

Piloting social networking and Web 2.0 software at Deakin University



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Deakin University piloted social networking software in order to complement and add a new dimension to its online learning and teaching efforts. In the first semester of 2007 eight teaching academics adopted three software applications. Six were used with students for learning while the other two were used by staff for professional development and research. This paper reports on the first attempt at providing institutional support for Web 2.0 and what was learned through the experience of these eight teaching academics which is essential to the ongoing development and decisions related to the future take up of these software applications.

Keywords: social software, Web 2.0, pilot case study

Introduction

Deakin University has a long history of using web-based technologies in its teaching and learning and currently Blackboard Vista™ known as Deakin Studies Online (DSO) is used University-wide as its learning management system. Most staff are extremely competent users of DSO but a content management system such as DSO does not allow the read-write-edit-publish features of Web 2.0 and inhibits the collaborative interactions of communities that include Deakin students, staff and others. Consequently, to extend the pedagogical applications and choices for learners and learning, staff have been independently experimenting with Web 2.0 technologies and a few have successfully adopted them in the recent past (Augar, Raitman, & Zhou, 2004; Goold & Augar, 2006). Evans (2007) recognised the possibilities of Web 2.0 in post secondary settings and others (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005; Choy & Ng, 2007; Guzdial, Rick, & Kehoe, 2001; Mader, 2006; Sauer et al., 2005; Sims & Slater, 2006) saw its value in higher education. Deakin University recently adopted the following software on a pilot basis to complement DSO, based on the variety of features they each offered.

- **Joomla!-SMF** is a content management system which allows easy website creation and management and social networking functionality.
- **Gallery2** supports the creation and management of a virtual gallery. Registered users have their own album of images and are able to post textual comments about images in the albums of other users.
- **MediaWiki** facilitates the collaborative creation of a website which allows each new reader to become a writer and editor by continually building upon, revising, and editing an emerging text.

This paper reports on the learning that occurred through experimentation and voluntary engagement with the above software and records some early experiences of a pilot study. Although the pilot was limited in size, in an emerging area, every case study and every report contributes to understanding the potential uptake of the software. The purpose of the study was to gather information that is required to help define the data that is required by the University's teaching and learning staff and technical staff to compile a strategic institutional implementation plan in relation to Web 2.0 software.

Research approach

Eight enthusiastic staff from all five faculties, volunteered in this pilot. Three adopted Joomla!-SMF, one used Gallery2 and four experimented with MediaWiki. The small scale of the study and its purpose determined a naturalistic inquiry. Case study approach was the obvious choice as the purpose of the study was to learn from experience, explore fine grained information, examine complexities, conditions and concerns as relevant to future adoption decisions.

Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews consisting of a series of standard open-ended questions and broadly explored pedagogical value and approaches; methods and processes of adoption; institutional support; impact on respondents work; views of collaborative work and assessing

collaboration; professional development; and constraints, frustrations and successes. This enabled similar information to be gathered from all respondents but also allowed the flexibility to follow up on additional useful information that surfaced during the conversation. All interviews were recorded and files of recordings and notes were verified by respondents before analysis. The interviews were reflective ‘stories’ of a personal and spontaneous engagement with the software applications as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Discipline areas of Web 2.0 application

Software & number of installations	Faculty/ Discipline area	Application
Gallery2 (01)	Arts	Deakin second year undergraduate photography students collaborate with students in another Australian university, create albums in small groups and comment on those of others
Media Wiki (04)	Arts	First year undergraduate students document learning and research and create a resource that could be used by future students
	Education	Post graduate student create case studies and explore case study as a methodology
	Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Science	Final year undergraduate students in small groups develop a guide for parents of intellectually disabled children on available support services. (Will be published as a booklet when ready.)
	Education	Faculty staff site for sharing research ideas
Joomla!-SMF (03)	Education	Second year undergraduate students collaborate within group as well as practice online teaching with student teachers in Pakistan and Iran
	Science & Technology	Final year undergraduate on-campus, off-campus and off-shore students work in groups in role playing settings
	Business & Law	Faculty staff and student site for research and teaching

Findings and discussion

The findings were broadly positive as all eight respondents saw considerable pedagogical value in their adoption exercise and their overall satisfaction was confirmed by their plans to further develop and use the applications in the following semester. They were attracted to Web 2.0 software for logistical reasons like the ability to work across time zones, ‘contribute and edit like on a whiteboard’, create communities of practice which included learners and professionals from outside Deakin University, develop a PBL learning environment, provide learners with their own space to collaboratively build knowledge, provide a formative peer-feedback mechanism, reduce the presence of the lecturer, overcome restrictions of DSO, use plug-ins (Joomla), display and share work (Gallery2), and use as a research method for case study (MediaWiki). All respondents felt learners adopted the software with minimum help from them. Themes and concerns which emerged from the interviews though by no means original, are presented below and where possible the ‘voice’ of the teaching academic is maintained for purposes of authenticity.

Collaboration

The respondents’ key challenges were to get learners to collaborate and share. Two respondents forced the collaboration by integrating it with the final assessment and observed that once students are comfortable with DSO, moving them on to other environments that are less content delivery oriented required effort. They concluded that the collaboration helped students to learn to compromise and work with people; negotiate in virtual spaces; critique and edit peer work; and manage knowledge.

