

Symposium: Do free social networking tools belong in educational environments?

Facilitators: Ian Smissen, Desire2Learn Inc, and a panel of peers

With advancements in technology, principally Web 2.0, social software, and open source tools, learners are challenging what it means to gain an education and be educated. Faculty are starting to explore the potential of blogs, media-sharing services and other social software - which, although not designed specifically for e-learning, can be used to empower students and create exciting new learning opportunities. What is the potential and implications of utilising Web 2.0 tools in online learning courses and as resources? What is the potential of social software tools and how far should they go? Ultimately this is something that institutions will have to determine for themselves. However, enabling the learner to take an active role in shaping their learning with tools that they are currently using may result in institutions seeing more students reach their goals. This interactive session will feature three panelists who will present the spectrum of views based on their own experience and participation in a recent ascilite co-hosted Web 2.0 roundtable. In addition, the session will present US and UK viewpoints on this topic gained by Web 2.0 roundtables hosted in the respective countries.

Keywords: Web 2.0 tools, social software, social networking

Context for panelist discussion

With advancements in technology, principally Web 2.0, social software, and open source tools, learners are challenging what it means to gain an education and be educated. Faculty are starting to explore the potential of blogs, media-sharing services and other social software - which, although not designed specifically for e-learning, can be used to empower students and create exciting new learning opportunities. What is the potential and implications of utilising Web 2.0 tools in online learning courses and as resources? Numerous reports have brought this question to the foreground and have highlighted the changing learning environment as the bridge between formal and informal learning environments converge.

In delivery of traditional education, most institutions are highly structured in their approach to student learning, student assessment, and student experience. In this model, the flow of information is between professor and student, but also between student and student. The onset of social software tools has not only expanded the network of contacts and information, but also empowered students in their learning journey. Through the use of blogs, wikis, discussion threads, and other collaborative tools, learners are able to access different types of information in the form they need and when they need it.

So why social learning tools and why now? Is it worth adapting the structured environment of traditional education in order to leverage these social software tools? The jury is still out as institutions are not in agreement on the appropriate use of these tools. Some institutions forbid the use of Wikipedia as a source for research, citing the lack of appropriate oversight and hence the unreliable information in the tool. Others, like the University of British Columbia embrace the tool and see it as a peer review system and a new way of publishing. Students have the option of writing a potentially featured article for Wikipedia.

There are numerous challenges to incorporating these social software tools into the learning experience. First, faculty may be challenged with balancing the current burden of classes, research, and administrative tasks, as well as getting up the learning curve with these technologies, which are not static in nature and are always changing. Time may also be an issue in both learning the technologies themselves and then in applying the technology to learning process. Second, IT may not be prepared to manage an increase in the use of these tools. If all students start downloading YouTube videos, then certainly the IT infrastructure will be taxed. Finally, social software tools should enable learning anytime anywhere. However, the adoption of broadband and the access to Internet may pose some issues in some areas.

What is the potential of social software tools and how far should they go? Are they just a fad? Is the reward worth the risk? Ultimately this is something that institutions will have to determine for themselves.

Format

This session will be an interactive session scheduled for 55 minutes, featuring three panelists and one facilitator. The facilitator and one of the panelists are the authors of the roundtable in New Zealand and the resulting white paper. Each panelist will be given a short amount of time to present their point of view (~5 minutes). The rest of the session will be used to engage the audience in discussion on the topic.

Resources used

Information from the following roundtable events will be utilised in the presentations and discussion:

- Web 2.0 ascilite co-hosted roundtable before ACODE in Wellington, New Zealand on 18 June 2008
http://www.desire2learn.com/news/newsdetails_90.asp
- Whitepaper resulting from above roundtable event
- Web 2.0 roundtable event before ALT-C in the UK on 8 September 2008
http://www.desire2learn.com/news/newsdetails_91.asp
- Web 2.0 roundtable event before NECC in the US on 30 June 2008
http://www.desire2learn.com/news/newsdetails_83.asp
- Web 2.0 roundtable event before EDUCAUSE in the US on 28 October 2008
http://www.desire2learn.com/news/newsdetails_96.asp

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