

Harnessing Social Scaffolding For Education

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Reflection is an essential aspect of learning, allowing students to progress through identification of learning strengths and needs. This has most commonly involved construction of reflective portfolios and personal development plans (PDP). Building reflective e-portfolios is rarely popular with students and does not always succeed (Driessen et al, 2005). Our own recent experience with reflective e-portfolios has illustrated some of the difficulties.

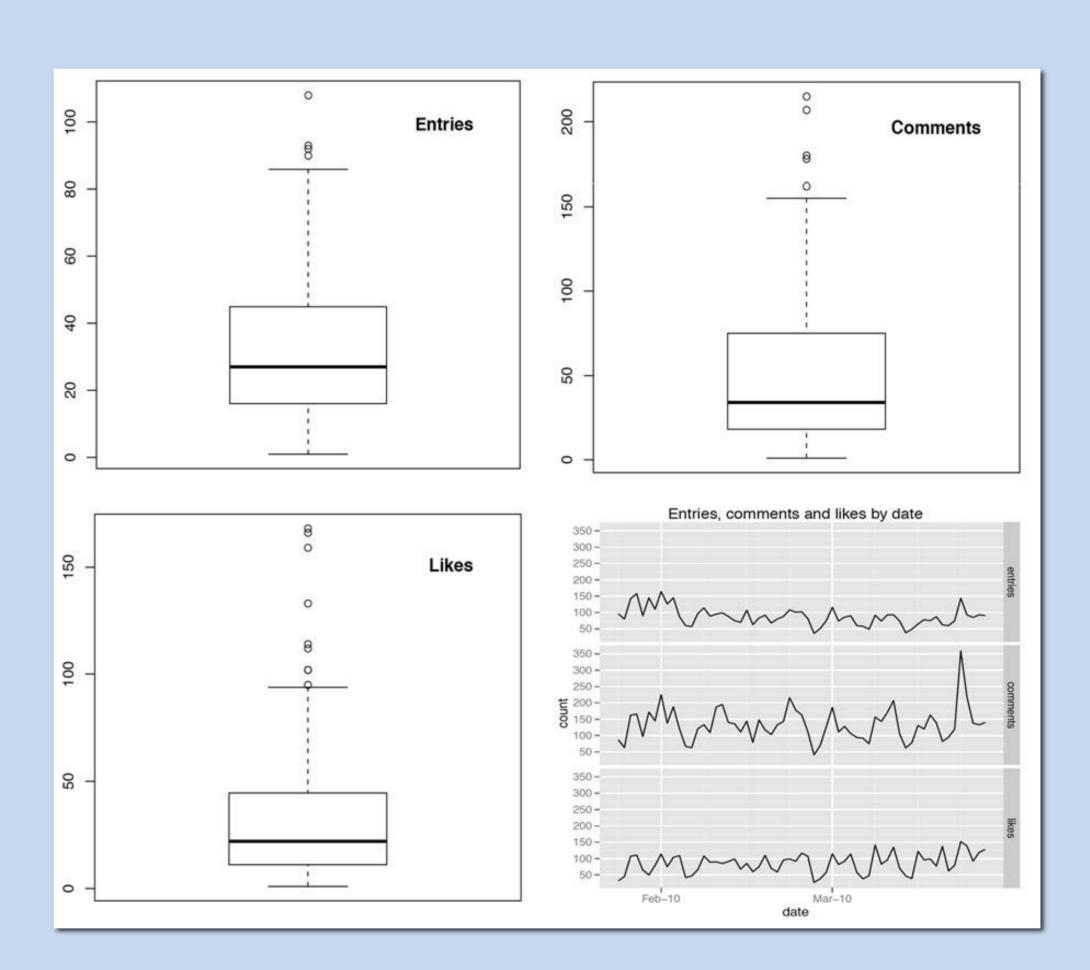
We revised a first year undergraduate key skills module, leading to the construction of a personal learning environment (PLE) and reflective e-portfolio. Evidence shows that "big box" tools tend to be rejected by students in favour of social sites - a "mashup PLE" (JISC, 2008). Students were initially encouraged to construct reflective e-portfolios based on wikis. Our observation, and that of others (Driessen et al, 2005), is that students tend to dislike e-portfolios. To promote engagement, students were given assessment criteria and deadlines. Feedback indicated that students did not enjoy reflection because they perceived it to be "not relevant" to their degree. Only 1% of the e-portfolios created were updated after end of the module. Consequently, we introduced changes for the second cohort of students, using a cloud-based solution using social network scaffolding for reflection and feedback. Friendfeed (www.friendfeed.com) is much more palatable to students, based on the Facebook paradigm and the attraction of continuous partial attention via status updates. In one term, 134 students whose accounts we were able to analyze produced 5,376 entries, ranging from a single word to several hundred words, 8,151 comments, 5,232 "likes", and wrote 199,853 words (an average of 1,491 each, not including private messages) words on topics including shared links, housekeeping and deeply personal reflections.

