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You Tube if you want to – a Web 2.0 approach to staff development in web conferencing

Mark de Groot and Gill Harrison

Introduction

How can we identify and make best use of potential resources in a staff development programme promoting web conferencing? What are the resources we should use? This paper regards web conferencing as a potentially powerful tool at the disposal of an institution intent on exploring new models of blended and online learning appropriate to the changing needs of 21st-century learners. It presents web conferencing in the user-centric context of Web 2.0 – the social web technologies whose educational impact is to empower online communication, collaboration, participation and sharing of resources. Based on findings from an 18-month period of evaluation and initial implementation at Leeds Met, it outlines practical staff development approaches in the related areas of user-created content and community involvement that could promote a more efficient and focused dissemination of the insights and experiences of a local, national and world-wide user group.

Web conferencing: the institutional context

Following an extensive six-month evaluation in 2008, Elluminate was selected as the web conferencing software to be supported at Leeds Met. Exploiting the potential of web conferencing with Elluminate was a named and specific target in Leeds Met's Assessment, Learning and Teaching (ALT) priorities for 2008-09. These priorities need, however, to be capable of responding to changes in economic, political and indeed institutional circumstances. Leeds Met's ALT strategy is now evolving to focus more precisely on addressing the issues of student support and learning delivery raised both in the National Student Survey and in a local survey conducted by our own Students' Union.

The UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) report into *Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World* (JISC, 2009) looks further ahead. It provides an important analysis of the need for and the means by which HE institutions can adapt to meet the expectations of students who are increasingly comfortable with Web 2.0 technologies. The report states that the processes of engaging with Web 2.0 technologies develop a skill set that matches 21st-century learning skills to the 21st-century employability skills of collaboration, creativity, leadership and proficiency in technology. The need to respond is clear from the significant statement that the "natural inertia of the established system is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term" (JISC, 2009).

In this paper web conferencing is seen as an important example of Web 2.0 technology. It has a multi-faceted ability to simultaneously carry, present and record the voices, text chat, video, graphics and web resources of its participants. Research evidence gives a strong indication that web conferencing has a significant part to play in this process of institutional engagement with Web 2.0 technologies. For Reushle and Loch (2008) web conferencing is "a powerful tool to connect students located across the globe enabling interactive and collaborative activity that facilitates joint construction of knowledge". Kreher (2008) gives an indication of the potential of web conferencing to bring benefits to educational institutions outside the current focus on its application in instructional settings and its impact on instructional outcomes.

Web conferencing then is a potentially significant part of an institution's response to changing student needs and expectations. How can a development programme better prepare staff to realise this potential?

Staff development background to web conferencing at Leeds Met

Web conferencing at Leeds Met began in early 2007 with a six-month cross-Faculty evaluation supported with Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) funding. The 39 participants in this evaluation were the core members of the three groups that later had the responsibility for the promotion and support of Elluminate across the University.

Staff development over this period has consisted of short awareness-raising sessions, a two-day intensive 'boot camp' and the development of internet-based resources including short guides, a wiki and links to Elluminate's own website. The integrated nature of institutional strategy, resource, training and delivery was summarised in a poster (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009) presented at the Blackboard User conference in Barcelona in April 2009. The challenge now is to move forward from awareness-raising to a fuller implementation. In planning this fuller implementation it is important to bear in mind the practical considerations raised by MacDonald (2006) for staff developers working with tutors whose working lives blend online and face-to-face teaching. In addition Garrison & Vaughn (2008) are clear about the limitations of 'one-off' staff development sessions. The collegial network they identify as fundamental for effective professional development needs to be mirrored by an evolving network of resources and opportunities that is in sympathy with changing institutional needs, participant aspirations and pedagogic principles.

Following a meeting held online using Elluminate, 27 Leeds Met Teacher Fellows were asked to assess potential future use of web conferencing and gave a valuable indication of what their likely staff development needs would be. Their feedback identified potential uses ranging from research supervision to running workshops, seminars and tutorials with distance learners. They also suggested potential uses of web conferencing for both formative assessment, for example with case study discussions and mini-presentations, and summative group assessment with project work submitted as an Elluminate recording. Some were keen to trial peer/tutor feedback on individual and group assignments, perhaps using scheduled 'virtual' office hours in Elluminate. The ability to conduct more focused and time-efficient meetings, without travel or room booking constraints, was identified as a positive administrative bonus. Of equal interest was the potential to offer students virtual group study space without the need to book physical rooms or travel to a library. Teacher Fellows further identified peer support and resourcing strategies to overcome possible training and technical issues they could predict for both themselves and their students.

