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Getting to know Web 2.0 tools

Original Citation

Barrett, Lynn, Evans, Jenny, Harrison, Ruth, Heathcote, Derek, Jones, Lawrence, Osborne, Antony, Pattern, David, Stone, Graham and Thompson, Katharine (2009) Getting to know Web 2.0 tools. CILIP update. pp. 40-43. ISSN 1476-7171

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Introduction

In 2008 library staff at Imperial College London and the University of Huddersfield introduced the UK's first *Learning 2.0* and *25 Things* programmes in higher education. Each took a slightly different approach, and included varying content, but came to very similar conclusions. This article aims to outline the development and evaluation of the programmes, both of which have been judged to be successful and will be re-run at both institutions.

The original 23 Things programme was created by Helene Blowers, then Technology Director at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (U.S.), inspired by Stephen Abram's 43 Things article and the 43 Things website. The programme was built entirely on web 2.0 technologies, was self-paced and encouraged participants to explore, by playing and learning, a new web 2.0 related tool (or 'thing') each week. A key feature was the requirement that participants blog about their experiences, evaluating each technology as to its relevance and usefulness. Staff were given the incentive of receiving an MP3 player if they completed the programme, as well as a chance to win a PDA or a laptop.

Blowers adopted a 'steal these ideas' approach by licensing the programme under Creative Commons. This has enabled over 350 libraries across the world to adapt it for their own workplace.

Learning 2.0: the Imperial way...

From 2006-08 the Library at Imperial College London ran an annual, hour long 'demonstration based' (hands-off) presentation on new technologies open to all library staff. Participants gave very positive feedback, but many wanted more depth and hands-on experience. This left us with a dilemma. We wanted to provide a longer, more advanced hands-on workshop, but trying to cover too much could result in participants feeling overwhelmed. By creating our own 23 Things programme we could give staff the opportunity to use the tools themselves over a period of weeks, not all at once. Additionally, as the programme would be delivered online staff at all Imperial's campus sites would be able to participate.

We chose to base our programme on two other adapted programmes: *Learning 2.0 @ Mac* from McMaster University (Canada) and *Murdoch University Library 23 Things* (Australia). Pertinent features included:

- a team-led programme;
- weekly featured content about a web 2.0 technology;
- links to further reading;
- weekly drop-in sessions; and
- workshops for some technologies e.g. Second Life.

Our programme ran for 10 weeks between July and September 2008. Content was delivered via a blog and consisted of an overview of a technology and weekly activities which participants were asked to complete. Optional advanced activities were provided for those who wanted to explore further. To accommodate different learning styles staff could attend workshops and weekly self-paced learning sessions, or work through the online programme at their own speed.

Where possible we linked to technologies being used within Imperial such as podcasting, multimedia, livestreaming and Second Life, and had the benefit of supportive Imperial learning technologists who advised where appropriate.

25 Things: the Huddersfield way...

At the University of Huddersfield, Dave Pattern, Library Systems Manager, had been drip-feeding staff for some time with web 2.0 stuff. The result was that some staff knew about new technologies, others knew about and used new technologies, and some remained in blissful ignorance. Dave talked to a small group of interested Computing and Library Services staff and our *Learning 2.0* programme was born.

To seek senior management approval of a programme that would require participants to use work time, we met in early June 2008 to put together a proposal. We came up with the following points:

- Our main selling point was that it incorporated many aspects of web 2.0 and required no funding (what we did need was buy-in from managers to enable staff to participate during work time)
- We would launch at a Computing and Library Services (CLS) Staff Briefing, and at the University Teaching and Learning Conference
- We would run as a pilot for CLS staff, but aim to make the programme available to all University staff
- Participants would be encouraged to work at their own pace
- There would be weekly drop-in support sessions and the suggestion that those who completed tasks easily could be invited to act as mentors
- Late starters could join up to 2 weeks after the start of the programme
- The programme would run from November 2008 to March 2009, followed by a period of evaluation
- We wanted it to be fun and not necessarily work related. Its application to CLS would be introduced occasionally to emphasise relevance
- As an incentive we offered a prize draw to win a digital mouse

As we were proposing the use of new technologies, we used a blog to record our meetings and any interim thoughts or comments. Our biggest problem was time, the University Teaching and Learning Conference in mid-September being too good an opportunity to miss for promoting our programme.

After careful research and blatant 'stealing of ideas', and holidays and deadlines notwithstanding, we wrote our 25 Things programme and promoted it. The programme started in November, avoiding the start of the autumn term and creating a convenient 'play' or 'catch-up' break at Christmas. As with Imperial, content was delivered by a blog with weekly activities. We began and ended our programme with a survey and provided additional support by email or one-to-one.

Feedback from the Imperial Learning 2.0 programme

We interviewed 5 of the participants to get feedback on:

- why they took part on the programme
- what they found most useful
- whether they were now using any web 2.0 tools for work that they had not previously used
- how they thought the programme could be improved

Most took part because they wanted to get practical experience in using a wide variety of web 2.0 tools. No-one is using every tool covered in the programme but all the interviewees found it beneficial to know what was available and how they can be used: one made the point that 'it was important to keep up-to-date with what [web 2.0 tools] students' are using'.

