



Project Document Cover Sheet

Project Information			
Project Acronym	HELPP		
Project Title	Higher Education Learning Portfolio for Placements		
Start Date	01/03/07	End Date	31/03/09
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Partner Institutions	N/A		
Project Web URL	http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/		
Programme Name (and number)	JISC –e Learning Capital Programme		
Programme Manager	Lisa Gray		

Document Name			
Document Title	Final Report		
Reporting Period	N/A		
Author(s) & project role	Naomi Hoyland: Main Author Project Manager contributions from R. Goodfellow, Deputy Academic - Project Manager G. Singer, Project co-ordinator - Engineering M. Flisher, Project co-ordinator - Media & Performing Arts V. Harrison, Project co-ordinator – Social Sciences B. Jones – Technical Administrator		
Date	31/03/09	Filename	HELPP FFfinal Compatabilitydoc
URL	http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/		
Access	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project and JISC internal		<input type="checkbox"/> General dissemination

Project Acronym: HELPP
Version: 5
Contact: Naomi Hoyland

Date: 31/03/09

Document History		
Version	Date	Comments
Version 4	30 January 09	Draft Final Report
Version 5	31 March 09	Final Report



JISC Final Report



Title Page
HELPP, HE in FE strand, JISC e-Learning Capital Programme

Final Report

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31 March 2009.

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Acknowledgements

HELPP was a project that was funded by JISC under the e-learning stream. Close collaboration took place with another funded project in this call, 'Space-FD'. Thanks to the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Support Centre.

Executive Summary

The HELPP project investigated issues involving the introduction logs web logs (blogs) for reflection; as a form of electronic Individual learning Plan e-ILP and e-Portfolio across various Higher Education [HE] and Foundation Degree [FD] courses within Hull College. Hull College is a large general FE College with approximately a thirteen hundred HE students. The project explored the use of a 'blogging' system to support three way communications and reflection between tutor, students and work placement mentors during work experience. A number of e-ILP formats were available. We chose to explore the use of a less structured 'Blog' as vehicle as it offered the scope for courses to develop their own course style, while potentially improved both the basic writing and the reflective writing skills of Foundation Degree students. It was felt that weak writing skills inhibited the change from recording experience to being asked to write reflectively. Writing a blog entry or uploading files was considered easy and students could decide who saw the content. This would enable the student can make very personal reflective posts to marshal their thoughts before sharing later posts with tutors peer group or the wider community.

We used an open source system 'Elgg'. This is an e-Portfolio based on personal publishing through blogs and other digital products and social networking that can link to tutors, peer groups or simply to others with similar interests. It is both learner centred and learner controlled. Initially conceived by Edinburgh University developers, it is named after a small village in Switzerland! As open source software it has developed a wide user base and a rich set of features or 'plug in', including blogs, wikis, bookmarking and presentation areas.

At the time of writing we have 433 student users and over 150 staff users across a variety of H.E. and FD courses. We also developed a College wide version as part of our dissemination activities. This version is integrated into Moodle, is presently supporting 22 academic and support staff based communities and approximately 90 staff across all sites including Harrogate. One of these communities will be linking with projects for Learning Mentors and Subject Learning Coaches. As Moodle is linked to our MIS system all staff and students have automatic access once enrolled. As yet we have not rolled out for general student use and the HE project version has been kept as a separate facility, however, in the Moodle version two student bodies 'Club 16-18' and 'Learner Voice' are developing communities.

What we did:

We initially introduced the concept of using social networking features to various courses in Computing, Foundation Degrees and BSc Computing. Participation was then extended to other subject disciplines.

- We introduced the concept to over 400 learners and their tutors
- We introduced the concept to a number of work based providers and provided training to them
- We developed a work placement module and modified various features of Elgg to better suit our courses.
- We developed the training, administrative and technical processes to support wide scale implementation.
- We disseminated our project to the wider College and created a core of users across a number of disciplines.
- We made a number of recommendations to the wider College community on the future use of web 2 applications.

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- We evaluated the project through interviews with staff, students, work placement mentors; reports from Tutors and analysis of the usage.

Our Main Findings:

- Current practice with regard to PDP and the use of 'personal reflection' differed across the College. This was evidenced by the approaches taken by the various courses. Common features were required by the design of the documentation.

The Elgg blog is an unstructured format. Lack of a common format did not affect its use. The dynamic quality of an on line facility and the different responses to that by individual tutors indicates that the College needs a set of recommendations for minimum standards about what students can expect in terms of support for their e-PDP to ensure a consistent approach across College

- Using blogs with work placement mentors is probably a step too far for many employers.

Although the use of this tool with employers in the way we originally envisaged was of limited success its uses in other forms of distance, work/college relationship should be explored.

Consideration should be given to the development of the placement contract through the use of a wiki (an Elgg plug in). The initial development of a placement contract comes at the time when employers feel most committed. Gaining on line expertise and using on line social interaction at the slightly earlier stage may help interactions at the later 'on the job' stage.

- It is a 'mistake' to assume that because many students use social networking they know how to transfer those skills to educational use. We wished at times we had avoided the term 'social networking' as it immediately distorted the student concept of what they were to do. Some students could not make the shift from what they knew and understood as a social space to what were asking them to do.

We clearly need to establish an induction plan for students to make them aware of our expectations within a semi professional network in contrast to a social network. For both teachers and learners stress needs to be placed on the relevance of a reflective log for extending and developing analysis and synthesis rather than the technical and social opportunities afforded by the tool(s).

- Making a facility such as Elgg available to students does not make it part of the learning experience. A 'take it or leave it' approach meant not surprisingly some students left it!

