

Everyone Wants Web 2.0

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Abstract: The interactive nature of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is the impetus for the adoption of digital technologies by students for socialising and communicating in new ways. In particular these new ways of communication have embraced web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook©, however, teaching practices within educational institutions have remained relatively unchanged. This paper explores the use of the web 2.0 technology Facebook© in a Higher Educational setting to support undergraduate students. It further highlights how students in a developing country currently use this technology and their expectations for the future use of this web 2.0 technology.

Keywords: Web 2.0, Facebook©, Developing Countries, ICT

Introduction

Facebook©, a web 2.0 tool with over 400 million users (Facebook©, 2010), is an example of one of the most popular web 2.0 tools for socializing and communicating online. This is the tool of choice for online interaction for many people across the world in developing and developed countries. This tool cannot be ignored when its active user base is so large and it is used for socializing and communicating by such a diverse group of people. In fact, socialising through the use of interactive digital technologies, was identified in over 81% of students in an American study by the National School Boards Association (NSBA, 2007). In other developed countries such as Australia, similar research also suggests that the youth are spending at least half of their discretionary time using digital media and communicating (ACMA, 2008). Thus, socialisation through the use of these interactive technologies is a well-learned habit of these students and is at the forefront of their daily activities.

Similarly, students in some developing countries also have access to these digital technologies. There is no statistical data available to show how many students or young people use these digital technologies for socialising and interacting in these countries, however, during the previous elections in Malaysia, the blogging community became such an influential and powerful political voice that the government had to listen, and final election results were heavily influenced by the social interactions of this community (Kaufman, 2008). This alone, would support the fact that a large percentage of the Malaysian population have access to, and are capable users of these interactive technologies for socialising. It is also one of the driving factors that influenced the following study of the Web 2.0 technology, Facebook©, amongst an undergraduate group (n=60) of students in a Malaysian based university education degree.

1. Background and Approach to Study

Within this collaborative capacity building program a range of common ICT tools were used to facilitate communication between the university and the students in the Malaysian Institutes Tools such as email, group lists and Blackboard, the universities preferred learning management system (LMS), were used, however, informal feedback, low page

visits and comments within Blackboard, and the lack of response to emails indicated that students were not using these tools. The limited access to reliable Internet facilities was initially indicated as the reason for this, however, through small focus groups with the students it was soon realised that many of them used the Web 2.0 technology Facebook© in their social lives. Consequently, the students invited their lecturers into their online social lives, thus prompting the use of Facebook© as an additional tool to support them as they undertook their 20 weeks of practicum in schools throughout Malaysia.

The study focused on the last 12 months of the course that included a total of 20 weeks of practicum. A large groups of students (n=60) invited lecturers to be a part of their online social community where they were supported by each other, and the lecturers. The student postings were recorded on the students Facebook© 'Wall', a place similar to a forum that allows students to post short statements for comment by others. Students also participated in a survey based on ICT and web 2.0 technologies in learning and teaching.

2. Findings and Discussion

Students (n=60) from the area of science, physical education and mathematics were the focus of this study with n=53 students actively posting on Facebook© and responding to the survey. The survey allowed students to provide feedback on their experiences with Internet tools and in particular the web 2.0 environment Facebook© which was used extensively to support students in their final year of study. Initial findings from the study identify the habits of students using these Internet tools in a developing country and further highlight the impetus for the need to change traditional didactic modes of teaching often found within higher education settings. Through an analysis of the data, two main themes emerged on how students used Facebook©. The first theme was that of socialization (general communication, the sharing of photos, letting other students know what they do and arranging meetings), while the second theme that emerged was that of a community that supported each other (e.g. students encouraging each other after a bad day of teaching in their practicum).

When students were asked about which Internet technology they prefer to communicate with, 61% indicated that they preferred Facebook© over other technologies such as Instant messaging (9%) and email (30%). When the students were asked to substantiate their initial response to using these technologies, the responses were indicative that the social nature of communication and collaboration was important to them.

While the study had as its aim to identify how students in a developing country used this technology, it also aimed to understand how students viewed the future of Web 2.0 technologies in their future teaching and learning experiences. Students were asked if they would use Facebook© with their students if they had access to it in their future teaching schools. In their responses, 74% of the respondents said that they would use Facebook©. This high response rate indicates the desire for these education students to connect with their future students and provide a different type of learning experience for them. In this context, when the students were asked if a system like Facebook© should be used in place of the Blackboard LMS that they used, 63% indicated that a system like Facebook© would be a better tool, while 26% were unsure and 11% did not think it would be a better system.

3. Conclusion

Student use of web 2.0 technologies, and in particular, tools such as Facebook© can not be ignored, given their want for these tools to be included within all parts of their lives, including their education. Students want this social community around them where they can support each other and communicate and interact in different ways. Facebook©, within the realms of this study can be seen as a type of white list email system where students know that messages in this environment are from someone they know. The messages are not spam or junk and all their activities occur within a safe walled garden of possibilities with people who they want to be part of their community. The implications of this need for web 2.0 technologies by students, even those from developing countries, reinforces the need for higher education institutions to move away from the more didactic approaches that exist and to re-examine new ways of teaching and learning.

The study is conducted within a collaborative, international capacity building project between two countries, and consequently further research is needed to explore the possibilities of these web 2.0 technologies in other contexts. Some technologies cannot be just added to current practices. The technologies need to be at the forefront of any new course creations and revisions. This study acts as a pilot study for a much larger project, to further explore the benefits of web 2.0 technologies and digital medias within the classroom.

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