanda, Cattermole, Christine and Byrne, Gillian (2009) Creating Learning Communities: Three Open Source Tools. In: 6th LDHEN Symposium: the challenge of learning development, 6-7 April 2009, Bournemouth University. (Unpublished)

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Creating Learning Communities: Three Open Source Tools

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*'I have always imagined the information space as something to which everyone has immediate and intuitive access, and not just to browse, but to **create**'*

(Berners-Lee, 1999, p. 169)

Use of the web today, particularly amongst young people, is now more social and participative. Collectively known as Web 2.0, tools have emerged that facilitate communication, user-generated content and social connectivity. Facebook and MySpace numerous areas of interest and issues whether they are political, educational, professional or hobbies. In a recent survey of 500 students, 80% claimed that they regularly use social networking tools to communicate with peers (JISC, 2008). This pervasive use of Web 2.0 technology for everyday interaction has yet to see its potential fully recognised and integrated into Higher Education pedagogy. Despite 73% of students using such tools to "discuss coursework" and 75% of these students recognising their value for enhancing learning, only 25% were encouraged to use such social software by academic staff (JISC, 2008). This raises the question as to whether Web 2.0 technology can promote social learning within educational contexts and how this might be realised in practice.

In a bid to harness this creativity, energy and sociability, the Academic Skills Tutors (ASTs) at the University of Huddersfield have been exploring open source technologies to investigate how such tools might enhance teaching and learning. This paper introduces practical examples of social software tools; how these are currently used to foster learning communities and promote academic development. Three distinct social software tools are discussed (del.icio.us, PBwiki and Ning), illustrating current use of these with students and their initial evaluation.

Social Bookmarking: Collaborative Resource Sharing

Web 2.0 software has opened up an opportunity for 'learning activities' that encourage students to become interactive with others (Dotsika and Patrick, 2006). Social bookmarking sites, such as del.icio.us (n.d.), allow the user to search and 'tag' suitable resources to add to a personal webpage which can be built up quickly and shared with others. However, where traditional forms of metadata use hierarchical structure, del.icio.us employs a "...controversial new form of metadata, the *folksonomy*" [tag], although users are reminded of "previously deployed tags" to help them arrange the URLs in a suitable manner (Alexander 2006, p.34). The increase of user contribution and "engagement with content promotes a sense of community, empowerment and ownership" which not only increases the 'resource bank' but elevates student motivation (Boules and Wheelert, 2007, p.4). Bookmarks can be shared with colleagues and students but the uniqueness of this system is that anyone can access the bookmark from any computer unlike the 'favourites' system currently used by many users. Del.icio.us allows the user to build up a collection of records that are available publicly and where additional sites and links, or other interesting bookmarks, can be added to the collection for individual use or shared with others for example, resources on essay planning/writing.

The Academic Skills Team was seeking to provide access to recommended learning development resources within a web environment. Rather than use a static webpage to which only the tutors contributed and students passively consumed, a more dynamic and interactive approach was preferred. Another consideration was the University of Huddersfield's devolved (as opposed to centralised) learning development provision, with Academic Skills Tutors based within individual Schools and Campuses, each having their own subject specific needs. Del.icio.us provided a suitable platform for tailoring resources to particular subject disciplines, whilst retaining the benefits of network connectivity to other subject areas.

Over the summer of 2007, the ASTs tagged (bookmarked) web pages using del.icio.us. The bookmarks were labelled with significant words (tag) and contained explanatory commentary and

and whether the tag categorisation was ambiguous since different tags can emerge for the same concept.

However, the ease at which users can register with del.icio.us is straightforward and the creation of individual pages and deploying tags is easy. Therefore, in terms of individual and educational use, social bookmarks have the potential to bring together users with common interests hence having some time saving value.

Wikis: Fostering Collaboration

Wikis are an asynchronous communication tool, allowing users to create multimedia content collaboratively, with Wikipedia (n.d.) being the most famous example. The Academic Skills Tutor in the School of Art, Design and Architecture has, since 2007, explored the use of open source wikis to encourage effective team working, collaborative research and writing amongst first year textile craft undergraduates. The textile craft students were engaged in an Academic Skills module, involving substantial teamwork to research and produce a group presentation about a textile artist and reflect upon this experience. Wikis were introduced in response to a prevalent theme within previous student reflections: a recognised need by students for more effective organisation and communication. Students were often in different course groups, having different timetables, and found it difficult to meet as a team. As previously demonstrated, students are actively engaged with social software for everyday communication; however the question was whether this could be extended to encompass and promote social learning and collaboration as a team.