Integration into the requirements of the course and its materials is the only effective approach.

- Our dependence on the enthusiast in the early stages inhibited our development of staff training as we concentrated on the enthusiasts' contribution rather than the commitment of the team.

Without in anyway dampening enthusiasm, as a risk exercise it is worth taking a hard look at a course with a very prominent member to consider if the skills and the commitment of the enthusiast is shared by the team and considering before the event how sustainable will this implementation be if this individual leaves.

- Our emphasis on the technology put many people off.

Whatever the technology, learning, is the primary and vital element and the reason that the majority of colleagues want to be involved. Emphasise the pedagogical or e-learning advantages first and foremost. The technology skills required can be addressed as they are needed to do the job.

- In the second year we increased training opportunities but still not sufficient for a number of staff. Continuing support was required. Good IT skills were not important criteria for success for staff, as little more than word processing skills were required what mattered was how well this type of computer mediated communication was integrated into the course and sufficient understanding of what & why it might be used.

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Training needs to continue after the initial period to enable reminders about key features and to reinvigorate use. Elgg has a number of features some of which may not be required early in the course when training takes place. Emphasise and relate the training to how the staff and students are using the application so any further training is about making things better for them.

This Executive Summary summarises the key findings and recommendations of the project

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Background

The Project grew out of two separate pieces of work:

- The e-Learning team's work with e-portfolio development
- A one year HEA mini project completed with FD Software Design

The College had gone through numerous trials to develop a VLE until successfully developing Moodle to fit with our requirements. Moodle did not, however, at that time offer some of the communication facilities which were becoming available on the internet.

While many individuals had good context specific knowledge in using digital technologies there was little sharing of information and experience between Schools with overlapping curricula. Social networking tools support a variety of collaborative teaching and learning methods.

Pressure was developing in College for an e-portfolio and e-ILP with very little grass roots understanding of the nature or the potential of these tools. A number of different products were proposed although each had its own champions there was no common idea of what facilities we actually needed.

FE Colleges are under external pressure from several different directions to introduce differing brands of e-portfolio e.g. awarding bodies; Local Education Authorities and large institutions like our own with links to a number of Universities can find that each HE partner has a different portfolio development. At the start of the project we had in mind that a 'one size fits all' product would be useful from an administrative and training point of view.

Why Elgg?

Elgg had been tested in a very minor way some years earlier in College, had been found to be stable. We had initially done some minor trials using adult learners in the Skills for Life School but had not progressed any further than simple writing tasks.

We needed to gain experience for ourselves. We had the experience of implementing a VLE where the College had bought a product which was hosted off site. Development was done for us; we failed to build up capacity, skills and knowledge and after three years it was barely used. The ability to experiment without the financial burden of licensing costs was attractive. We hosted Elgg ourselves so concerns about the public nature of social networking sites were removed.

Elgg has a number of well developed features including; a profile area, personal reflection space, a portfolio area.

Both to find out what curriculum needs are and to make Elgg an effective tool for use across our College we required curriculum areas to feed back any issues which they might have with the Elgg the interface, especially navigation issues. We also needed to know about any problems which might arise with large numbers of users who wanted to upload files other than text files and if any problems arose when used in cross college conditions. We needed to put this product and its administration under some real life pressure!

The course team for the Foundation Degree in Software Design and Development gained funding for an HE Academy, ICS funded mini-project to utilise Elgg as a means of maintaining communication with students, employers and tutors and encouraging reflection during Foundation Degree work placements.

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The HE Academy project aimed to facilitate the three-way conversation involved in Foundation Degree work placements between student, employer/mentor and tutor via an online environment. Elgg, being an existing environment that supported file upload and blogs with a comment facility, was chosen as an excellent starting point. The mini project had just eleven students with an enthusiastic highly computerate tutor. The project raised a number of questions which the HELPP project wanted to explore.

- Could quality be maintained outside a close knit situation operating in the mini project?
- To what extent did the features of Elgg serve the different demands of a variety of courses?
- Does the use of Elgg impact positively on the student experience?
- What technical skills did users need to know beyond basic word processing?
- How well would the e-portfolio function by moving from just text based items to a richer mix media.
- What would be the technical support and configuration needs?
- What formalised risk assessment was necessary? What guidance and technical advice would the College need?

These questions were incorporated in to the broad aims & objectives of the HELPP project. .

Aims and Objectives

Aims:

- The project sought to make more effective use, institutionally, of social networking to encourage both reflective writing and sustained writing while raising awareness at both the institutional and individual level of the opportunities for dynamic and positive engagement with students beyond the classroom.
- For students whose learning style or area of study is less text base we wanted to explore the benefits of the e-portfolio facility where images, sound and video could be used to record experience and reflections while critical evaluation could take place both peer to peer and tutor to student within the same working space.
- The project sought to encourage and to raise awareness of social networking in the work placement context to provide three way communications between student, tutor and work place mentor/employer.
- In the institutional context the introduction of any new technology raises key issues around quality assurance, central support for the differing needs of different stakeholders and their different expectations.

Objectives:

- Learners, their respective employers and tutors will be aware of the technological advantage of the use of blogs in Elgg to encourage and enhance reflective practice by incorporating tutor and employer comment throughout the work placement.
- To assess the extent to which the e-portfolio space has been used by students / employers to share and upload work to be assessed. Will learners by using the e-portfolio space be able to enhance the recording of work placement experience via sound, images and video of the work placement?
- To assess the extent to which the use of asynchronous discussion forums and the Elgg system enhanced communication between all parties.
- To develop a download facility to address the interoperability issues between e-portfolio systems, for all the files stored in Elgg and all the blog transcripts; so at a single button press, learner's e-portfolio work can be transferred onto portable media.

