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25 Research Things: engaging academics with social media tools

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25 RESEARCH THINGS

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Since the publication of the Research Information Network (RIN), *If you build it, will they come?*, 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. 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.

'25 Research Things' is an innovative online learning programme, undertaken jointly by the University of Huddersfield and the RIN, which gives researchers a structured way to engage with selected web 2.0 tools. Based upon previous work undertaken at Huddersfield, a number of web 2.0 tools were introduced each week and the 'thingers', ranging from first year PhD students to professors, were given specific tasks which encouraged them to experiment, with the aim of helping them to assess the value and interact with web 2.0 tools and technologies. Each week, they reflected on their experiences via a personal project blog.

Who were the participants?

Figure 1: Career stage of participants

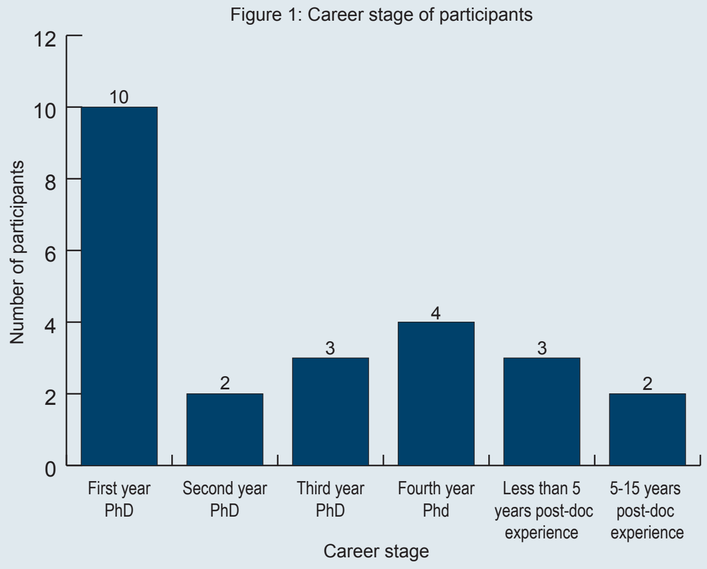


Figure 2: Participants' familiarity with web 2.0

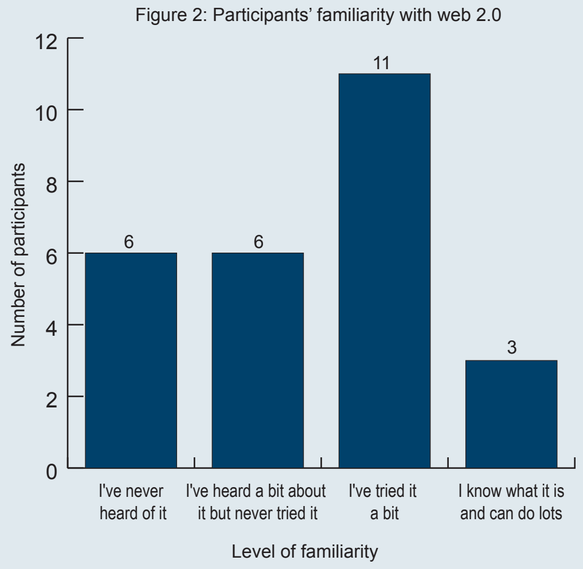
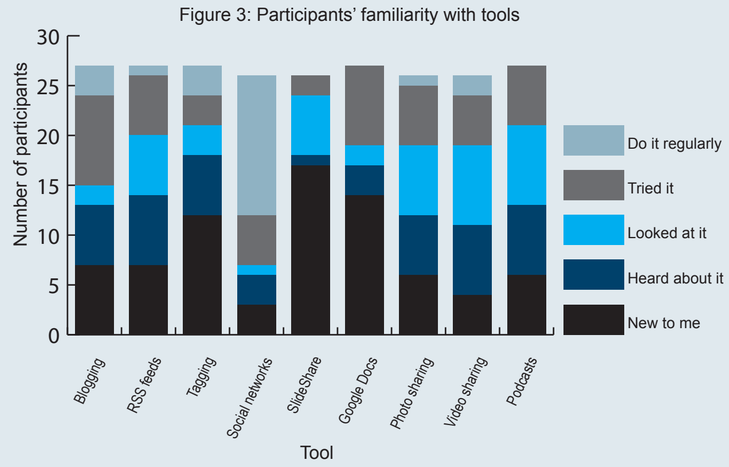


Figure 3: Participants' familiarity with tools



The dominance of first year PhD students probably reflects the way the course was marketed via the Post Graduate Research induction as well as to all research active staff.

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.

What motivated them to join?

Most researchers joined the course to learn something useful, but also to enjoy themselves. We tried to meet both these aspirations through our course design. While the primary focus of each 'thing' was the tool's potential research application, we also showed some lighter-hearted uses. Comments in the weekly blogs suggest that these 'fun' elements were important in keeping participants motivated.

Their experiences

Course structure and process

The majority of participants didn't make it beyond the first couple of 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.

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

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.

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 hadn't previously come across, or because it gave them dedicated time to explore and experiment with the full capacities of services that they already used.

Most researchers finished the course with 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.

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 used the approach, getting students to blog about their experiences on a work placement, for example.

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.

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.

References

About Learning 2.0 http://plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com/

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