Rather than use the wiki provided by our institutional Blackboard VLE, which at the time lacked the visual capabilities that would appeal to art and design students and their research interests, it was decided to use the open source PBwiki (2009), using the VLE as the gateway to this application. A PBwiki was created by the tutor for each team (42 students, 11 teams); students can view other team wikis but can only edit their own with an allocated password. In addition to the team password, students also provide their own username, which is displayed if they edit the wiki, allowing a tutor to note individual contributions. Each wiki page also has access to an archival history, allowing a tutor to track progressive development of the wiki and students to access and revert to earlier versions of a page, if they so wish. From past experience, when wikis were first suggested as an option within the module with unsurprisingly very little uptake, it was felt important to integrate the wiki into the module delivery and assessment (see Table 1).

Example Module Sessions	Wiki Activity
Introduction to module and 'Getting to know your team'	Writing individual profiles on wiki front page, team photographs and what they hope to achieve in the module; team visit to art exhibition and writing collaborative exhibition review (see Figures 1 and 2)
Team work and team building	Establishing team ground rules, area for team meeting notes and actions
Time Management and Project Planning	Developing team project plan
Academic Research	Space to collate research findings for team project
Harvard Referencing	Collaborative creation of reference list
Oral presentations	PowerPoint slides can be uploaded onto the wiki for team collaboration and editing
Reflective Writing	Area on the wiki with questions to prompt reflection on teamwork project and process

Table 1: Relationship between module and use of the wiki

Although structured and integrated, students were encouraged to customise their wiki to 'make it their own', changing 'skins', incorporating different colour schemes, images and additional wiki pages (see Figures 2 and 3 for example wiki pages).