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- To deliver training to learners, employers and tutors in both a face-to-face and online mode and to pilot the system with learners, employers and tutors involved in work placements.

The high level aims of the project were met although our expectations of involvement with work placement employers were only modestly fulfilled.

Although we achieved many of our objectives the emphasis of some objectives changed during the progress of the project.

Methodology

Co-ordination of the project was carried out by the project team and the directorate of Higher Education. The strategy was to have two main phases with a mid point review and final evaluation. In the evaluation plan we aimed to develop a set of questionnaires to answer research questions about the development of IT skills by students. These were created and implemented but no statistical analysis was ultimately carried out. Data was collected by the project team using discussion groups from which exemplars of practice have been produced along with feedback from learners to give the student perspective.

Phase 1 included:

- Elgg Server configuration and platform development
- Initial development of preparation of the Elgg interface to deal with work based learning requirements.
- Internal promotion. Preliminary Demonstrations and Pilot user recruitment
- Workshop arranged
- External promotion and development of informal external support network. Included seeking advice from existing users of Elgg
- Survey design
- Mapping of the expected processes to be used by the various stakeholders
- Students survey to assess IT skills
- Implementation
- Stakeholder feedback
- Review

Review at the end of the first year resulted in a decision to shift the emphasis from tri partite communication to how better integrate this type of facility into individual course design regardless of work placement availability. Evaluation at this stage wanted to examine effectiveness of the approaches made by individual courses but its main focus was functionality of Elgg rather than the functionality of process. Evaluation was given by tutors in the form of brief reports and students by way of blog or face to face discussion. Evaluation of student feedback took place to assess the effectiveness of the process thus far. Students were most concerned to get the interface right and led the redesign of the interface. There was general approval of the changes by both staff and students.

A schedule of meetings developed at the start of the project had proved difficult to maintain. Details of meetings were posted on a Moodle course, however, as we needed new pilot tutors themselves to get used to the on going dialogue in Elgg and in anticipation of having more widely distributed users in phase two, we set up a community for project communications in Elgg.

Following feedback recommended by Phase 1 -

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Phase 2 included:

- Dissemination of lessons learnt and recruitment to phase 2
- Training events - We increased the training opportunities for people who would be involved in the phase 2 pilot.
- Student survey to assess IT skills
- Implementation at course level
- Stakeholder feedback
- Case Studies /video
- Final evaluation.

See Appendix 1 for Data sheets

Evaluation:

Originally evaluation was planned around both the use of both formal questionnaires and informal data collection methods.

The data collected at the start of the first pilot by a formal questionnaire was felt to be of little relevance and this was modified for phase two. The original questionnaire sought to understand students' IT skills to see if there was a relationship between the use of Elgg and the development of IT skill. As this initial questionnaire was then delivered mainly to students who were on courses where they would naturally be extending their IT skills it was impossible to pick out how much could have come from the use of Elgg. The same could be said for one of our other research questions 'did the use of Elgg aid retention'? The reasons for students leaving a course are highly variable. The project team came to the decision that these questions were too complex to deal with within the broader aims of the project detracting from our focus on pedagogy and awareness raising of the advantages of this technology.

Evaluation in Phase One concentrated on functionality. In Phase Two our main focus was our understanding the different models of use in a variety of courses with different modes of attendance.

Evaluation was planned around individual stakeholders. Data collection methods involved:

- Tutor interviews and reports
- Observations
- Student interviews
- Work placement mentor interviews
- Individual web logs
- System statistics

Post evaluation plan

- Participant centred reports for the individual School were planned. These have not yet been completed but are considered necessary for sustainability after the end of the project.
- As our evaluation depended on informal self reporting we feel we lack the authority that formal questionnaire can give. We are therefore putting in place a feedback questionnaire for staff and student feedback.
- Addressing training needs discovered through the evaluation
- Dissemination is continuing.

System set up

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The project utilized Elgg as a basis for the online environment. Elgg is a free to use open source social networking environment that could be readily modified by our content-development team. Elgg has the facility for individual and community blogs and an e-portfolio included in one environment. Log on was set as per the network log of the individual. A bespoke work placement contract was developed for use in Elgg prior to the start of the pilot which replicates the College paper based contract for work placements.

See appendix2 Examples of the paper based contract and screen shots of the Elgg version

Elgg Server Configuration/Platform

Initially we ran Elgg on a Windows 2003 Server (college default) with Apache as the web server. Whilst this worked, it did require a lot of tweaks/hacks to enable the full functionality. Some of the features of Elgg although they worked, were not stable. The Widgets, a portable chunk of code usually developed for a particular job by the open source community were a major problem. After experimenting with Elgg under Linux and Apache, we found that Elgg ran much better. All of the functionality that we had struggled with previously worked fine and did not require many of the tweaks they had previously under windows. As a result of this Elgg now runs under Linux (CentOS5) with Apache (2.2.3) as the web server.

Full technical details under Elgg Technical Challenges.

External promotion and dissemination

Hull College was not part of a consortium in this project. We considered it both advantageous and necessary to build an informal network of people who might become critical friends or have information and expertise which we may find supportive. Very early in the project we attended:

Leeds University e-Portfolio Conference 27/03/07

Where we were able to present our aims and objectives and take part in a discussion forum on the use of e-Portfolios. Leeds University were experienced users of Elgg e-Portfolio and we able share our ideas and pick valuable advice from an HE perspective as we embarked on our project.