University of http://bit.ly/bSb6mh eBulletin.. **7** Leicester **FEATURES** Academic development via social networking at University of Leicester Social media pioneer seeks out new ways for student growth As a Senior Lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences, Dr Alan Cann's teaching interests lie in the realms of molecular biology, viruses and the environmental gene pool; however, it is his keen fascination with Web 2.0 technologies that have formed the theme of his recent research into using social networking tools to enhance the educational experience of students. His interest in new media technologies has led him to trial a variety of new ventures, including Google's recent additions, Wave and Buzz, as well as forming a collaboration with other academics at the University to analyse the use of Twitter as a communication tool within academia and pioneering personal development through FriendFeed. "There are all those overlapping products out there that do very similar things lots of others can do. Whilst they all overlap slightly, they are not quite the same. I can see potential in Wave but it's still very rough around the edges which makes it difficult to know what you should be doing, whereas Buzz is much more interesting as a cross between Twitter and Facebook." Dr Cann is interested in how all of these tools can be used in education as they are a familiar part of students' everyday lives and therefore seeks out new ways for need to be utilised to encourage learning as well as reflection and development according to the government's compulsory Personal student growth Development Planning (PDP); a required element of higher education. "We need to be able to use the social networking paradigm for educational purposes. There is a legal obligation for students to complete their PDP with the responsibility lying in the individual department. "One common response is an e-portfolio, however, we tried this with our first year biological scientists during their Key Skills module and they hated it. It would be much more beneficial to use a social tool that the students are already familiar with and spend far too much time on. Even though it is estimated that less than 1 per cent of students do not have a Facebook account, Dr Cann is keen to avoid infiltrating this particular social sphere with academic information through fear that students will just ignore its presence "We have no intention of using Facebook for academic purposes. We are acutely aware of the amount of student time Facebook occupies which I personally think is quite good; it acts as social glue in terms of social transitions, easing the transition for first years from home to university; they can now meet and interact with fellow "However, Facebook is a social space and therefore I don't want to intrude or deliver learning there. It is possible to pull content from Blackboard to Facebook, but many Within the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Leicester, Dr Cann has built a network on the FriendFeed website with first year students to trial the success of using social media to deliver course-related information and provide a forum for discussion and feedback amongst students via a social media space described by one The differences between FriendFeed and Facebook are reducing due to the recent acquisition of FriendFeed by Facebook which has seen a slow introduction of functions from FriendFeed into Facebook, making it easy for the students to get to grips with as they already possess a degree of familiarity and therefore it needs no The biological science students use FriendFeed for reflection and personal development through a network of discussion between peers. The social aggregator is used purely for work-related items and has already been a huge success within the Department. "Since we introduced FriendFeed at the beginning of the month, the response has been incredible. Students are on it 24/7 and are being very social but extremely "We haven't received many negative comments from them, most love it! I have never seen anything like this level of interactivity with Blackboard before. FriendFeed offers a forum for extended discussion, enabling them to have conversations with 200 other people on their course, providing a way for their questions to be answered Dr Cann hopes that interactions between staff and students via social networks, such as FriendFeed will enhance the student experience, in particular, by providing more regular feedback for their assessments. Dissatisfaction with feedback is a dilemma universities on a national scale face from pupils and a greater staff presence on social networks in this manner seeks to eliminate this. Academics will become more easily accessible and can join the online conversation, answering student queries "I am quite excited about how this is going. An individual's homepage acts as their portfolio by storing all of their posts, forming reflection on what they are doing and explanations of what they do not understand. Only it doesn't feel like they are doing it as they are so used to doing it in a similar manner in their personal lives on Facebook and there hasn't been any negative feedback yet."

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Do social network status updates provide sufficient scaffolding to encourage deep reflection on learning? Friendfeed is ideally suited to this task and has the benefit of engaging users through intermittent variable rewards in the form of reflective status updates from "friends" (Baker et al, 2002). Through the use of "Friendfolios", a highly cost-efficient cloud computing solution, we have been able to make reflection "sticky" and even popular.



References:

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