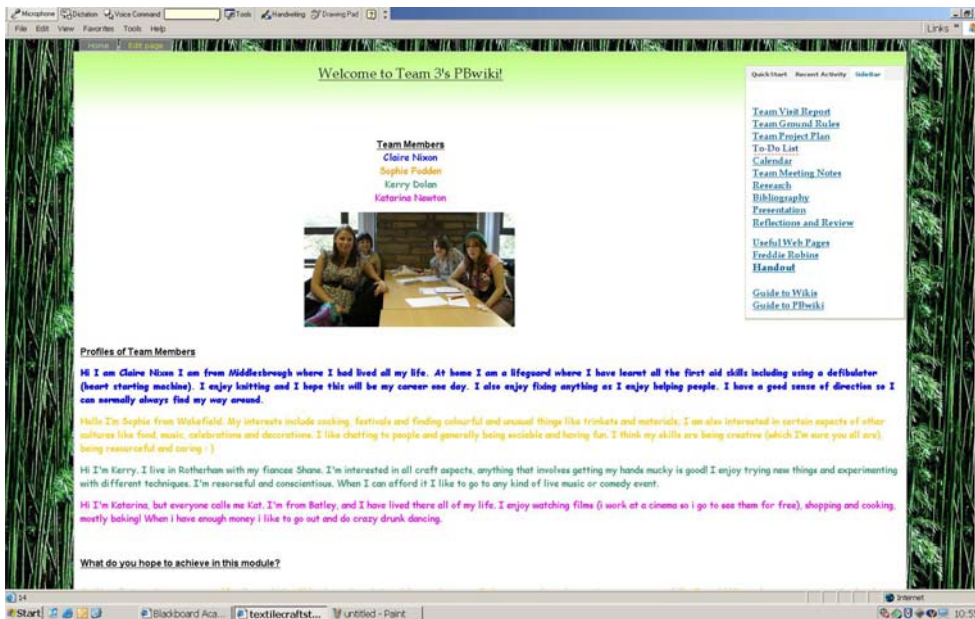


Figure 2: Wiki Front Page

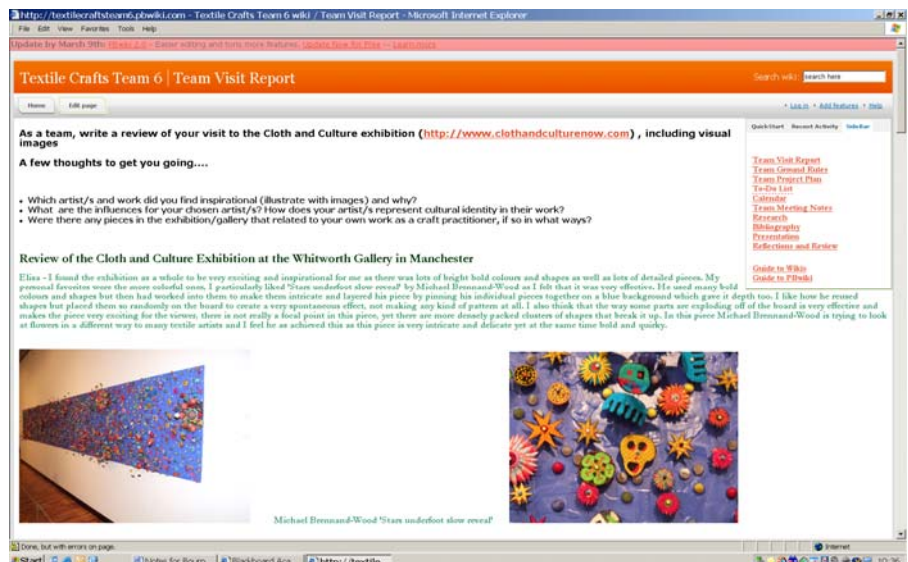


Figure 3: Team Building through Collaborative Exhibition Review

The wiki is not directly assessed, primarily due to the content being held by an external party, yet it is integrated. As part of their reflective assignment, students are asked to evaluate the role of the wiki in supporting their teamwork and, from this academic year, include relevant screenshots to evidence their teamwork process.

Qualitative analysis of these student reflections and a feedback questionnaire identified both positive and negative aspects. Students found the wiki a valuable space for storing and sharing their research and exchanging ideas; this peer learning also appeared particularly valuable in facilitating a greater understanding of referencing techniques:

"..great way to store information especially the Harvard referencing I had to make for all the images and information used"

"The main reason we worked well together was we used the Wiki to communicate our research"

Providing an organisational framework for their teamwork was another important aspect:

"It gave us a structure to help plan and organise ways of approaching the task."

"There is no doubt that the wiki was a big factor in our good organisational skills for this project."

"we kept referring back to the team plan. This helped us structure our meetings and kept us on target."

Students also found that they worked more efficiently as a team, discouraging duplication of effort:

"...stopped us looking at the same websites more than once."

Moreover, as the students were using the wiki in the first term of their first year undergraduate course, they enjoyed viewing each other's wikis to learn about and learn from their peers, aiding cohort integration and transition:

"...a good idea to get us started and introduced to each other. Helped you learn more about your class mates"

"It was interesting to look at [other] groups' work"

However, despite these successes, due to limited Internet access, some students found it difficult to contribute regularly. This may also be due to the nature of the Textile Craft course, with its studio bias, providing less opportunity and facilities for computer access. Other students, despite recognising the potential of the wiki and the tutor emphasising that it was a supplementary (not replacement) tool, still preferred the immediacy of email, text or face-to-face communication:

"...found PBwiki to be a little more complicated and meeting up was much more appropriate and constructive".

Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of the wiki may have discouraged participation amongst some, allowing only one student at one time to edit and contribute. The potential of additional synchronous tools, such as Etherpad (2008), is currently being explored to allow a more dynamic interaction in "real time". This year, one team of students began to address this issue themselves by creating their own Facebook group with a link from the wiki and vice versa; the wiki was used as the shared research repository and the Facebook group for quicker communication (arranging team meeting etc.). Other issues include the need for equal participation (a perennial issue in many team work projects) and learnability; as previous research has shown (Currant, et. al., n.d.), although students may regularly use social software, a new tool (particularly when used in a different learning context) may present a learning curve, requiring more training than might be expected.

Overall, the wiki has been found valuable for tutors in making the teamwork process more visible, allowing monitoring of student progress and early identification of any participation issues. Similarly, as a repository, the students also have a record of their collaborative research and teamwork process, which can form the basis for their reflection and identification of learning. However, a wiki cannot *create* a successful team and it is not a panacea for all. As one successful team noted, its role is to "consolidate."

Social Networking: Creating Learning Communities

Social networking software enables groups of people with shared interests to collaborate and share electronic data in many forms. Ning (2009) is an open source site that allows the creation of a network easily and quickly. The network can be either public (anyone with access to the web can view and join the network) or private (members are by invitation only and the site is password protected) and the administrator can edit content and prohibit members as necessary and appropriate. Since September 2008 the Business School Academic Skills Tutors (BSASTs) at the University of Huddersfield have been exploring various ways in which Ning can be used to create learning communities. This exploration has included using Ning to make contact with students prior to enrolment, to provide a collaborative writing tool that could be utilised in a structured manner during taught sessions and to create a student-led learning community based on the issue of referencing and plagiarism.