Sheffield RSC-YH e-Learning Conference 22/06/07

We presented of our aims and objectives and details of mainly the technical set up to mainly FE Colleges within the Yorkshire and Humber region.

Leeds Metropolitan University, Regional University Network ALT-Enhancement Showcase event 01/11/2007

This event shared cross-institutional experiences of work-based assessment and learning. As well as presenting, the team gained some ideas and thought on how e-learning is being used to support learners in the workplace.

One of our most supportive and continuing relationship was with our colleagues at:

Bradford College SPaCE-FD JISC Project 19/10/2007

This session was held so that the Hull College project could share some of its findings to date of using Elgg with Foundation Degree students on work placements. We demonstrated some real-life scenarios and also discussed problems and issues we had discovered so far. The main points that come out of the meeting was that we could not assume that all lecturing staff were confident in

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eliciting reflection and needed training to help prompt students to reflect using comments on blogs in Elgg.

18/09/08

Hull College shared with Bradford and its partner's our progress so far. Hull was particularly interested in SPaCE -FD's use of a wiki for work placement contract development. Various teams in Hull College have expressed interest in developing this idea in the future.

04/03/09

Discussion took place around shared experience of the final report and evaluation. It was felt that a meeting of the various engineering groups to share experience would be valuable. This contact would be continuing and take place beyond the present project limits. The Bradford team supported the Hull administrator with technical expertise for e-mail alerts of Elgg activity.

YHELLN 'Surf and Turf' Event

05/12/2007

This lively event shared experiences of blogs (ourselves), podcasting (Mick Mullane from Yorkshire Coast College) and accessibility issues (TechDis).

Moodle User Group

13/11/08

At this event hosted by the Regional Support Centre we shared our experience on the implementation of Elgg at HE level and our subsequent integration of a version into Moodle

Implementation

Preliminary Demonstrations and Pilot

Stage 1: Preliminary Demonstrations and Pilot user recruitment

The HELPP project built on the work of an HE in FE funded mini project which had involved one cohort of eleven students, we had therefore the luxury of an exemplar. Students had used the blogs to record, share and reflect on work. The tutors and work based mentors had contributed with critical advice. A video case study was available to support initial induction.

The mini project had established:

- Students like using web logs
- It was difficult to ensure employer engagement
- Students and employers like sharing documents via e-portfolio space
- Online placement details were easier to access

The HELPP project scaled up the project both in terms of student and staff numbers but allowed the College to address specific questions mentioned previously which had been posed by the mini project.

To raise interest for the recruitment of a pilot cohort, presentations were given via ILT/e-maturity Committee and the HE Committee and finally to a number of Foundation degree/HND/Degree course leaders. From these presentations six courses were recruited.

- BSc Computing Top-up (full time) – PDP group work – 13 students
- FdSc Software Design & Development Y1 & 2 (full time) – PDP reflections and work-based-learning tasks – 24 students
- FdSc Business Information Technology (part time) – PDP reflections and work-based-learning tasks – 12 students
- FdSc Computing Top-up (part time) – PDP reflections – 7 students

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- FdSc Business Management (part time) – PDP reflections – 77 students
- Pre- Service PGCE (part time) – PDP reflections – 16 students

The PCGE course subsequently dropped out. The remaining courses were all based in the School of Business and Computing. Training workshops were established and an initial training manual was developed.

Implementation started with staff training events. These events were simply about functionality showing staff the process of profile creation, community creation and basic administration. A training manual was developed at the same time. Training with employers mirrored this approach. The development of the work –placement module was a standard Hull College work placement contract which was converted to a digital form.

Invitations to training were sent to local employers who offered work placement for the pilot courses. From the ten employers initially given training only two ultimately used Elgg. However these training sessions were also used to inform the re-development of the work placement contract.

The Model Process for using Elgg

Questionnaire: To understand students' IT skills to see if there was a relationship between the use of Elgg and the development of IT skills and whether technological awareness had been raised.

Students would keep a reflective diary of their work placement or project and lodge any appropriate development work in their portfolio area. Students would record any issues for tripartite discussion by creating their own workplace group. Access would be available in the portfolio for discussion with the appropriate people. Other posts could be limited to private or tutor /student issues. Public posts to the course community were also anticipated.

Work Place Mentors could make modifications to the original brief or could comment on the appropriate post and portfolio content to the student, anticipating that this would also be viewed by the tutor. Two way discussions between the tutor & mentor or tutor & student were also anticipated.

Tutors would monitor the placement progress intervening where necessary using the time allocation to visiting placements. The time allocation for visits, however, could be used more flexibly at the discretion of the tutor.

Monitoring, technical support and the recording of organisational issues took place through out the project.

Lessons Learnt During First Pilot

Tutors said:

- Tutors reported that they were able to control the student project more effectively, getting a richer picture of the project's progress over time instead of relying only on physical visits.
- All course tutors felt that reflective practice been enhanced and that time had been saved in dealing with work placement.
- Student feedback and support has improved via the blog comments and online contract
- The online environment provided ongoing support that was not time and place dependent.

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The original questionnaire gave little worthwhile information if used with students who were developing higher level IT skills within their courses. This would apply to courses in Art and Design; Media and to a lesser extent to Engineering.

Knowing the IT skills level of students and their understanding of 'reflection' and how that might relate to learning was considered to be worthwhile information and the questionnaire was changed to an on line questionnaire in Moodle which could be delivered at any appropriate time for the course and its students.

