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eLEN2 – 2nd Generation E-Learning Exchange Networks

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1. Introduction

Since May 2007 the authors have explored and evaluated the use, relative merits and challenges of social networking within the context of higher education professional development programmes in France and in Britain.

The social networking tool Ning¹ was adopted for Masters' level courses at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 and the University of Hull with the specific aim of establishing an effective collaborative pedagogical environment and sense of community, by placing students at the centre of the learning process (*cf. Coombes et al., 2003*). This approach was used for two key reasons: a) the students' professional backgrounds are very different and it is not within the remit of the more structured 'academic' programme to cater for such diverse needs and experience; b) these students are working at a distance and have infrequent opportunity to meet face-to-face.

Analyses of three case studies conducted during 2007-2008 (Marsh & Panckhurst, 2007; Panckhurst & Marsh, 2008a, b) strongly suggested that a social network can benefit student learning by allowing for a sense of freedom from the perceived 'constraints' of a more formalised institution-based VLE² or LMS³. The online community of practice proved a powerful support to students who were accustomed to more directive, hand-holding pedagogy, to take up the 'independence' challenge and direct their own learning.

It was on the basis of this 'success' that case study 4 was set up. However, in the very early stages it was evident that this group would not evolve and develop in the same way as had the three previous case studies. This paper sets out some reasons why and concludes with suggestions of how to move towards 2nd generation *eLearning Exchange Networks* (eLEN2) through evolving both the pedagogical approach and implementation.

2. Case study 4

2.1 Organisation

This fourth case study with second-year Masters' students at Montpellier University took place between October 2008 and March 2009. The focus of the network was to provide an online forum through which the students could discuss pedagogical issues related to eLearning practice, via a "private" eLEN using Ning (<http://reelgaf2009.ning.com/>).

The nature and general organisation of the network remained consistent with previous case studies with one modification to the organisation of the student discussions.

3 distinct phases were planned:

1. A general getting-to-know-each-other phase. Tutors "led" the initial discussion threads but quickly stepped back to encourage student autonomy in preparation for phase 2;
2. The compulsory discussion threads stage. Discussions were designed and led by individual students with peer group student participation. At the end, students were required to submit a reflective synthesis of their experience;
3. The final tutor-led phase. During this 3rd phase (new in case study 4, and in response to earlier student feedback), tutors initiated and led discussions inspired by key points from student syntheses of phase 2 discussions.

2.2 Analysis

29 discussion threads were initiated during the 2008-2009 eLEN: 12 by the tutors, 16 compulsory threads by the students and 1 spontaneous extra-curricular thread initiated by a student.

From the outset, the student autonomy ratio was much higher than it had ever been before. Feedback from students themselves made it quite clear that tutor intervention during phase 3 was not appreciated. Tutors, who had taken a 'back-seat' in order to facilitate independence, hesitated to intervene, considering their contributions were unwelcome and a distraction from the student-led exchanges.

The advent of social networks (Facebook, Beebo and Twitter⁴) has resulted in familiarity with the concept of social networking and this group of students were clearly far more comfortable in their online exchanges and the concept of leading and initiating discussions. This said, the very nature of compulsory discussions was a problem for certain students.

The 'compulsory' discussion phase has formed an integral part of these case studies from the beginning of the research. Their conception was based upon the now recognised pedagogical practice that it is not enough to expect a group of people who are logged in to the same environment to communicate.

“The fallacy is to think that social networks are made up of people. They're not: social networks consist of people who are connected by a shared object.”
(Engelstrom, 2005, in Conole *et al.* 2008).

In any social network there is a need for a sense of purpose, a structure and an end result for there to be effective interaction and exchange.

Yet, through case study 4 the authors have recognised that some of the 'success' of the early use of the social network Ning could well be attributed to the 'novelty' factor of using online forums in the learning context as much as to the pedagogical benefits. Simply continuing with the same formula as previous case studies is no longer sufficient. Students' needs, expectations and skills in online exchange have moved on. As a consequence, it is time to evolve to the next generation of social networks in education. This does not require a change of technology, but a step forward in thinking and approach in how to organise and support social networking and learning. In other words, the very nature and purpose of engagement and motivation online needs to be reviewed and the results acted upon.

3. Conclusion: towards eLEN2

In previous research related to 1st generation eLENs (Panckhurst & Marsh 2008a) the authors have noted the following as key elements to the success of a social network:

- sense of purpose
- group cohesion
- tutor guidance shifting towards learner self-group management
- encouragement/promotion of learner independence/autonomy
- learners' sense of 'ownership'
- teaching staff /tutors 'letting go' and 'taking the back seat'

Case study 4 has shown that students more readily accept the notion of social networks now than several years ago, but they still need something around which to build their discussions. Social networking requires social objects: “The term 'social networking' makes little sense if we leave out the objects that mediate the ties between people.” (Engelstrom, 2005). Weller (2008) defines a social object as “something [...] that facilitates conversation, and thus social interaction”.

In this paper, it has been suggested that eLEN2 do not require new technology, but a new, more developed pedagogy. As Anderson (2009) states: “social networking learning designs will prove more effective, efficient and motivating ways to support learning than any previous forms – including both traditional campus based and distance education”.

The following three issues need to be explored in more depth (*cf.* Weller, 2008):

1. Content that acts as a social object;
2. Tools that facilitate social interaction around these objects;
3. A community of learners who find the social objects engaging.

The third point is the key towards academic social network success: in theory any content can act as a social object and the tools to facilitate social interaction exist, but if the community of learners do not find these social objects engaging then the eLEN will not succeed.

In future coming work with eLEN2 networks an approach which adopts a social learning object focus is to be explored. For the 2009-2010 group, the pedagogical design is centred on group work on specific projects rather than on individual led discussions.

However, questions are already being raised. Are we compromising the diversity, autonomy, openness, interaction, keywords associated with network usage (Downes, 2008)? Will this move to more structured learning take away the current sense of freedom? Only the next case study will help answer any of these questions, the results of which will be available in September 2010.

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¹ www.ning.com

² Virtual Learning Environment

³ Learning Management System

⁴ Facebook: www.facebook.com; Beebo: www.beebo.com; Twitter: twitter.com.