Inspired by the University of Bradford's successful use of Ning to create their social network Develop Me! (University of Bradford, 2008) which in part is used to make pre-enrolment student contact, the BSASTs created a relatively small-scale network. This pre-induction network contained course information and reading lists and was dedicated to one first year accountancy course. It was decided in this first use of the technology that the network be private to lessen the burden of monitoring the site for inappropriate user-generated content. This would appear to be the safest option and one that protects both students and institutions. However, this alternative is not without its issues, one of which is that where a site remains private members are invited via a mass, software-generated email. As a consequence the invitation email is in danger of becoming 'lost' amongst the many others that web users regularly receive in the form of spam. Further, the recipient is unable to view and assess the network prior to registration. This has been identified as a possible barrier to engagement; however, making a site public is not without its difficulties, as the possibility of inappropriate participation makes rigorous monitoring of the site advisable (Current, 2009). Another issue with the invitation only approach is that tutors, more often than not, only have access to university email addresses and many students choose to use personal email rarely checking their university accounts.

Despite these issues a quarter of the students invited signed up. Their engagement with the site was limited to downloading the information and, in some cases, up-loading their photographs. There was no interaction in the form of discussion and, photographs aside, no user-generated content was added to the site. However, in subsequent module evaluations students were positive about the site and welcomed the opportunity to access information prior to their induction activities.

In contrast to this, the BSASTs explored a more structured use of Ning during a Bridging Course, which is traditionally run during the second week in September. This is a four day intensive course which covers reading, writing, research and presentation skills and is attended by Foundation and HND students transferring on to degree courses. Here the Ning (Figure 4) was utilised to facilitate collaborative writing. The site was divided into sections that represented the different chapters of a dissertation and the students were set the task of writing a mini-dissertation on the topic of the conventions of academic writing. The site was again private but was introduced to the students and then used extensively by both staff and students during taught sessions. This formal use of the tool proved successful and students were positive about the technology in their evaluation feedback:

'Easy to learn with technology used.'

'It was good and different trying out the new technology; it broke the day up well.'

'It was attracting my attention to keep working and not to be bored.'