It was very difficult to get work based mentor buy in. If workplace mentor participation was absent it didn't prevent valuable communication and oversight by tutors from taking place. It became clear that we would be in danger of hampering the development of Elgg as an important 'reflective and analytical tool' if we over emphasized or restricted its use by requiring involvement of a third party, external, work based mentor.

We didn't restrict courses to those with a traditional work based element. We sought to help tutors devise an integration model suitable for the needs of their course and its students.

In training, emphasis had been placed on the use of the blog for specific modules of courses. It was an unintended consequence that in some cases when the module was complete, activity in Elgg stopped.

To get full embedding into the course we needed to stress the advantages of using the blog to develop the continuous nature of reflective activity rather than using it as something with which to do ILP or WBL modules.

Posting to the portfolio was little used by this initial cohort. There was no tradition of portfolio use within the area and students had well established storage methods. One mentor commented on these methods by pointing out a 'chaotic array of memory sticks was produced to review work'.

Remaining pilot groups were based in one School, the individual courses having very similar demands.

Involvement of Creative Arts courses was actively pursued.

Pre- Service PGCE (part time) dropped out of the project as the tutor who had been interested and involved with the project left, no one other tutor in the course felt able to pick up the use of Elgg.

This highlights the need for team involvement rather than individual involvement. Training must be given to whole course teams rather than just the enthusiast volunteer.

The initial project members had technology and its use as part of their culture. We had failed to fully understand that that we dealing with cultural change for other groups.

Far wider preliminary demonstration of the target application was necessary taking in managers at both senior and middle levels who had the authority to make decisions about a whole course development. Our emphasis in these demonstrations needed to stress the pedagogical features and the e-learning advantage to generate enthusiasm and support.

During this first pilot several staff changes in one course impacted upon the project. Reflecting on this initial implementation we realise we sowed the seeds for some of our subsequent problems by allowing the pilot to draw from too narrow a base.

Phase 2

Second Pilot Demonstrations

In May 2008 a recruitment of a second pilot took place. As the use of web log facility had been well tested in Business and Computing but little demand had been placed on the e-portfolio facility we were therefore particularly keen to recruit from Creative Arts areas believing they would have greatest use of the portfolio having had a history of portfolio use.

Presentations were given to all Heads of School. We shifted the emphasis of our presentations from showing the advantages of the Elgg product to a more general dissemination of the advantages of blogging and e-portfolio use as a continuous process. Heads of School then put forward potential pilot areas whose staffs were given a general introduction to the pedagogical advantages of blogs and a more in depth training on the use of Elgg in particular. One to one training was offered and taken up by six staff and support was also offered to staff during the first session they would be having with students when Elgg was being introduced and profiles set up. The administrator attended all sessions so that teams knew who they to contact if things went wrong. As a result of discussions with Heads of School and Heads of Service a version of Elgg was incorporated into the Hull College Group VLE initially to allow staff to create 'communities'.

The e-learning support team only attended the classroom when invited however the engineering course leader whose courses we did not attend, suggested we do this automatically as part of any further implementation as his students were hesitant about contacting the administrator. We still feel that we haven't quite got the right mix in our training sessions for staff but our greater understanding and available exemplars should further improve our delivery. The nature of project time scale meant we put all training up front. Future training would have some refreshers at various times during the year as people tended to forget about some features which are less main stream for their course.

Pilot Surveys

As previously mentioned the original questionnaire was not well received. However, it did give some good general information to the course tutors but there was delay in processing the information from a paper based system. We did a similar exercise at the start of the second year using an on – line questionnaire in Moodle. As the questionnaire was on line, feed back to the tutor was instant and we were able to locate students who had very weak IT skills or no easy access to ICT quickly and respond accordingly. For these reasons we will give course teams an optional on line questionnaire with the questions tailored to individual course need.

See Appendix 1

Course and Student Use

First Pilot

During the first pilot second year and first year cohorts in computing, business and Teacher Training (TT) used Elgg in various parts of their course. For FD Software Design blogs were a compulsory part of the students work based learning programme so use of Elgg was mandatory, work placements were managed and tracked using the Project feature to build learning contracts that tie work placement activity into tangible actions that match required learning outcomes.

All foundation degree students within the computing programmes in Business and Computing & FD Business students (77) had some compulsory use of Elgg. In addition to this, Elgg was used in some PPD modules and again this was compulsory as Blogs, would form part of the module assessment. In some cases there was compulsory usage, as the blog was part of a marked submission students had to make at least four postings. Where blogs were used in this way, within a student's project or

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report, the blogs were indirectly graded against the criteria for the module, but no independent grading of blogs, in their own right, took place.

'Finishing the report was easy, working from the blogs and information provided before I started the assignment really helped me plan and structure the report'. **Student Blog:**

Some students also use Elgg for personal Blogs outside of their formal module requirements and for community or group work. Social chat was not discouraged, there is a social element to all learning but it did cause sufficient issues to lead to the forming of an ad hoc committee to develop 'guidelines' for the use of digital communications.

'Just wondered who was interested in getting together to go through a few ideas of venues for our exhibitions for the end of our 2nd year. If we get ourselves organised it'll be one less thing to worry about as we get busy with assignments'. **Student Blog**

Second Pilot

Try this if you want to!

During the second pilot three courses made Elgg available with the expectation that it would be used! It does not work simply to make Elgg available and tell students how useful it is. If the course team do not show in some way this activity is required and valued students get the message that it is not required and valueless. Students, who went in, set up profiles and started up stopped using it. Other students exhibited remarkable persistence despite lack of interactions with the tutor.

