



The role of collaborative online tools in business and community engagement with course design/delivery

Jacquie Kelly

JISC infoNet, Northumbria University, United Kingdom

Andrew Stewart

JISC Advisory Services BCE Team, Northumbria University, United Kingdom

‘The Trialling of Collaborative Online Tools for BCE’ JISC-funded project is investigating the use of collaborative online tools to support Business and Community Engagement (BCE) in a variety of contexts via a number of trials situated in colleges and universities within the UK. BCE is the strategic management of interactions, partnerships and transactions with partners and clients external to the institution. This includes the commercial and public sectors (including charities and trusts), the cultural landscape and the social and civic arena. Three of the eight trial projects are working with partners in the design and/or delivery of curricula. Two have an international dimension and one is a large regional partnership with The Regional Health Authority. These three are trialling very different approaches and tools to support their BCE activities and through their activities and experiences, future BCE collaborative ventures will benefit. This poster shows progress to date.

Keywords: Collaboration, online tools, business and community engagement, course design, course delivery, innovation, employer engagement

Introduction and background

Collaboration is at the heart of BCE, manifest in three dimensions: within institutions (across disciplines and functions), across institutions, and between institutions and external partners. Co-creation and co-production are key concepts for BCE, but also increasingly seen as more progressive and sustainable development models in a wide range of contexts. While effective and sustainable collaboration requires initial (at least) face-to-face contact, the vast majority of BCE collaborative work is heavily dependent on virtual collaboration through email, telephone or online tools and resources. In a severely time-constrained and information-heavy environment, it is critical that tools that enable collaboration are simple to use, with minimal risk and mutually convenient. Web technologies, in particular, offer exciting new opportunities to meet these needs. Both Knowledge Transfer and employer engagement are strategic UK government priorities, supported by increasing funding streams (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/bce>). Both activities rely heavily on effective collaboration, new hybrid skill sets and flexible, interoperable systems, but generally institutional central services and policies such as those related to HR, finance or IT are not designed to empower these activities. Therefore the tools and infrastructure used to support collaborative activity tends to be whatever can be found to work to meet current needs resulting in a hit-and-miss approach.

Much of the employer engagement within course design and delivery tends to be on the periphery of this academic activity for example employer advisory groups and guests lectures, or as work-based tutors. The subject disciplines of Health are the exception to this with the involvement of healthcare professionals being at the heart of the education delivery. This prior engagement with the delivery of education and skills is seen as important in one of the trial projects; the partners do not have to develop good working relationships at the same time as starting to use new online tools to enhance the collaboration.

Industry and Business have a long history of involvement in an advisory capacity in the design of courses – via liaison committees and to a lesser extent via student industrial placements, academic secondments, employer advisory groups, or with more direct involvement as work-based tutors and professional body

accreditation. Involvement in delivery is less well developed. There are some excellent examples in Health and Health Sciences; for instance student placements and PDP courses have clinical/practice tutors, and work-based learning where business tutors assess learner achievements. Guest lecturers are common place at universities but not so well utilised in colleges. However, it is less usual for a direct and continuous involvement in course delivery of the type described in this project where the deployment of collaborative online tools has enabled international experts to be directly involved in the delivery of education giving students an insight into the business world, a depth of discussion and understanding, and the opportunity to work with acknowledged experts and other students world-wide.

However, there are still some IT barriers to overcome: business and industry may be wary of 3rd party tools (JISC, 2009), social networking sites are blocked by some universities and colleges as they do not have control over the security of such, and the NHS does not allow external access at all from wards. Some education establishments 'block first and investigate second' which hinders innovation in education. It is for this reason that each of the trial projects had to have their IT Departments fully on board. For example, the Director and Deputy Director of IT Services at Northumbria University are both committed members of the Open ICT Tools Trial Project. The barriers that these trials are overcoming are common to many academic-BCE engagements and it is due to open discussions with stakeholders that progression has been made.

The trial projects

The University of the Arts London is exploring how Web 2.0 social networking tools can be used to build a virtual community of practice (VCoP) that links the academic world with the professional one in a multifaceted exchange, enabling students to gain insights into the world of professional practice and industry, but also for industry to gain the critical perspectives on practice that an academic environment can provide. Online presentations and discussions are being held to reflect upon issues pertinent to the profession; for example an ethical code with respect to images of war. They launched the OPEN-i community website on Ning at end June 2009, and membership stands at 499 as of 30th October 2009 with a variety of members from academic, industry, practitioner and student levels. Each Wimba webinar attracts over 50 participants worldwide and the sessions have been saved for re-viewing and for those unable to join the session. The site is very active with wide-ranging discussions, for example 'New Business Models'; and separate groups for specialist discussion, for example 'Multimedia' and 'Race and Diversity in Photojournalism'. The group of photojournalists are confident with using digital media and many will use social software sites as part of their work. They are also familiar with each other's work and may have worked collaboratively before. It is anticipated that this experience will assist with the online CoP cohesion and development of trust and that using a new technology will not be a barrier to the development of the community.

The aim of the 'Open ICT Tools' project at The School of Design, Northumbria University is to enhance understanding of the use of ICT tools to facilitate global collaborative learning with external business and community partners. Using the Global Studio as a research site, the project is examining the utility of various IC technologies for enabling secured collaboration with community and industry partners. Each collaborative grouping consists of a student group from Northumbria University, a student group from an overseas partner university and an industrial partner. Previously the course used an internally hosted wiki for the collaboration but found the functionality was too limiting for the Multimedia Design collaborations. As a result of this project, the team has been collaborating with the University IT Services on the fit between their functional requirements and available systems that can be hosted by the University. The hosting issue is an important one for this trial given the type of business partners and the fact that Northumbria is an IT-enabled university but its IT Services require a certain element of control. This situation is not unusual as a recent survey by the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (Browne et al, 2008) showed that 64% of respondents used centrally supported wikis in teaching and learning as opposed to externally hosted technologies. Whereas previously the University was very wary of open-source products, the trial is now utilising a Plone website hosted on its own University server.

The Response Project, a joint venture led by Matthew Boulton College on behalf of The West Midlands Health Academy, is trialling the use of online tools to support collaboration between NHS employers, Further Education Colleges and Higher Education Institutions. The focus of this trial is the development and delivery of a Diploma in Public Service. Response, the West Midlands Health Academy trial, decided after a scoping exercise to use Moodle together with Elluminate. The licensing is not straightforward as there are several partner colleges and universities together with the NHS; negotiations are ongoing. Within the NHS and most UK colleges, individuals do not have administrator access rights on their PC so

laptops have been procured for partners in order to install any required software. As many of the people involved have no prior experience of using collaborative tools, full Moodle and Elluminate training is planned prior to collaboration on progression pathways and course design for NHS staff training and development.



The CAMEL model, developed by JISC infoNet and partners for collaborative approaches to e-learning management (JISC infoNet, 2006) is being deployed to facilitate and to encourage a reflective and agile approach to the trials.

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Authors: Jacquie Kelly and Andrew Stewart. JISC infoNet, Room 304 Hadrian House, Higham Place, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE1 8AF. UK. Email: jacquie.kelly@northumbria.ac.uk

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