



Twenty first century edgeless universities: Designing community spaces for connectedness across degree programs

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Flexible learning approaches within university spaces is a feature of the Edgeless University (Bradwell, 2009). By allowing flexibility in place and time, universities are better able to meet the needs of 21st century learners. However the issue of disconnect resulting from a lack of community in such environments needs consideration. The issue may be addressed in part by designing virtual community spaces for degree programs that enable social, educational and professional connectedness. In this concise paper we discuss the design of two Master of Business community sites within the QUT Business Faculty Flexible Learning Initiative. We also consider the strengths and challenges in effective implementation of the sites in university environments that are only now grappling with the concept of being “edgeless.”

Keywords: flexible learning, community, edgeless university, community sites

Introduction

The continuous development of information and communications technologies enables universities to explore flexible learning options, which in turn has led to a change in the way universities are defined. Bradwell (2009) suggests this creates an opportunity for rebirth as universities lose their traditional boundaries of time, place and means for teaching and learning – a development which has led him to propose the emerging “Edgeless University”. An edgeless university calls to mind issues inherent in urban development; that greater sprawl loses connectivity between members and creates a disconnect in the community. If learners are increasingly involved in this kind of flexible learning context, the sense of community and social interaction that is a quality of face-to-face instruction may be at risk. This concise paper explores the concept of flexible learning in the emerging 21st Century “Edgeless University” against an issue of disconnect that may result from a lack of community. We propose that creating virtual community spaces in a flexible environment may work to address some of this disconnect, and discuss the design of two such community sites at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Of concern to us is whether and how these sites will or can address the disconnect and we will use the challenges arising from the design as discussion points in the session.

Literature discussion

Flexible learning

Adopting greater flexibility in their approaches to learning is about universities “seeking to incorporate practices from traditional and online learning in order to provide the best environments to assist the learner with the learning process” (Hill, 2006, p.188), often capitalising on opportunities afforded by emerging technologies. While the concept can and should be applied across teaching and learning strategies, alternative program design, organisational structures, and institutional administrative policies and procedures (Goode, Willis, Wolf & Harris, 2007), the use of technologies enables us to meet a core concept behind flexible learning – choice provided to learners of where, how, what and when they study (Khan, 2007; Willems, 2006). It is an attempt to take into account that the 21st century learner is in a technology-rich, information-loaded, socially-constructed world. Typically today’s learner has a complex life with multiple demands on time and attention, such as work and family (Goode, Willis, et. al., 2007).

They have typically grown up with technology as a part of everyday life, and “prefer to work in teams in peer-to-peer situations within a structured environment that affords a fair amount of flexibility.” (Rodgers, Runyon, Starett, Von Holzen, 2006, p.3) Thus it is important to acknowledge Fisher, Coleman, Sparks and Pletts’ (2007) discussion of the necessity for building social identity through meaningful interaction, therefore learning, within web-based learning environments. Creating and utilising communities of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), enables optimal conditions for learning, and reflects contemporary social learning theories such as constructivism and connectivism. Much literature of flexible learning attends to the teaching and learning communities within a class context; what is neglected is the notion that learners within a degree program exist in a community, and a community of practice at this should be integral to supporting learners in flexible learning environments.

The edgeless university and urban design

Bradwell (2009) developed the concept of Edgeless Universities from a descriptor of urban growth. Urban areas have sprawled in the past sixty years as a result of the increased reliance on the automobile (Soja, 2000) and while universities have spread as a result of the increased use of technologies and improved efficiencies and flexibilities in use. Urban designers now consider the impact of urban sprawl on community neighbourhoods. As a consequence, the New Urban movement propose reshaping urban spaces so that “people can interact with their neighbours and enjoy public spaces.” (LeGates and Stout, 2003, p.207) Duany and Plater-Zyberk argue for a design process based on the development of neighbourhoods, described as “urbanized areas with a balanced mix of human activity” (2003, p.208), and against separation of zones of human activity, instead suggesting the provision of community spaces that naturally integrate a variety of human activities. Thus in the design of learning places within edgeless universities, we might similarly consider shaping the environment for this balanced mix of human activity which allows for social interaction and the development of a “neighbourhood” in its public places. A flexible learning initiative in the Faculty of Business at the QUT has decided to use community sites as a means to strengthen its communities of learners.

Background to discussion

The Business Flexible Learning Initiative (BFLI) was instigated to align teaching and learning within the Faculty of Business (FoB) at QUT to learning styles and preferences of today’s students as well as the broader market call for flexible delivery methods. Within this Initiative has been the development of community sites for two Master of Business programs – Master of Business (Human Resource Management) and Master of Business (Public Relations) – with the aim of addressing a number of perceived limitations at the program level. The intended outcomes include enhanced learner engagement with the program, learner sense that their university learning and has professional relevance, and a sense of community through a shared public space with opportunities for communication.