"After several weeks of posting blogs on another site I have finally realised I have been using the wrong blog site. So now I am starting again on Elgg!" **Student Blog**

Art and Design (Lens Based Media yr 2) students (17) posted their work, still images, often giving detailed technical information and asked others to comment. While some interesting discussion took place the language and behaviour of social networking started to intrude after a few weeks, gradually the thoughtful and considered exchanges stopped. Disruptive behaviour would not be tolerated in a lecture, but we found several situations where serious exchange of views was interrupted by inappropriate language for an educational environment.

Course staff need to develop guidelines for student interaction appropriate to their course and be prepared to monitor from time to time.

Reflective Log

Social Science course(s) (18) didn't take this completely voluntary approach. Students were required to keep a reflective diary. At first a compulsory approach was taken, however, difficulties students experienced in terms of access to the internet necessitated a more relaxed approach. Several severely dyslexic students and one with a significant visual impairment were concerned that compulsory reflections on Elgg would disadvantage them. Although the course team (with the help of IT Services) worked hard to overcome this perceived disadvantage, one student did not take up the considerable support provided. Interestingly, the dyslexic students (2) became some of our most frequent users of Elgg and despite their initial doubt have overcome these difficulties and are contributing well.

Community Building

Social Science area liked the ability to develop an HE community much more effectively than students were experiencing within their course groups. These courses have low numbers with many mature

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students, attending at different times of the day and week. The Social Science tutors hoped, that regular contact on Elgg would give students a shared resource for communication, collaboration and a place to share understanding of the wider issues affecting a range of sectors thus providing opportunities for 'cross fertilisation' of ideas and perspectives. However, the uptake for Elgg was disappointing. For a significant proportion of students, early difficulties in logging on proved to be a 'turn off' particularly as they had been asked to sign on from home, where they were unable to be supported immediately with fairly basic problems. There were a significant number of mature learners who appeared uncomfortable with the technology and from an early stage never fully engaged with it.

General Discussion

The Social Science course tutors tried to make active use of discussion forums by generating open discussions on current topics e.g. 'Alzheimer's'.

Use of the web logs and of comment walls is continuing beyond the 'compulsory period' and is becoming embedded in course delivery. The use of a general discussion space only really happened in social sciences but contrary to expectations, it was not used as a facility in Creative Arts areas.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was an issue for several students in the social science cohort and very occasionally elsewhere. Students can simply choose a completely private mode, this meant that their entries are not able to be seen or shared by the wider community or tutor. Within Elgg, groups can be set up to allow the tutor and the student to have confidential interaction.

Social Sciences thought 'groups' were of limited value as most students declined to take up the group offer. The meant that although some were using it the tutor was still not able to engage with individual groups effectively to support in reflective practice or share experiences with the wider community.

It should be noted that although confidentiality was an issue for some students, others in the wider college community appeared to have an entirely different view of privacy and always worked with '*all logged on users*' access. The administration team spent time each week sending messages to students to remind them of the access restriction possibilities when posting were made that appeared to need a more private audience. Those students that did reply were: "cool" about '*all logged on users*' seeing their post. There is possibly a generation of learners who, because of social networking, have a different concept of privacy! In the 'School of Business and Computing' where there is now a longer history of use there was only one issue raised about privacy.

Barriers

Three barriers to implementation can be seen to be operating in the social science group.

ICT skills of the cohort and the need to ease the compulsory use rule of mature part time students

Perceived privacy issues; and

Technical support during early access especially for students' home access

See Case Study pod casts of a Tutor and Student view of Elgg.

Compulsory v Voluntary

In the School of Performing Arts and Media two student groups piloted Elgg; FD1 Media and Broadcasting (15) and FD2 Theatre (15) and both groups approached this piece of software in very different ways. Elgg was attached to the Media student's assessment where they had to critique their learning; in this respect the software became a valuable tool to their development. Lecturers made regular (weekly) comments on their blogs in attempt to encourage them to think more deeply about personal professional development. Conversely the Acting group were not assessed on their participation with the software and as a result only three could be convinced to use Elgg and even then this was only to communicate ideas via the messaging service rather than a blog.

Course team(s) found that Elgg was advantageous to those students who are:

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- Familiar with blogging software
- 'Required' to use it.

However, it should be noted that towards the end of the assessment the Media students did have a greater knowledge of their developmental needs after reflecting on their studies through using Elgg.

"Just simply by doing this blog I am developing my skills within New Media."
Student Blog

The School of Business and Computing now have well established compulsory use of Elgg. Using 'compulsory' for this School is to misstate the case as it is simply the established and accepted form of communication for some modules.

The Right Structure for the Course

After evaluating their experience the Media /Performing Arts team felt that using the Elgg portfolio module first and then as a blogging module second allowed a greater sense of personalisation for the student. In essence they feel they are creating their own website which would work for their students. This is essentially the route taken by the engineering courses.

No restrictions were put on personalisation by the college.

Performing Arts and Media disliked the use of Elgg for PPD. Although Elgg was for some a required mode for tutorials, students found it very difficult to accept this and they still required their usual tutorial support as this felt 'safe' and more legitimate. This reaction was very similar to the social science students, mainly mature students while Performing Arts and Media are relatively young students. The course tutor also preferred having a one to one tutorial and as a result of these extra tutorials Elgg became very time consuming particularly as it was felt that a substantial written response was required rather than a one line comment.

Working Methods

Social Sciences also found Elgg proved much more time consuming than expected in terms of guiding users and maintaining interest, especially during September and October when a significant proportion of time was spent commenting on individual reflections, pages and profiles. To be able to visit each student's site and comment on their reflection individually was very difficult and as workloads increased towards the end of the semester, interaction on Elgg reduced as the tutors were unable to sustain this level of blogging. Engineering commented on the time problems initially but felt that this was less of an issue when tutors and students got use to using it.

