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# A Study on the Effective Use of Social Software by Further and Higher Education in the UK to Support Student Learning and Engagement (Key findings and recommendations)

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## 1 Key findings

We have drawn out some key findings from our investigations reported in final report of this project. In this section, we discuss these findings, which relate to the benefits and challenges that organisations (policy makers), educators, and students will experience in a social software initiative.

### 1.1 Benefits to the organisations

*Student retention:* There are several instances which we came across in our investigations where early signs of a student struggling were picked up in formal and informal contributions on social tools and early interventions meant that students were provided with support and help before it was too late.

*Image-building:* To be at the forefront of adopting digital technologies in courses and programmes not only attracts students but also is perceived by external bodies as being forward looking.

*Alumni community building:* In two of the case studies that we investigated we found that students, who had worked collaboratively using social software on courses, went on to form alumni groups at the end of the course to keep the conversation and dialogue flowing.

### 1.2 Challenges to the organisations

*The tension between social software tools in the public domain and the VLE:* If the tools used by educators are not within the institution's Virtual learning environment (VLE), then continuity of the service, its reliability and maintenance, and whether it should be employed in assessment are just some of the concerns that policy makers within an organisation have. The lack of control of an external service is of concern, as the service to the students cannot be guaranteed unless formal agreements are set up with external providers.

*Policies about the usage of social software tools for both educators and students:* We did not come across any formal policies that an organisation had set up about how these tools should be used and what were the expected norms – even when the students' contributions were being made in public groups (for example, on Flickr or on Facebook).

*Firewalls and access to tools in the public domain:* Access to some social software tools, such as Skype or Second Life, may require altering the firewall mechanisms. The security risks to the institution's network systems are of concern to the organisations.

### 1.3 Benefits to the educators

*Being able to track student's process and intervene early:* Educators are now able to keep a track of the group's or an individual student's progress and intervene before the formal assessment.

*Being able to review students' contributions:* Educators are able to see the questions that students want to find an answer to prior to a tutorial which enables the educator to make a more effective plan for a tutorial.

*Being able to teach interactively rather than broadcast:* Some courses and activities require students to have a conversation and dialogue, and now there are tools such as a wiki to discuss collaboratively and create resources. Students can create podcasts themselves to learn communication skills and receive feedback from peers and the educator.

## **1.4 Challenges to the educators**

*Changing the way they teach:* Students who belong to the digital generation expect to talk back, and have a conversation. They want their education to be relevant to the real world; they want it to be interesting, even fun. Therefore, educators face the challenge of continuing to 'broadcast' lectures as well as using 'conversational' social software supported methods to motivate, empower and enthuse the students.

*Diverse needs of students:* While supporting students who have grown digitally and who prefer a more participatory approach to education, the education system still has to cater for the needs of those students who may not have had the resources (availability of computers, broadband) to be able to grow as 'Net Geners' (from the net generation). Some of these students may still prefer a 'broadcast approach' of teaching and may be unfamiliar with the social networking phenomenon.

*Designing and assessing learning activities:* Even though the case studies investigated in this study provide several examples of effective use of social software tools for different purposes, there is currently little (formal) guidance for educators to assist them with the design and assessment of learning activities for the social software toolkit. So unless there are personal initiatives (as the majority of our case studies are), educators may find it difficult to determine the role the tools can play and how they can be effectively employed. Further, designing assessment can be extremely challenging; counting the number of comments on a blog post may not be an effective indicator of a student's contribution if the comments are not insightful enough.

*Workload issues:* Some of the case studies suggested that the planning, launch and maintenance of a social software initiative can be very time consuming. Further, some educators suggested that it was difficult to keep a track of everyone's progress (30 blogs on a course is not unusual) if there is formal assessment along with using social software tools. However, other case studies are exactly the opposite (the initiative did not take much time to organise or has saved time overall and assessment is practical and not unreasonably time consuming. Tools such as RSS feeds can help in tracking the updates but better reporting tools (for example, who has contributed on the wiki, what and when, instead of scanning the history on the wiki) and integration of support for assessment into social software tools would help to reduce the burden on the educator.

*Perceived role of the educator:* The role of an educator becomes facilitative, (ie more like a mentor) when social software tools are employed. This perception might be in conflict with that of the educator's who may still see his (or her) role as 'delivering' education and instruction.