There were different views on which web 2.0 tools were most useful and all have continued to use some tools since the programme ended. One participant uses Pageflakes to manage the blogs he reads as well as Google Docs to collaborate on projects. Another commented that she used 'MSN Messenger a lot last year as a lot of my colleagues were working from home at the time'. One of the more technically advanced participants said that the programme enhanced his view of Second Life, because 'being in there with a group of people and having that interaction definitely made me feel that it added something to that interaction that went beyond just instant message chat'.

There were a number of ideas for improvements to the programme, focussing on timing and the types of activities. Some participants felt overwhelmed with the amount of material they were expected to cover. Suggestions included introducing activities fortnightly, not weekly, splitting the programme to run from July to August and January and February, and finishing in advance of the start of the autumn term. Several participants thought future programmes should focus more on fostering a sense of community such as providing constructive feedback on participants' blog posts and creating a more collaborative wiki activity.

Post-course survey results provided reasons as to why people had not completed the programme, the main reason being annual leave, or that the timing of the programme became inconvenient.

In addition team member Jenny Evans set up an online reflective journal to record the highs and lows of delivering the programme which became a place to note ideas for its future shape and development.

Feedback from the Huddersfield 25 Things programme

We questioned a number of our participants about their reasons for taking part, their staying power, the future for learning 2.0 in their work (and outside), and how the programme could be improved.

One of the 25 Things team took part in the programme which proved to be useful both in the gaining of new skills, and because it helped the team appreciate the time pressures. Most participants were intrigued, some were scared. Those who completed found it great fun and felt that they would miss the weekly blogging and new activities. Participants who got most from the programme regularly read and commented on other participants' blogs. They also found it helpful to learn from each other.

A range of work activities were reported. Examples include the continued use of delicious and Bloglines - both tools were found to be invaluable - and the use of a personal blog as a record of staff development. On a social level there are now many new converts to Facebook!

Improvements ranged from the timing of when the programme should start and the need for more catch-up time. It was thought that future programmes should emphasise the suggested one hour a week was a starting point and more time could be required.

To find out why people did not finish the programme we sent a specific survey to the non-completers group. We found that when compared with the group as a whole, the non-completers tended to be older, have less access to the internet, be less confident in their IT skills and wanted more support. They would also have liked more face-to-face contact during the programme and, interestingly, had more of a work-related reason for taking part in the first place.

Comparing the two programmes

Tool/technology	Imperial College London	University of Huddersfield
Blogs	Wordpress	Wordpress
Instant Messaging	Windows Live Messenger (formerly MSN Web Messenger)	n/a

Wikis	Wetpaint	Wetpaint
RSS feeds and readers	Bloglines, Google Reader	Bloglines, Google Reader
Social bookmarking	Delicious	Delicious, Technorati
Photo sharing	Flickr	Flickr
Online office	Google docs	Google docs
Online mapping	n/a	Google Maps, Google Earth
Online image generators	n/a	South Park Studio, Comic Strip Generator, Image Chef, Happy Face Generator, Face your Manga
Online libraries	n/a	LibraryThing
Personal start pages	Netvibes, Pageflakes, iGoogle	n/a
Mobile technologies	Participants mobile phone	n/a
Toolbars and widgets	Conduit, Show yourself widget, Widget box	n/a
Mashups	Yahoo Pipes	Mappr; Flickr Color Pickr, Montagr, Multicolr Search Lab, retrievr
Multimedia	iTunes, YouTube, Google Video	iTunes, YouTube
Social networking	Ning, Twitter	Facebook, Twitter
Virtual Worlds	Second Life	n/a

Comparators	Imperial College London	University of Huddersfield
Organisation & administration		
Number of people in Learning 2.0 team	4	5
Incentives/prizes offered	none	Prize draw (posh mouse)
Number of 'things'/technologies included in programme	22	25
Participant information		
Number of participants	38	27
Pre-course questionnaire completed by participants	Yes	Yes
Post-course survey/interviews completed by participants	Yes	Yes
Completion rate (%)	24% completed all or most of the programme and a further 34% completed at least half the programme	40% completed
Programme delivery		
Length of programme (weeks)	10 weeks including 8 weeks content and 2 weeks 'catch-up'	5 months with 11 weeks content and a Christmas break
Method of programme delivery (blog, wiki etc)	Blog, email	Blog, email
Methods used to support participants (email, workshops, one-to-one etc)	Email, instant messaging, drop-in sessions, workshops, one-to-one	Email, one-to-one
Plans to run programme again	In summer 2009	In January 2010

Conclusions from Imperial

We intended that the programme should become a feature of the Library's staff development programme and to invite non-Library colleagues to participate. To fulfil this aim we used Jenny's reflective journal and participant feedback to identify areas for improvement.