Engineering courses (6 groups, 80 Students) were prominent users in the second pilot. Use was compulsory and time was allocated within the day schedule to bring both the portfolio and log up to date. All the courses involved were part time –day release courses. Only two students had any familiarity with social networking. Unlike their Media and Performing Arts colleagues, engineering staff did not feel this had any bearing on students' ability to get to grips with either the tools or with writing. Elgg was used for project work and PPD. The course team established the working rule that if the work was not on Elgg or in the web log it simply didn't exist. The e-portfolio and blog modules were used. There were issues around upload sizes which were resolved. Casual drawing work was an issue as this couldn't be captured which meant that some of the early draft creative work remained paper based. The College will find a solution to this. Students were given 15 minutes at the end of each day to update their log.

The course team felt that initially using Elgg took more time but with greater use and confidence this became less of an issue. Staff had to be more diligent checking activity than with a paper based system. The nature of engineering communications requires concise and specific expression and

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working with the blog helped this. Reflection activities are found to be difficult in this curriculum area and student logs tended to be based on reporting activity and CV preparation. The team reported that they would normally look at a paper based system 4 or 5 times a semester whereas all Elgg entries were checked each week. For project work it helped students to evidence a logical approach to their work. The team leader was very enthusiastic and thought that the use of Elgg had definitely improved achievement as he expected 100% pass rate for this semester as a far closer watch had been kept on weaker students and if any students were border line the external examiner could see the whole structure of the student thinking for the project.

What Students Did

With many Foundation Degrees having modules dedicated in some way to reflective learning it's important to get this right or modules may become 'dead' modules. Many students were new to the concept of reflection, had inhibitions and lacked the confidence to admit problems or mistakes. The students from the School of Business and Computing used the application for the longest period of time. Arguments and complaints about having to use this medium simply died away and Elgg is now accepted as the method for communication for certain elements of the course. Over the period of the projects their blogs became longer and more sophisticated, they moved from simple recording to writing about what they did, why they did it and what they'd learnt. They responded to prompts, reported on progress and difficulties. They built up a valuable record for CV building. This pattern of response is being followed by the engineering students. Engineering students also built up quite substantial portfolios.

Media & Theatre students incorporated reporting on their own progress and problems with comments about films and media events in the news at the time. They also used the blog for criticism about the course and about group activity. At the time we are reporting they had not begun to consider their own responsibilities. This should not be seen too negatively. The reflective process can't be developed overnight. Their posts afforded opportunities to understand the group dynamics and gave a place to sound off about the course and their frustrations.

Across all courses complaints about course issues were challenged, modified or supported by other students. Only on one occasion was a substantial issue challenged by academic staff using Elgg.

Although the greatest concerns about privacy were expressed by the Social Science students they were the most reflective. Very little of their time was spent on simple recording or CV building.

Art and Design students sought opinions through their blogs. There was very little simple recording of activity but quite precise detailed technical methodology about the images they had created.

Feedback

Ten staff gave formal feed back in the form of written reports by the course leader, which included the student view and additional tutor interviews. This has been incorporated into the report of the project team. Elgg was used by 433 students in some way over the course of the project. Mistakenly we didn't record all the earliest student feedback in 2007 which centred on the functionality of the site. Some 40 students fed back to us excluding those who communicated with the administrator about site functionality. Feedback was by blog or face to face discussion either individually or in groups. Formal student feedback proved difficult. A hard copy questionnaire was totally ignored. We didn't mention this questionnaire when we gave any inductions to students and feel we should have introduced the fact that we were going to ask for feed back at inductions.

Views were elicited from a random selection of students who were chosen from the site statistics. Four pod casts have been produced of student feedback which includes two individual students while seven students fed back as two groups. Pod casts of interviews are also available of tutors (3) and work placement mentors (1)

Continuous observation of the site had taken place throughout the project. Informal student comments and opinion via blogs has been incorporated in the report where it was felt appropriate.

"I don't like using Elgg. So contact me somewhere else" (*My Space address given*) –
Student Blog

Did the evaluation methodology work?

Tutor interviews, reports and Observations

Face to face discussions with course leaders / (Elgg) community leaders were the most valuable source of information about how lecturing staff wanted to work with the software while observation of the site gave good information about what was actually happening. There was confusion about the creation of a blog inside a Community and a Personal blog with community friends' access. The project team will make some further recommendations about the training programme and the creation of communities. We discovered that there was a great deal of activity happening outside formal communities. Written reports provided useful opinions and were clearly more considered than some blog posts. Blog posts at the commencement of tutor and student activity were a good indication of where frustrations with the application were happening and intervention was necessary.

Student interviews

Formal student interviews were generally positive. There was a mix of students who recorded evidence, those who were far more reflective and those who found Elgg totally unsuitable for social networking. Comments suggested that a far more thorough induction about reflection and course expectations was necessary.

Actually working with students in the redesign of the interface was invaluable. In future projects we would look to involve student groups as formal team members in a development or implementation role right from the start

Work placement mentor interviews

We experienced much the same problem getting interviews or feedback as we had in getting comments through Elgg. People are not unwilling to be helpful but it must be on their terms.

Individual web logs

These were a great source of information especially from students who were less guarded than staff. Their frustrations with the software came through and we were able to act on it. The quotations we have supplied give some of the flavour of how it was for those students who didn't give any formal feedback. Some of the comments may prompt further discussion at course level. It would be difficult given the number of posts we have now, nearly 4000, to tease out all the useful comments.

