Using Web 2.0 for learning in the community

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of a range of Web 2.0 technologies to support the development of community for a newly formed Land Trust on the Isle of Lewis, in NW Scotland. The application of social networking tools in text, audio and video has several purposes: informal learning about the area to increase tourism, community interaction, 'ownership' of the Trust's website and pride in the local landscape. The paper provides background theory related to informal learning and Web 2.0 technologies and describes an innovative application of them to a sparsely populated rural community.
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1. Introduction

The Galson Estate Trust in NW Scotland has recently acquired 56,000 acres of land under a community ownership buy-out and has as one of the key objectives in its business plan the ambition of promoting tourism based upon the unique cultural, environmental, and historical assets of the area. The project described in this paper involves a programme of development initiatives, based upon the widespread community adoption of new technology applications. Web 2.0 is at the core of the concept of bringing together the heritage assets of the community in order to increase informal learning about the area and ultimately to increase tourism activity.

Two important points about this initiative need to be emphasized at the start. Although ambitious, the success of this project is low-risk as the innovation is based upon the customization and re-combination (often referred to as a mashup) of existing successful technologies in a powerful integrated network that has not been attempted for this purpose elsewhere. Secondly, the long-term sustainability of the project is based upon the motivation of local businesses and enthusiastic individuals, under the co-ordination of Galson Estate Trust, to provide ongoing content management and development with minimal further external expertise or funding.

The community acquiring ownership of the Galson Estate coincides with the popularization of a number of social networking tools which are ideal for developing a sense of community, e.g. YouTube, podcasting, Flickr, and internet broadcasting. In this project, the aim is to 'mashup' these applications for the purpose of presenting the geographical

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community to visitors and tourists. Finally, the project builds on the fact that broadband is now available throughout the area.

There are three main aspects of the project:

1. The initial set-up, customization, and inter-linking of the new technology applications that provide the platform (the network ecology) to enable the local community to interact with visitors and tourists both past and future.
2. Training of members of the local community (tourism micro-businesses, local societies involved in heritage and music etc, school children, and local volunteer enthusiasts) to manipulate and input data relevant to their own subject areas. A number of 'learning-by-doing' workshops will also be run.
3. Embedding the management of the various internet applications in the community structures of Galson Estate Trust who then become responsible and capable of adding to, maintaining, and interacting with the contents of the sites.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Informal learning

The concept of informal learning involves all that is learned throughout life in the day-to-day processes at home, work and leisure. The acceptance of informal learning acknowledges that there is more to learning than the absorption of 'explicit' knowledge codified in texts and delivered during formal courses. It also, crucially, consists of access to 'tacit' or implicit knowledge. The difference between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge has sometimes been compared to the difference between the knowledge represented in an A to Z street map and the knowledge in the head of an experienced taxi driver (Ballantyne and Quinn, 2006). Cross (2007) makes a case for the fact that informal learning is not the opposite of formal learning, and other analysts agree that the boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning are blurred and can only be meaningfully drawn in relation to particular contexts. It is more useful to talk about dimensions of formality and to look at ways in which these aspects interrelate (Rennie and Mason, 2004: 111).

E-learning and technology supported learning can be successful in formal learning, but can it also support the sharing of tacit knowledge? There is a growing interest in a number of emerging web-based services that might be harnessed to support this very purpose. For example:

A number of factors are associated with this shift but amongst them are web-based technologies that make it almost effortless for individuals to contribute to web based discussion; the spread of broadband services enabling the sharing of multimedia files; and the growth in web-services that support social interaction and exchange in one form or another. Whether it's sharing bookmarks in del.icio.us ; photos in flickr.com ; videos in youtube. com ; opinions in blogger.com ; knowledge in wikipedia.org ; or friendship in myspace.com the web has become much more social in nature and much (though not all) of this web based interaction is used for informal learning about hobbies, passions, and obsessions. For many thousands of people the social web – or web 2.0 as it has been labeled – is a place for networking, community building and sharing collective experience: leading some to describe this new phenomenon of massively distributed collective intelligence as "the wisdom of crowds". (Ballantyne and Quinn, 2006).

Other commentators question whether social networking has real learning value and point to the superficiality of this informal mode of learning. Learning from websites and online discussion groups is very different from the orientation of formal courses, where stress is laid on learning step by step, just in case one needs it later or for the exam. By contrast informal learning is just-in-time and just the amount necessary to put to immediate use. Kapp argues that:

We can contemplate whether "real" learning happens with Web 2.0 technologies, we can be philosophical about the value of informal learning versus formal learning, we can tout the virtues of "collective wisdom" but in the end…none of that matters.What matters is that kids are already using Web 2.0 technologies comfortably and effectively. If we old folks (over 30) don't figure out how to effectively use these tools to help the younger generation learn what they need to be successful in our baby boomer-run companies, government agencies and