

Web 2.0 and user-created content: Students negotiating shifts in academic authority

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Web 2.0 technologies are able to support established student-centred pedagogies by enabling user-created content. However, user-created content generates some interesting challenges for educators, curriculum coordinators and designers—including issues such as academic integrity, public environments and shifting academic authority.

This paper looks at the question of how students responded to shifts in authority in the specific example of a podcasting activity using student-generated content. We report on themes that emerged from university medical students' reflections on the learning activity: resistance to shifting academic authority, hybrid teacher/student approaches to content, and the perceived benefits of peer learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of how understandings of the process of content creation, as opposed to the end product, are key to perceptions of the educational value of user-created content.

Keywords: Web 2.0, user-created content, teacher authority, student voice, podcast

Introduction

The issue of user-created content in education generates some interesting challenges for educators, curriculum coordinators and designers. In some ways learning and teaching with Web 2.0 technologies, particularly in the undergraduate context, presents familiar pedagogical issues with an overlay of new questions and possibilities. For example, what are the temptations, conventions and evolving understandings in relation to academic integrity (Gray 2007)? What are the implications should educators choose learning environments that are open to the public (McLeary 2006)? How can we approach students' contributions to new knowledge in public forums (Boettcher 2006)?

In universities, there have been a number of avenues for students to share their contributions to new knowledge with the wider academic community eg. essays, theses, performances, architectural models, exhibitions, software programs etc. In the past, publication often involved considerable effort; yet, with the Internet, barriers to publication have fallen. The rise of Web 2.0 technologies specifically enables students to create and publish new knowledge with less effort (McLaughlin & Lee 2008) with immediate and potentially unmediated results. What happens, if anything, to the authority of the university when its walls are rendered so permeable by the Internet (Davis 2007)?

Of course, students sharing ideas is not new with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies: students have long been swapping comments in tutorials; looking over people's shoulders and chatting in classrooms; and debating in lunch breaks on college lawns. As student-centred pedagogies have increased, opportunities for students to learn with and from peers have also increased through collaborative approaches including problem-based and project-based learning. While student-centred pedagogies may be well established (Schunk 2008), we are arguable still exploring how they can be fully applied to online learning environments (McWilliam and Dawson 2008).

Although these approaches are widespread, curricula are often either explicitly or implicitly imbued with the notion that "the Faculty" are the arbiters of what is important to know and come to understand in higher education. In this context there may be a tension between students' desire to learn from traditionally authoritative, "text-book" or teacher-created content, and the lure of student-centred Web 2.0 pedagogies, which allow a learning process where academic authority shifts to student-created content.

This paper considers the way in which intellectual authority is negotiated by students in Web 2.0 learning contexts.

Method

This paper provides a preliminary report on one aspect of a student-generated podcasting project that was piloted at the University of Melbourne. The podcasting pilot project, called “Problem”, was conducted with medical students in second year (Semester 3, 2008), a cohort of 319 students.

In this pilot project, students were invited to create podcasts relating to the problem case study in the medical problem-based learning curriculum. Content was entirely student generated and the audience was only their peers. This paper explores students’ perceptions of intellectual authority and student participation in relation to podcasting. This project is one of a suite of pilot implementations of Web 2.0 technologies conducted in Semester 1, 2008 (Kennedy et al 2007).

While a great deal of data has been collected, this paper focuses on qualitative data from a student focus group, which four students volunteered to attend—three of whom had podcasted. The focus group data was chosen to highlight students’ voices. The focus group invited students to reflect on their perceptions, attitudes and use of podcasting in the pilot project in a semi-structured interview format. (A copy of the focus group questions can be obtained by email from the authors.) Data was collected by a staff member outside the teaching team and conducted in accordance with human ethics protocols where participation was voluntary and confidential. Data was coded manually using both themes from the questions and emergent themes. Students’ involvement did not extend to the coding process.

Lecturer’s or student’s voices: Who do students prefer to listen to?

This paper explores themes that emerged from students’ reflections on student-generated podcasts:

- Resisting shifts in authority from teacher-led transmission to student-led knowledge creation;
- Negotiating hybrid teacher/student approaches to content; and
- Perceived benefits of peer learning.

Resisting shifts in authority

Students reported that the process of creating podcasts—“the act of actually making one”—benefited their learning, but were reluctant to support a shift in authority from lecturer- to student-generated content. A student noted:

... I think one reason also for like trusting, like accepting of [sic] lecturers’ podcasts would be because lecturers are like probably “correct”, because I mean, they have authority more so than us students. We just... read and say what we understand...