The sites are located within the structure and functionality of *Blackboard* Learning Management System at QUT. Each site opens to a ‘homepage’ which contains an interactive image map with a menu for accessing the content, as well as the typical *Blackboard* left hand menu (See *Figure 1*). The *Blackboard* folder and item tools are used to organise content, and the generic *Blackboard* icons have been replaced with customised icons for design consistency. Both sites have similar content areas which provide information to assist students with their studies, demonstrate the structure of the program and how units tie together and create a place for the program community (staff and students) to communicate and belong. There is also some difference in cohort and thus focus of the sites. The MBus (Public Relations) site focuses on providing a home base for their solely online learners. There is a welcome page from the Head of School, and information focuses on supporting learners who have no contact with the physical university space. The MBus (Human Resource Management) site focuses on being a ‘home’ across the program for an essentially on-campus, or face-to-face, learning cohort, and aims to map the program learning goals as real-world relevant learning, and contains a community of practice through linking community members with the outside world of human resource management.

Discussion: Challenges

Of particular interest in this paper is the nature of community, and how creating public places can allow for neighbourhood interaction. The community site for all learners in a degree program is a public place promoting social interaction for the student group as members of the degree community, beyond the sense of community developed for teaching and learning at the individual unit level. The public place provides information about the program, study support, and real-world relevance of units and teaching and learning



Figure 1: Master of Business (Public Relations): Navigational image map

activity across the program. Social interaction is provided through a community (MBusHRM) or communication (MBusPR) sections, which aims to provide a means for students to ask about studies, but also to have their own presence. However, as these sites are developed and prepared for implementation, issues in the nature of interacting community emerge, and we need to address these to enable the development of vibrant, connected communities in virtual locations. Several key challenges have been identified and are briefly raised here.

Challenge 1: Public places

As a public place the sites must attract the community to visit and revisit, hence the accessibility and navigability of the sites is important. A limitation of the *Blackboard* software design is its highly structured environment: unit and community *Blackboard* sites are separate entities and require individual entry, therefore it is not possible to force the community to access the course units through the public place. Links inserted within the unit sites to direct to the community site partially addresses this issue, but unless there is compelling reason for student community members to visit the public place, it may still not be used. Relevant and attracting content is another possible solution. Having material which links students to their professional identity, and that which assist students in their studies are considered relevant by staff and students are being included in the design decisions. The MBus(HRM) site in addition aims to house community newsletters, seminar recordings, and latest research – adding a dynamic element to what is essentially static content. A further solution is for lecturers to be active community members in the public place, through encouraging students to go there, by placing some of their teaching resources on the site and using them in their teaching (resources such as case studies specific to the discipline, or document templates used both in professional practice and for assessment items). A subsequent challenge, though, is whether lecturers themselves would be active community members in the ways outlined above. Even more than school teachers, university lectures are autonomous in their teaching spaces (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and anecdotally, truly collaborative work practices within Faculty Schools is unusual.

Challenge 2: Social interaction

The engagement of the community with a public space is a challenge in urban planning and in the planning of community sites. As raised in Challenge 1, requiring students to complete learning and assessment tasks using resources on the community site will necessitate they visit and make use of the public space. However, social interaction implies interaction with others. Incorporating social collaboration and communication tools such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, into the public place can increase student participation in the site as well as interaction and social presence. Lecturers can encourage them to introduce themselves, to pose questions regarding program-level matters, to respond to other students' questions, facilitating interaction between students and the development of an online community. Some lecturers have required students to complete a team 'personality' quiz such as Belbin

or Myers-Briggs on the site, and if lecturers then use this information to create teams for assessment activities, or for initiating a discussion topic, student use of the site is encouraged, even required. However, true social interaction is limited and remains an issue to be explored. Initial assumptions that 'a community site created is a community site used' is somewhat allayed by incorporating a classroom use of the site with the use of both static information as well as dynamic student-centred content.

Conclusion

In order to address the need identified in the Schools for program level cohesion and sense of community and belonging, two community sites are being developed for student use. The metaphor of public space and social interaction as adopted from urban design appears apt as a notion for creating such community settings. The design and implementation of the sites to truly play a role in developing a vibrant community is challenging and will require on-going consideration, evaluation and active development over time. The risk in utilising a *Blackboard* community site is that it becomes a static content repository. To avoid this, these sites require active involvement from academic and other Faculty staff to maintain and build into vibrant community public places that fulfil the need for cohesion and program level community for students.

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