Enhancing networking and proactive learning skills in the first year university experience through the use of wikis☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

S U M M A R Y

This paper discusses the introduction of blended learning strategies, a combination of traditional and online techniques, into the first year of a new preregistration nursing advanced diploma and degree programme at Bournemouth University (UK).

During a ten week sociology of health academic unit, in the first term of a three year nursing course, wikis were introduced as a complementary learning technique to traditional lectures and seminars. Wikis, an online application, provided eleven student seminar groups (each divided into 4 online or elearning groups of 6–8 students) with the potential to communicate collaboratively "anytime, anywhere" (JISC, 2010) to discuss a sociology preparation activity for the preceding week. The implementation of this elearning tool was structured through the application of Salmon's five stage model (Salmon, 2002) and evaluated from 69 students' online contributions to wikis as well as questionnaires completed by both a sample of students and academic staff. As well as the many comments made by students the evaluation indicated that 45% of students' responses valued wikis as a communication tool and 33% believed it promoted or allowed the sharing of group views.

The evaluation presents and critiques the initial project management using Salmon's five stage model and the engagement of students and academic staff. In particular it begins to show how wikis have the potential to structure academic learning and promote social networking in the crucial first few months of a course.

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Introduction

During their first year, university students undergo the transition from pedagogy to andragogy (adult learning) and Knowles et al. (2005), argues that this transition starts with the expectation that adult students are capable of self directed learning, building on the opportunity to use rich, past experience. Vgotsky "refers to the gap between the novice and the expert" (Scott, 2008, p. 87) advocating that scaffolding "a form of guidance in which the novice engages with an expert to solve a problem or carry out a task" (Scott, 2008, p. 87) assists the student in achieving this transition to their zone of proximal development.

Harnessing adult students' ability to facilitate their learning through their own student led, online space holds tremendous potential as a catalyst for encouraging early adult characteristics of learning and employability (J.I.S. Committee, 2010). In particular a second generation of online tools known as Web 2.0, such as blogs and wikis, are built upon collaborative and interactive learning principles. A wiki is a collaborative online space where knowledge is presented, edited and accepted by those creating the wiki in a style that is open, accessible and responsive to change (Fig. 1). Students no longer sit passively by their computers but are encouraged to interact with course materials and each other in order to further their understanding.

Wikis can therefore create a change in the social values of the learning group that can be significant to the learning outcomes. Knowledge is constructed differently via collaborative effort (Fountain, 2005) where "students are contributors, not mere recipients." (Mejias, 2006 p. 3). Traditional power relationships between student and teacher are altered (Weller, 2006) as the online facilitator or emoderator relinquishes the role of being the sole source of information. The process of virtual community building which has already been shown to be crucial to students' participation in social networking (Weller, 2006) is thus transferred to an educational setting. The potential to promote collaborative learning early in the course can therefore be extended to include the promotion of social networks in large cohorts where peer networks have been shown to be significant to student attrition (Brigham and Smith, 2008; Stewart et al., 2001).

The potential of Web 2.0 development within Higher Education in the UK remains in its infancy (J.I.S. Committee, 2010) despite the rhetoric that surrounds the benefits of elearning, and the assumption that students themselves, the "net generation", (Oblinger, 2004), are

Elearning terms	Features
Blended Learning	A mix of several different learning approaches eg traditional learning methods combined with e learning
E Learning	Learning that is supported and delivered through the use of ICT
Discussion boards/ Forums	Online discussion area where messages can be posted to colleagues and replied to
Netiquette	A set of rules, often mutually agreed, that govern the content of online discussion
Web 2.0 Tools	A group of technologies that assist users of the world wide web to create content such as blogs, wikis and podcasts
Wiki	An online application that allows people to work together to create a joint document

Fig. 1. Elearning terms.
Adapted from: Clarke, 2008 Palgrave Study Skills: Elearning skills (second edition) Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York.

driving a change through Higher Education for the implementation of online learning. Former barriers thought to effect student engagement such as age, gender (Broady, Chan and Caputi 2010) and the earlier distinction of the population being either digital natives or digital immigrants has become less relevant (Prensky, 2009) or digital immigrants has become less relevant.