## **1.5 Benefits to the students**

*Collaborative and peer-to-peer learning:* Students learn by looking at the contributions of other students in the collaborative working space such as wiki or a

group blog, by seeing the different approaches that others take, and by reflecting on their own contributions. Through conversations and dialogue, they are better able to internalise their learning. Students also tend to comment on other contributions and provide support and critical feedback.

*Gaining transferable skills for work environments:* Social software tools are increasingly being used in the workplace, for example, wikis as intranets, blogs for marketing, podcasts for customer education, web conferencing for meetings, and social networking groups for campaigns, and for conducting surveys. If students learn to use these tools and are aware of their potential, then they will not only be able to use and adopt new technologies with ease but will also feel confident when taking decisions about which tools should be used for what purpose. In addition, using social software tools assists students develop team-working skills and online collaboration and communication skills, which will help them to fit easily into work settings.

*Developing an e-portfolio for future employment:* The outputs of their studies, eg essays, poems, records of their skills audits and skill development, are portable if they are in tools such as wikis and blogs, and can be shown to prospective employers.

*Collation of resources:* Social bookmarking facilities can enable the students to collate their resources over a period of time and across courses and institutions.

## **1.6 Challenges to the students**

*Group working in collaborative authoring spaces:* When students work in groups and contribute collaboratively in a space such as a wiki or a group blog, there are concerns about everybody not contributing equally and, therefore, there are questions or concerns about the ownership of the resulting product. However, the same problem is reported in all group-working situations whether or not they are technologically mediated. Further, the students may not benefit from the collaborative activity if most students do not contribute. Mechanisms such as the history in a wiki can track individual contributions but it requires monitoring by the educator. A more general solution is to design the assessment in a way that rewards group and individual contributions.

Most organisations require their employees to work in groups and there will always be people who do not make as great a contribution to the group as others, so learning how to recognise and manage this situation is arguably a useful life lesson.

*Deriving value from the tools:* The value from social software tools comes only if there is participation by the group. If a student does not receive comments from his peers on his blog, or on his photographs on Flickr, then he may not derive the intended value from contributing on these tools.

*Learning new tools:* Unlike an institutional VLE, as new tools evolve and educators experiment with them, students might be using different tools on different courses, and this would require them to learn to use these tools, taking up time and effort, and perhaps diverting them from the actual learning activities that they are supposed to conduct using these tools. On the other hand, learning the tools helps to equip them with knowledge which can be used later.

*Pedagogy vs. technology:* If students are not able to understand the role the technology plays in their learning or if there is a steep learning curve for the

technology or the usability of the tool is poor, they will have an unsatisfying experience and may feel that the technology is 'getting in their way'.

*Concerns about their materials in the public domain:* Some students have concerns about their contributions on these tools being in the public domain (eg a public-facing blog). Some students even have concerns about sharing their reflections and ideas even with peers (eg being worried that somebody else would take their ideas). Even when the ethos of the social software tools is to be collaborative, the individual assessment is still seen as competitive by some students.

*Invasion of students' social spaces:* Students are not always willing for institutions to enter their social spaces such as Facebook, or being asked to make a tutor their 'friend' on a social networking site. Some students are keen to keep the personal (social) and academic spaces apart. However, most case studies concluded that there were few, if any, problems of this sort.

*Preference for individualistic learning rather than collaborative learning:* Adult learners or part-time learners who are handling work and studies at the same time generally prefer learning at their own pace and in their own time. They can be resistant to collaborative work as it means that they may have to work at a time that suits others, a commitment which they may find hard to meet.

## **2 Recommendations**

As discussed in Section 6 of the report, there are wide-ranging factors that influence the success of a social software initiative. Therefore, there are no set procedures or guidelines that, if followed, will guarantee the success of a social software initiative. In this section, we outline principles, which we believe will apply to an initiative and will guide you.

### **2.1 Be learner-centred**

The initiative should be learner-centred: meeting learners' requirements and providing them with a positive and empowering experience. The technology should support the learning activities and outcomes of the course or programme.

### **2.2 Consider the impact on staff**

It is important to consider how all staff will be affected by any initiative. For example, a technical support team may have to support another tool; or a helpdesk may receive queries from students and others involved and the associated staff will need the requisite training and resources to support the students. What is important is that policy decisions about the expected involvement of all staff are taken.

### **2.3 Identify your key stakeholders**

The key stakeholders will include students, technical support teams, departmental heads, and colleagues who are involved with the learning and teaching strategy of the organisation. It will be useful to communicate with them regularly as they may not only offer support to the initiative but also give ideas. They will help you to understand the requirements from multiple perspectives.