Creating and running the Learning 2.0 programme was an interesting and informative experience, but a greater undertaking than anticipated. Researching and writing posts, keeping up with emails and assisting participants took up considerable time. We decided to expand the team and include 'graduates' of the first programme utilising their new knowledge. To this end we recruited three enthusiastic participants to assist in the running of the 2009 version of Learning 2.0.

Our post-course survey results demonstrated that all participants had increased their knowledge and awareness of web 2.0, but the number of completers was disappointingly small (see table). Time was a major factor: initially the programme was to start in the early summer but had to begin later due to extenuating circumstances. This meant it finished only two weeks prior to the beginning of the busy autumn term. Participants also commented that the programme was too short and attempted to cover too many tools and technologies. Therefore our 2009 programme began in early June, running for 12 weeks with 3 catch up weeks.

Communication between participants was raised as an area for improvement. There was a reluctance to comment on each other's blogs, which led many to believe no-one was reading their blog posts so there was no incentive to continue posting. This lack of communication adversely affected the activities which required collaboration, for example wikis and social networking. Introducing participants to a technology such as wikis and asking them to explore with no further direction did not work well. Participants wanted a much more structured collaborative task and this has been added to the 2009 programme.

Lastly, the team believed that participants would feel more comfortable commenting and collaborating in small groups of people they knew well. The 2009 participants have been divided into 'learning groups' and encouraged to read the blogs of other group members, comment and start discussions and work together on collaborative tasks. Team members have been assigned groups to provide help and support for, and keep a watchful eye on blog posts. We hope that by creating a strong support network more participants will complete the programme and the team can offer help to those falling behind at an earlier stage.

Conclusions from Huddersfield

Like Imperial, we intended our first foray into the Learning 2.0 programme to be a pilot to help us shape future staff development both for CLS and the University as a whole. We were fortunate that we could write the whole programme before the autumn term as, inevitably, we had virtually no time to input anything after September. To this end it was useful that one member of the team actually took part in the programme, otherwise it would have been very easy to leave people 'unsupervised' and unaware of any issues or problems.

Again, as at Imperial, the number of completers was less than we had hoped. We felt our biggest mistake was to assume that a long Christmas break would both give people catch-up time and the opportunity to play, whereas in fact, many people lost momentum and dropped out at this point. Others assumed they would be able to complete each task in the one hour allotted from work time and dropped out when they found this impossible. Some would have liked a stronger support network with occasional meetings.

The original team will soon be disbanded as people retire, move onto other responsibilities and so on, but the next programme will be led by one of the first completers who is conveniently placed within the IT training team. We hope that one or two of the other 'graduates' will assist her in moving the programme forward. To accommodate the issues around timing we plan to start in the spring term, and allow more time to complete each activity, coupled with a warning that the allotted one hour should only be seen as a starting point. We want to ensure that reading, learning from and commenting on each others' blogs is an integral part of each week's tasks.

The biggest encouragement to rerun the programme has been the comments from the blogs of those who graduated:

"This has got to Stop..STOPStop, you're turning me – ok HAVE turned me in to a techno'infomaniac...help! I've now got so many bloggy/twittery/googly things to look at, that I haven't the time to actually use/do anything useful with all this info I'm being bombarded with... Now, well I think 25 things are going to be named as correspondents when the family file for divorce."

"Such a disappointment this week to find that it's the last week and there's nothing new to discover! It's been such good fun and I've learnt so much. At the start I didn't know what to expect, I was apprehensive but full of enthusiasm. It knocked me slightly though to discover that I couldn't do what was needed in an hour, I wondered if it was just me but it was a relief to find out, by reading other 25 things blogs, that I wasn't the only one with timing issues! Once I decided that I was better off doing this from home I never looked back."

"Well, it's been lovely. Mondays won't be the same without a fresh set of Things to look forward to and I'm already hoping the team will imminently announce "25 More Things" as a post-graduate option. Have spent many happy hours at home exploring areas it would never have occurred to me to investigate and have also enjoyed the virtual contact with other 25-Things whose paths don't often cross mine."

Summary

Like web 2.0 itself the two programmes continue to evolve and change. The designing, writing and delivering of the programmes has provided new and beneficial challenges to the teams who created them, and the overwhelming positive feedback has been very supportive. At both institutions participants have continued to use technologies and tools, in both their work and social lives, and the teams have been inspired to develop the programmes further for and including more content and activities.

Imperial College London Learning 2.0 team:
Jenny Evans, Ruth Harrison, Lawrence Jones, Katharine Thompson

University of Huddersfield 25 Things team:
Lynn Barrett, Derek Heathcote, Antony Osborne, Dave Pattern, Graham Stone.

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The Original 23 Things programme
<http://plcmclearning.blogspot.com/>

Murdoch University Library 23 Things
<http://mullet23.blogspot.com/>

Learning 2.0 @ Mac
<http://macetg.wordpress.com/about-learning-20-mac/>

Learning 2.0 @ Imperial College London Library
<http://learning20atimperial.wordpress.com/>

25 Things @ Huddersfield
<http://25things2008.wordpress.com/>