What this suggests is that in moving beyond awareness-raising in exploiting our use of virtual conferencing spaces, we need also to find more efficient ways to develop and to capitalise on the real knowledge, experience and insights of staff and students who involve themselves with web conferencing. The core proposal here is that ease of access to Web 2.0 technologies and the collaborative climate that their use engenders can support the adjustments needed in order to provide more appropriate, targeted staff development resources.

Some proposals for staff development in web conferencing

Staff development programmes using Elluminate have the opportunity to reflect and explore new models of blended and online learning appropriate to the changing needs of 21st-century learners. They can increasingly bring into play the principles of user-created content and user involvement that underlie Web 2.0 technologies. Proposals are presented here in two of the overlapping categories of Web 2.0 technologies identified by Franklin and Armstrong (2009).

The Read/Write Web

This highlights the web presentation of user-generated content. It allows readers to contribute to pages on others' websites (e.g. product reviews by Amazon customers). It allows communally edited pages (e.g. Wikipedia). It is proposed to develop more coherent and straightforward web presentation of content that is increasingly user-generated by:

- redesigning Leeds Met Elluminate support pages to make core information more explicit and immediately available (e.g. that needed to enable moderators to run their first conference)
- piloting a user-driven staff development session, perhaps themed around feedback to students, where staff determine both the content and tools utilised according to their individual needs
- compiling a simple list of 'top tips' – based on the advice of both internal and external practitioners this would be a much reduced, local version of the fuller list produced by Brandon (2008)
- encouraging a growing user community to contribute to a shared online resource. This may be a more user-friendly development of the wiki currently supported by the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) team
- working with Faculty learning technologists to produce a more holistic resource, demonstration and showcase resource base (for example, Faculty-based buddy sessions, cross-Faculty 'boot camps' and cross-University showcasing of learning objects produced with Elluminate Publish).

The Social Web

This emphasises community involvement. It provides messaging and content sharing by groups with shared interests (for example Facebook and Twitter for messaging, Flickr and YouTube for sharing photos and video respectively). We could better unlock the resource potential in the local Leeds Met community of students and staff by:

- more focused targeting of existing learning communities. The TEL team, Faculty learning technologists and the Teacher Fellow network are all key Leeds Met networks who could help realise this
- building of an internal, cross-Faculty network of expert students to publicise and support the use of student-only virtual meeting rooms available on demand through Elluminate
- promotion and expansion in other Faculties of the Faculty of Health's sessions developed by their learning technologist. This gives staff the opportunity to explore the potential and practicalities of the technology in the shared professional context of the group. The course promotes the collegial network espoused by Garrison and Vaughn (2008)
- preparing and delivering a web conference similar to that of the University of Hertfordshire, which allows for virtual or physical attendance at each of its sessions. Their success, as described by Bullen (2009), can be emulated and built upon. A starting point for us was the preparation and delivery of the web conference 'UK E-Learning: Gentleman Amateurs or Hard nosed Professionals?' Two linked web conference sessions were run in July and September 2009. An online discussion forum and resource base has been set up following the two sessions, enabling participants to reflect on and discuss issues raised.

Conclusion

If learning in the 21st century is an increasingly learner-centred, social, collaborative activity that maximises the potential of online communication and digital resources, then it is reasonable to expect staff development approaches for the resourcing and support of web conferencing with Elluminate to mirror and exemplify the spirit of learner-centred, social, collaborative good practice.

Higher education institutions must respond to the needs and expectations of today's student population, and web conferencing is a potentially significant part of that response. This has important implications in terms of staff development. The design and implementation of a staff development programme at Leeds Metropolitan University, making use of Web 2.0 facilities such as social networking tools, and underpinned by Web 2.0 principles such as user-created content, is currently being undertaken. It is a work in progress, but initial feedback from participants is very positive.

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Mark de Groot and Gill Harrison
Technology Enhanced Learning Team