### **2.4 Be convinced yourself**

In almost all the initiatives that we investigated in this report, the educators were passionate about the tool and were convinced of its significance in learning, teaching, and student engagement. Therefore, only if you are yourself convinced that the initiative is worthwhile, should you proceed with it.

### **2.5 Be prepared to spend time**

The introduction of any initiative requires the allocation of time and resources for: planning for designing, conducting and evaluating the initiative, communicating with a variety of stakeholders, choosing a particular tool; designing the educational activities. It is necessary to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to an initiative.

### **2.6 Do not hesitate to learn from others**

There may be colleagues within your institution who have already used the same tool or have faced similar challenges. There will almost certainly be colleagues in other institutions who have relevant experience (as can be seen from the case studies). Talking to colleagues who have had similar experiences is helpful as there are several minor details of any initiative, which the reported case studies could not, or did not, capture but which can be elicited in conversations or by sharing concerns.

The case studies accompanying this report are intended to provide useful insights into a variety of initiatives and should be a very useful resource for learning from experiences of others.

## **2.7 Keep a log of the experiences**

Keeping a regular log of the activities and your experiences with the initiative will be useful for self-reflection and for sharing experiences with others during and after the project. This regular log could be maintained in a tool, such as wiki or blog, which could be made accessible to all or to selected group of stakeholders.

## **2.8 Be willing to disseminate**

Do not wait to write a journal paper! It would be good to share your experiences and efforts from early on – whether they are internal seminars, departmental meetings, and lunchtime talks in your institutions. The more you discuss and share your experiences with others, the more support and ideas will flow your way.

## **2.9 Be prepared to monitor and intervene**

Our investigations have shown that constant monitoring of students' experiences and timely interventions play a significant role in the success of the initiative. This, of course, has resource implications and you would have to be prepared to spend time to 'be there'.

## **2.10 Evaluate the initiative**

All the successful case studies indicate that it is important to elicit students' and educator' perceptions and experiences and to evaluate them. The evaluations can help to iteratively improve the initiative in terms of activities, choice of the tool, training and support, and so on. Further, evaluations and iterative improvement of the initiative will enhance its potential for sustainability and transferability. Depending on the context of an individual initiative, a variety of techniques may be applied to collect feedback: reflective journals or diaries, surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups.

To draw out both analytical and statistical generalisations, collect both qualitative and quantitative evidence, over a period of time. Thorough evaluations will be helpful in convincing the institution. They would also facilitate transferability of the initiative, and will be useful for the community.

## **2.11 Be prepared to adapt and change**

The landscape of social software tools is emerging and changing, and so are students' choices of tools and their expectations of the tools. However, the experiences with a set of tools can be carried over to other initiatives with a different set of 'new' tools, if there has been a thorough process of evaluation and learning from the evaluations (as suggested in strategy 9.10 above).

One educator summed up their experiences as follows: 'I think that you just have to give these things time, use them and try and build up experience and expertise and disseminate this expertise.'

### 3 Background reading

#### Key reports and online resources related to this project:

Anderson P. (2007). What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education, <http://www.jisc.org.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf> (Accessed January 12 2009)

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Owen M., Grant L., Sayers S., Facer K. (2006) Social software and learning [http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/opening\\_education/Social\\_Software\\_report.pdf](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/opening_education/Social_Software_report.pdf) (Accessed January 30 2009)

Ofcom (2008), Social Networking: A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use. [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media\\_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/socialnetworking/report.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/socialnetworking/report.pdf) (Accessed January 30 2009)

Reo R.A. Affordances of Social Software for Learning Online <http://sshistory.pbwiki.com/f/Affordances+of+SS+for+Learning+Online+-+final+draft+2-16-06.doc> Accessed January 30 2009)

#### Key texts

Aleman, A.M.M., and Wartman, K.L. (2009). Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding what matters is student culture, Routledge, New York.

Cross, J. (2007). Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that inspire Innovation and Performance, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., San Francisco, CA.

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Mason, R. and Rennie, F., 2008. *E-learning and Social Networking Handbook*, Routledge.

Shirky, C., 2008. *Here Come Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organisations*, Allen Lane: an imprint of Penguin Books.

Tapscott, D. 2009. *Grown up digital: How net generation is changing your world*, McGraw Hill, New York.