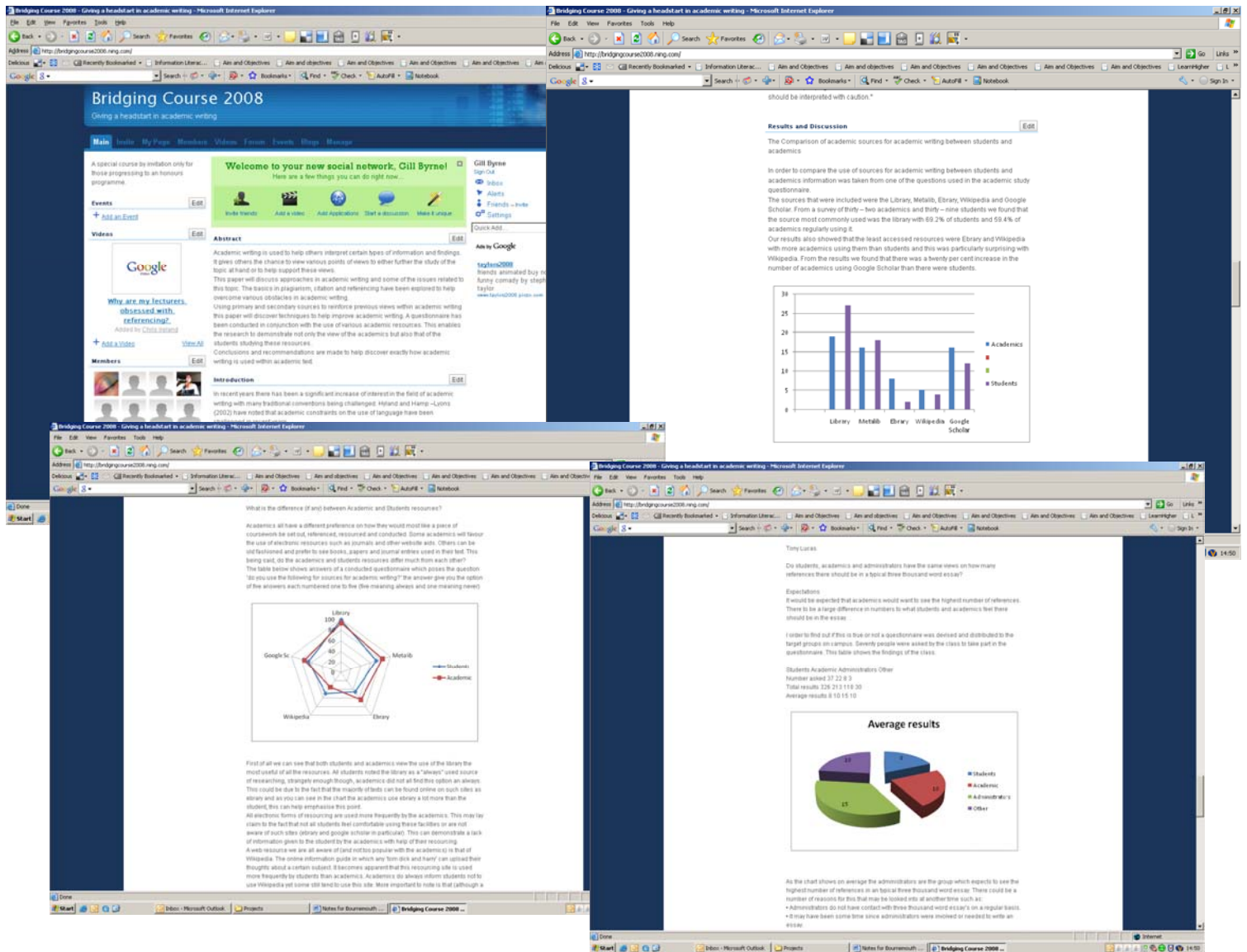


Figure 4: Bridging Course Ning

A further use of social networking software has been as part of a wider project that seeks to prevent plagiarism by using technology to up-skill the student. The project's aim is to create a variety of technological approaches to the teaching and learning of the principles of Harvard referencing, addressing the individual needs of all Business School students with diverse learning styles. A range of technologies have been utilised both in formal teaching and informal learning situations including Blackboard, voting pads and a social network entitled *Academic Matters*, hosted on Ning (Figure 5). *Academic Matters* provides links to information about referencing, recent contemporary examples of plagiarism in music and other media, videos and discussion forums. It was created to provide an alternative, informal, student space in which learners could share their ideas and concerns about this issue. Thus, highlighting for students that plagiarism is not only a concern for universities but also one for industry and popular culture. In this way it was hoped that the subject would be made more accessible for students and that *Academic Matters* would engender a student-led social learning community.



Figure 5: Academic Matters Ning

As previously discussed, although the evidence is clear that students are readily utilising Web 2.0 technology to organise their social lives, it remains unclear whether they can or indeed want to make the transition from using these tools for entertainment to engaging with them within an educational context (Hoare, 2007). The evidence seems to suggest a confused and complex picture as although students appear to use Web 2.0 informally to discuss their courses (Ipsos MORI on behalf of JISC, 2007; JISC, 2007), “as one lecturer recently found out, it is easier to join with the herd and discuss this week’s coursework online within FaceBook ...than to try and get the students to move across to the institutional VLE” (Anderson, 2007, p.21). However, following students into their online space is not always welcomed either (Hoare, 2007). In an effort to bridge this gap between a standardised approach that can be afforded by using a VLE and the students’ desire for privacy and control over their own online space, the decision was made to embed the Ning within a Blackboard course but to employ a student ambassador to manage the site.

All of the Business School students were invited to the, initially private, network during the first few weeks in term one. Take up and activity was very low; of the 4000 invited 54 signed up. A second invitation created a further 25 members. The decision has now been taken to make the site public and to send another invitation to investigate whether this will make a difference to take up. The use of the Academic Matters Ning is still in its infancy; future research will include examining usage statistics generated by Google Analytics (Google, 2009) and student evaluation feedback.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how three open source tools are being explored in supporting social learning within Higher Education. With an increase in both independent and collaborative learning, the use of technology in learning and the way information is constructed and consumed, social software affords an opportunity for users to locate, assemble and create a range of information suitable to their individual needs and, more significantly, enables them to share this with others. However, open source tools are still relatively new with little data available to define the true evaluative expediency. Although there appears to be a clear potential for such tools in contributing and sharing resources, facilitating teamwork collaboration and communication, and creating learning communities, their full realisation still remains in transition. Despite students using open source tools for social purposes, it cannot be assumed that all students are able or even willing to engage in this same way within an educational context. The experience and evaluation to date suggests that the technology is most positively received when appropriately integrated and embedded within teaching, ideally within relevant modules and linked to assessment. In so doing, students may begin to recognise the value for themselves and their own educational development within a collaborative learning community.

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