Curriculum designers interested in blended learning techniques have the opportunity to work against the current fragmented picture of Web 2.0 implementation (J.I.S. Committee, 2010) to reemphasise the concept of "adding value" to educational outcomes (Rich and Holtham, 2005) and explore the significance of what the "e" part of the learning could add for the student (Mayes and De Frietas, 2004) Although students may have familiarity with online communication through their exposure to social networking sites it is important assumptions are not made about the level of participation that may result or the disengagement that can occur when academic issues are introduced in previously exclusive social areas (Schroeder and Greenbowe, 2009).

Background to the study

The rewrite of a nursing curriculum provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the first year student experience and think creatively about the support and academic needs of a large and diverse cohort of 300 nursing students. It was planned to introduce blended learning into the curriculum and using the medium of group wikis to see if first year students capitalised on the affordances that wikis could potentially provide.

Wikis were chosen as the elearning tool, due to their potentially less intensive emoderation as well as their simple one page format, and introduced into a ten week sociology of health unit within the first term of the new nursing curriculum. Both wikis, and another elearning tool, discussion boards, located in a concurrent unit, could be successfully incorporated into the university's virtual learning environment that already acted as a portal for all course materials. Eleven seminar groups of approximately 30 students for both the same units were divided into the same 4 elearning groups based on an ideal number of 6–8 students (MacDonald, 2008). It was hoped that by using the same elearning groups across both units students' confusion would be reduced and their group identity strengthened. Access to the group wiki was only possible by academic staff and the elearning group themselves (Fountain, 2005) to promote security and build students' online confidence in collaboration with just their own elearning group.

Although the Web 2.0 tools, such as wikis, have the potential to achieve the desired constructivist learning ethos for first year students a framework of Salmon's five-stage model provided a valuable curriculum building tool to integrate a blended learning approach (Fig. 2).

Salmon's idea of building on levels of development strengthens a constructivist approach (Salmon, 2007) and plans for online activities (etivities) to become increasingly harder, and more complex as the unit continues, with a predicted reduction of emoderator support as the etivity progresses (Salmon, 2002). The emoderator role is thus reduced over time and replaced by a strengthening of students' communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) essential to collaborative learning and in particular the effective use of group wikis.

Salmon's model also provides a practical awareness of the mutually supportive roles of the emoderator and IT support as well as how students "are likely to exploit the system at each stage" (Salmon, 2002, p. 12).

In the sociology unit wikis were to be used to pose a simple introductory activity or question to inform the weekly sociological theme that followed in the lecture and two hourly seminar times the week afterwards.

Prior to the sociology unit "going live" a staff wiki was established to enable the sociology staff to become familiar with the workings of the wiki and its format. Team members uploaded new materials onto the wiki for peer scrutiny and discussion. Sociology lecturers were thus experimenting with wikis well in advance of their students and any initial reluctance to access wiki explanatory materials was countered by using it as a portal to download and edit course materials.

Students themselves completed a netiquette activity face to face in their new elearning groups and were introduced to the wiki during the first sociology seminar with explanation given to the location of frequently asked questions and a screen shot presentation on accessing and using wikis. The first wiki activity enabled students to introduce themselves to fellow elearning group members online whilst experimenting with some of the features of the wiki such as hyperlinks and attachment of photos. Most importantly it was decided that students would not be allowed to edit other students' contributions as this was seen as counterproductive to them finding confidence with their online voice. The emotional nature of having work deleted (Wheeler et al., 2008) was therefore avoided at this early stage of elearning and the wiki adapted away from its traditional editing functions to meet the needs of students in their first year.

As in the study by Jones and Peachey (2005) it was planned that students would move swiftly through the online socialisation stage of the wikis (stage 2 of Salmon's model). This was due primarily to the curriculum designers wanting to engage first year students quickly into the sociology activities of the wikis without impeding their early enthusiasm with discussion of online dynamics. It was hoped that potential issues, "promoting mutual respect between participants, defusing problems and counselling any apparently alienated or offended individuals" (Salmon, 2000, p. 29) would have been initially addressed in the pre unit netiquette activity.

The evaluation study

Sample and methods

As the wiki work continued during each week of the sociology unit, a sample of three seminar groups (69 students divided between 3 seminar groups and therefore 12 elearning groups) consented to being part of an anonymous evaluation on their use of their wikis. The groups completed structured questionnaires during seminar time in the fourth and eighth weeks of the course to illicit their response to their wiki work near the beginning and end of the unit. The groups were taught by the same seminar leader to gain some consistency in the variable of emoderation.

Tracy (2011, p. 841) sees sincerity as an essential base to a study where "research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, goals and foibles". It was hoped that a clear explanation of the evaluation study would help to equalise power