

Essay

Web 2.0: Unlearned Lessons from Previous Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract

Web 2.0 tools are changing the way we work online. As lecturers, we need to understand how these emerging technologies impact both on our students' learning and on our own teaching practice. This means we must ourselves become more confident in our use of Web 2.0, to be able to cope with the rapidly changing nature of these technologies. In most cases the technical infrastructure is already in place, but this is not enough. Unless lecturers are given sufficient support and encouragement at an institutional level, the use of Web 2.0 will follow the VLE pattern of rapid but shallow adoption. If Web 2.0 applications are to fulfil their true potential, institutions must acknowledge the effort and time it takes lecturers to implement them as true learning and teaching tools.

Keywords: Web 2.0, e-learning, VLE, ICT

e-Learning is the term currently used to describe the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support and enhance learning (Juwah, 2002). Personal technologies and social networking are emerging issues in e-learning. Although the web has always been a tool for collaboration, it is only recently that software has allowed most of us to use it as a platform for true collaborative activities: the term Web 2.0 has been coined to define this new phase (Anderson, 2007). Whether a real revolution or just the natural development of online collaboration, Web 2.0 tools are changing the way we work online (Anderson, 2007; Thompson, 2007). According to a recent survey carried out by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC, 2007), learners in Higher Education (HE) are developing a range of complex working practices around technology, both in personal and institutional contexts, and they often do not recognise e-learning as separate from other learning approaches. Many lecturers are ill prepared to provide suitable e-learning materials for their students.

Appropriately used, e-learning technologies can improve the flexibility and quality of learning, enhance students' learning experience and encourage independent learning (Littlejohn and Higgison, 2003). However, the current state of e-learning is one of widespread use, but with poor pedagogic development in most cases. In a report about the present and future of ICT use in universities across Europe, USA and Australia, Collins and van der Wende (2002) describe a general positive feeling among lecturers regarding ICT use. Moreover, most institutions now have the necessary technological infrastructure to support the use of ICT institution-wide. However, the researchers also highlight that this infrastructure is often not used as part of a rich pedagogical environment. Worryingly, they noted that lecturers tended to be less enthusiastic about the benefits of ICT use than decision-makers and technical support staff. Many lecturers in the study felt that they were "gradually doing more, but with no reward", what Collins and van der Wende called the "stretching the mould" scenario.

The case of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) is a typical example. When assessing the use of the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework by students enrolled in leisure and tourism programmes, Dale and Lane (2007) found that their VLE was mainly used to download lecture notes. Badge *et al.* (2005) found that, although 62% of module convenors at the School of Biological Science, University of Leicester, used their VLE, the majority of staff were using it only as an alternative or as a supplement to lecture handouts. Lack of time, reluctance to engage with new technologies and lack of expertise are some of the reasons given by lecturers as the causes behind this poor pedagogic development.

So far, the use of Web 2.0 applications in teaching is mainly restricted to pockets of good practice, with innovators and early adopters leading the way. Although most of us are keen to explore the use of Web 2.0 to enhance our practice, it is understandable that many feel reluctant to invest excessive time and effort in new tools which may be short lived. For the majority of us to engage with these applications, appropriate support mechanisms have to be in place. Institutional support must move away from the traditional staff development activities (often of a general nature, rooted in the “one size fits all” spirit) to a more personalised, targeted approach. After all, if we lecturers are expected to provide an individualised learning experience for our students, one would hope that we deserve the same consideration. The HE Academy has acknowledged the need for change by supporting several initiatives such as DEBUT and ADELIE (Armellini *et al.*, 2007), projects which explore future staff development scenarios. The objective is to provide the HE community with transferable examples of how ICT can enhance learning and teaching within the daily life of an institution. Hopefully, the results of these and similar projects will help to shape the future of staff development.

Lecturers’ attitudes towards Web 2.0 tools are mixed. The pedagogic benefits seem clear, but the increasing use of technology in our practice has added to our workload. Considerable time and effort are needed to apply these innovations in a meaningful way; this issue must be acknowledged at an institutional level. Unless sufficient support and encouragement is provided by HE institutions, we risk a repeat of the rapid but superficial spread of VLEs. If institutional support is limited to providing the technical infrastructure, the use of Web 2.0 in a pedagogically-rich environment will become another unfulfilled promise.

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