This student implies that lecturers’ academic authority comes from experiences other than reading, perhaps making assumptions about medical lecturers’ backgrounds and range of clinical experiences that may be unfounded for some. The same student predicted that if lecturers were to podcast, then students might be reluctant to also podcast:

...I don’t think people will want to post as much, I mean, compared to lecturers their posts would probably not [be] as correct.

Sometimes the preference for lecturer-generated content was described in terms of pragmatic utility. Students spontaneously described poor quality student content as “useless” and reported:

...it’s useful to hear from both lecturers and students, but what lecturers say tends to be more useful.

Interestingly, students are employing levels of academic authority to evaluate and classify content at various levels of usefulness. Nevertheless, these students (interviewed relatively early in the second year of their studies) voiced reluctance to accept shifts way from lecturer authority.

Hybrid teacher/student approaches

Despite their reservations about authority, students were interested in learning experiences that involved creating and sharing student content. To this end, students attempted to negotiate shifts in authority from lecturers to students by proposing hybrid teacher/student generated content. Students' first suggested student-led learning that retained teacher authority in a question-and-answer format:

...you can allow students to post, like, questions and maybe lecturers can answer a student's question through [a] podcast...

The term "allow" implies a student perception that the power and authority remain with lecturers, and student authority is conveyed or borrowed at the lecturer's discretion.

Students then suggested an activity that reversed the roles and allowed increased academic authority to sit with students:

...maybe something like a very short case study that's different from our Problem of the Week might work. So if they [lecturers] were to present information plus questions that might counter that problem of people not wanting to post.

This proposal has the lecturers providing more structured activity within a problem-based learning framework with questions acting as scaffolding, and shows a progression towards increased student authority.

Perceived benefits of peer learning

Students perceived benefits from peer learning—in the absence of lecturer-created content—both in existing educational contexts and in future settings. Students nominated online threaded discussion as an existing context where they accepted peers' academic authority. The factors leading to students accepting peers' academic authority are beyond the scope of this paper, but initial themes that emerged in relation to threaded discussion included issues of exhaustive coverage, fitness for purpose and expediency:

Just last year, especially around exams you'd find that Top Class [threaded discussions]... would be overwhelmed with like lots and lots of questions about different parts of the exam and you could go through and click—Hey, that's a question I'm wondering about!—click on it and usually someone will always reply with an answer. Like you can almost be guaranteed within the day...

In addition, students anticipated benefits from student podcasts without lecturer content in later years of their degree. Students proposed an online community in forth year and beyond, when medical students are in clinical (hospital-based) schools.

That would be really good, I recon. If you have like an interesting case during the week or something particular that you learned, to get that up on podcast, it'd be interesting because you could listen to it, especially because we won't be together.

Students also saw podcasts as a way of strengthening the oral presentation skills that senior medical students require for assessable tasks:

...later on a lot of our assessment is not so much written but it's actually like oral presentations and that kind of thing. So if people are willing to share what they put together for the week, like because you're in the process of preparing an oral presentation anyway. Then that might be useful.

In this context, students are comfortable with the prospect of shifting intellectual authority to students. The question of whether medical students are making a connection between intellectual authority and clinical experience is a potential line for further investigation.

Conclusion

There are numerous challenges for educators as students approach meaning-making by creating user-generated content. This study illustrates that students may presuppose lecturer-created content holds

superior academic authority when compared to student-generated content (if students consider the content in terms of transmission pedagogies). However, this presupposition does not take into account that the final product in student-generated content is the result of a creative process, and it is in the processes that valuable learning can occur. McLoughlin and Lee (paraphrasing Boettcher 2006) argue that “the key benefit of learner-generated content lies in the processes of creating, knowledge construction, and sharing as opposed to the end product itself.” So even where students perceive educational value in the processes of content creation, one challenge is to balance their concerns about the quality of final products with appropriate strategies—which may include collaborative, iterative processes to review, amend, comment on, interconnect and tag content (McLoughlin and Lee 2008; Seitzinger 2006; McLeary 2006).

While student-centred pedagogies are by no means new and long predate the Internet, Web 2.0 technologies throw issues such as academic authority into sharp relief. The students in this study, although not universally rejecting peer-generated content, struggled with the shifts in academic authority at this stage of their learning development. Their comments suggest that even where students may have an interest in an emerging technology, this alone doesn’t automatically translate into easy implementation in educational settings. And this is a finding that makes intuitive sense. Even all-singing, all-dancing technologies are no substitute for what educators and educational researchers have long known—that effective learning activities require sound learning design and considered implementation. But the learning gains are worth it.

Acknowledgement

Support for the project has been provided from Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

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Please cite as: Chang, R., Kennedy, G. & Petrovic, T. (2008). Web 2.0 and user-created content: Students negotiating shifts in academic authority. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*. <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2008.2486>

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