Time

Except for the tech-savvy respondent who preferred ‘to do it and learn and [I] don’t consider that time’, the others observed that their innovation efforts were a ‘black hole for time’. They pointed out that student groups needed to be manually created and loaded to the site which was tedious and time consuming. Overseeing and managing group work required them to login at night and during weekends (from home) to check if all was well. However, these respondents were pragmatic and believed that ‘doing anything new is costly and change is costly in terms of time and energy.’

Recognition

All respondents felt their efforts were recognised by the University as they had received invitations to showcase their work in their faculties, apply for teaching awards and present at the annual Teaching and Learning conference.

Professional development

Being confident DSO users, the respondents did not require professional development in relation to using the software. They identified beneficial professional development to be conversations with their peer networks and special interest groups on teaching collaboratively, engaging students to collaborate online and assessing collaborative work. Show-and-tell sessions of exemplary use of social software in different learning situations was also viewed as strong professional development because 'right now the use is a bit serendipitous'. One respondent suggested having an information page on using wikis, general principles on contributing and writing 'to build wiki language infrastructure' among staff. Such professional development initiatives could include information on pedagogical opportunities in relation to collaborating, interacting, publishing and creating knowledge in a virtual space as well.

Institutional support

Respondents felt they were well supported by the educational developers/teaching and learning contacts in their faculties, the project manager at the Institute of Teaching and Learning and their informal networks and colleagues. They all felt more active support should be forthcoming from the University instead of an unhelpful attitude described by one as 'do what you like but we want the student evaluations to be good' which did not accommodate the technology adoption learning process of the teacher. The challenge they felt was 'to get the senior executive to understand the value of social software because they still think this is fringe.' Institutional support was seen as giving time release to develop these new teaching approaches; exploring methods of reconciling new work practices; investigating the ramifications of opening out sites to participants outside Deakin University; resolving concerns such as the legal position of collaborating with other universities; looking into the copyright and ownership of those collaboratively created resources and the reuse of those resources; setting up codes of conduct for students; and determining the usability of files with images of people. These must be resolved and be made a part of the evolving policy framework for staff to feel confident of a supportive and encouraging environment. While some of these issues are complex and are less easily resolved, addressing the simpler issues as a start would be a step in the right direction that will be encouraging to staff.

Technology

The adoption was not impeded by unstable technology, 'it didn't fall down so [I] was really pleasantly surprised'. This could be attributed to the small pilot in contrast to mainstreaming the application that could involve different pressures and different outcomes. However, student connectivity and broadband access would have to be considered when designing units incorporating Web 2.0 software.

At the time of writing this paper, the student evaluation data of the six installations that related to units were unavailable. These reports may offer additional feedback that may impact on future decisions. Further follow-up evaluations using mixed method approach with quantitative and qualitative data obtained over a period of time across several units, comprehensive studies which examined participant contributions, used statistics and tracking data and analysed the conversations would also be helpful to better understand the learning value of these technologies and to develop an institutional strategy.

Implications for practice

This is a pilot and an emerging 'Deakin story'. We are still experimenting with new ways of understanding knowledge. The wisdom will build and the approaches will be refined with future evaluation data and experiential learning. Currently learners are comfortable users of DSO and their MP3 players, but all learners may not engage with and learn from these technologies with equal ease. Many academics hesitate using Web 2.0 and social networking for teaching because they are unsure of its potential, sceptical about it being yet another software application they would have to learn before it becomes very quickly obsolete. What ever the trepidation, the pilot efforts discussed in this paper have promised to foster group work, facilitate collaboration, harness group effort and create a community and offer some benefits and uses in certain settings.

To move forward from this pilot to a mainstream delivery of Web 2.0, the University will need to continue to recognise adoption efforts of staff, make considerations for time invested in those experimentation efforts and create opportunities to showcase their work among other interested staff. Concurrently, for wider acceptance from teaching staff, efforts must be made to resolve their queries around reuse of collaboratively created resources with subsequent student cohorts, ownership, copyright and opening up sites to participants outside Deakin University. Keeping alive a dialogue on pedagogy related to Web 2.0 will promote reflection and contribute to professional development in that area, develop a better understanding of how learning takes place in Web 2.0 environments and how it supports learner-centredness and learner types. It would also involve defining and considering approaches to developing new literacies in learners such as enabling learners to be critical and discerning in contrast to being passive and accepting of information, developing skills in giving constructive feedback, working in groups and being collaborative, managing information and working with video, audio and multimedia files, developing good communication skills and team processes. Moving beyond the pilot would also demand good support such as multi-skilled staff, stable technology and establishing institutional level policies and procedures that help staff provide quality learning.

For the long term, there must be knowledge built around adoption and implications on time and workload, a mechanism to support experimenting and risk-taking, and to learn from mistakes and bad experiences as well because it all forms a part of the institutional knowledge base. Reproducing existing patterns of the academy will not help because all our social and institutional practices have been built around the restricted control of the 'read-only' web. The promise of read-write-edit-publish possibilities of Web 2.0 calls for a radical rethinking of the ways we operate. We need an holistic understanding of how all this fits with the institutional infrastructures and support systems, adoption implications, policy issues and how existing teaching has to be re-engineered. Such an understanding should also include issues such as student learning and the student experience, new approaches to how faculty staff operate and accommodate new ways of working and conducting research. This will no doubt, form a huge agenda.

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