Web Logs suggest we need to have more clarity about:

- Course expectations about reflection which also came through in the face to face discussions
- Initial training for students
- The level and frequency of comments might a student expect from a tutor

System statistics:

System statistics have been useful to both modify and support impressions. In Elgg the blog feature is the most prominent one and it was easy to be aware of post activity. It would have been impossibly time consuming to check comments on posts - system statistics report an average 40% Use of the e-portfolio was less apparent as system statistics record we have over 2000 files

Employer Involvement

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Recruitment of employers followed a similar pattern to Course recruitment. Employers did attend training and we did receive a great deal of good will but this wasn't followed through into engaging through the use of blogs.

"I'm used to e-mail, it's established. I haven't time to learn something new". **Work Experience Mentor.**

Involvement of employers is likely to continue to be problematical. There are issues with employer engagement which are outside the scope of this project. However, where they are involved in the future, training needs to stress the communications elements rather than the technology process. Getting more initial engagement by the use of a wiki to individually develop a placement contract is one possible development for the future. Involvement using blogs will proceed on a case by case basis.

'I have used Elgg to communicate with students (and staff) on a number of occasions, this use ranged from answering their general IT queries, supplying information about the department in general and the work they were doing with us, as well as using the blog function to participate in feedback, discussing suggestions and assisting them with things related to their reflections'.

Work Experience Mentor

Employers will continue to be given access to Elgg to review Blogs and Learning Contracts with employers receiving some Elgg training and support within their mentor training. In the majority of cases the College is unable to insist on this process.

See Work Placement Mentor pod cast

Elgg Technical Challenges

Elgg Code & Modules

Download Module

When developing our download and placement modules we encountered one issue in particular, Elgg allowed non - logged in users to see users' icon photo/pic. This was fixed by adding a check to the file, *icon.php*, to verify that the client requesting the icon was logged in with valid credentials.

Under certain circumstances files with non-standard characters in the file name were not being included in the ZIP archive. This was resolved by rewriting the regular expression that parses the file names.

Elgg Implementation of tinyMCE - by default not all of the functionality of the WYSISWYG textarea is compatible with the Elgg environment/our server setup in particular the spell check. Other aspects of the editor were also found to be undesirable such as the ability to create custom CSS for your blog posts. To solve these issues we installed ASPPELL, a spell check package known to work with tinyMCE, and other scripts that were not included in the Elgg package. Once all of the functionality had been installed we could then configure the tinyMCE to block / allow certain functions.

Administration

The standard administration of users in Elgg is very basic and quickly becomes unusable when 250 students/staff accounts are created. This problem is then compounded by the username being their student ID and most students not wanting to use either their real name or their surname. This was

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partly addressed by running a script to look up students' real names against their student ID's and re-filling in their name into the database. This made identification of students easier but the process was still unworkable given the sheer number of accounts across countless pages. To make the task of administrating accounts we created a new search page that allows the admin users to actively search for a student using their name or student ID instead of trawling through page after page in search of the right person. From these search results we also built in the ability to administer 'Roles' within the Placement module with a single click.

Password persistency

To authenticate our users, staff and students, we use the Elgg LDAP authentication plug-in to lookup users against our NDS tree. The first time a user successfully logs onto Elgg it will cache their password in the database. Due to this caching and the way in which Elgg works, if the user then changes their password in NDS they will be able to use both the new password and the old password which was cached when the account was created. This means that if a student logs in for the first time and they haven't changed their default password from their date of birth, anybody who knows their date of birth and their user id can log in as them long after they have changed their password in NDS. It also allows students who have accounts which have been disabled or deleted to access Elgg despite failing the LDAP authentication process. To solve this problem we modified the LDAP account creation script to clear out any cached passwords after the new account has been created as well as clearing out any cached passwords for users who we can find in our NDS tree (not workplace mentors or other manual accounts).

Elgg has been upgraded from version 0.8.2 to the latest build of 0.9.2. The upgrade was done on another server and the data migration was tested before going live. This upgrade also provided many bug fixes as well as some additional features.

While the upgrade did address many bugs, there were still some serious bugs that were flagged up by users. The worst of all was a bug in the file permissions code that was not accepting any new group permissions. This resulted in some students not being able to restrict their dialog to their tutors only. This was traced back to some inaccurate code and MySQL statements and was corrected with the help of the Elgg community forums and the Elgg bug tracking site.

The main feature of the upgrade was the addition of a comment wall for each user and community, which gives users the ability to leave quick little messages for each other on their profile. Another addition was an improved user administration interface, which whilst being a welcome improvement still wasn't capable of easily administrating a site with the number of users we currently have. There is also a new activity module that shows new content on the site and can be sorted by various options such as blog posts, comments, files etc... These can then be restricted to friends and/or communities. This along with our customized front page has greatly aided managing, reading and finding of new site content.

In addition to the new features and code fixes the upgrade was necessary to better position the site for migration over to Elgg 1.0 when the Elgg community release the data migration tool.

Elgg Server Configuration/Platform

Initially we have been running Elgg on a Windows 2003 Server (College default) with Apache as the web server. Whilst this worked, it did require a lot of tweaks/hacks to enable the full functionality. Some of the features of Elgg worked but were not stable; the Widgets in particular were a major problem. A web widget is a portable chunk of code that can be installed and executed within any separate HTML-based web page by an end user without requiring additional compilation. In the case of Elgg these take the form of movable blocks on a user's profile page. The user can move, add, remove, edit these widgets as they see fit. Popular uses for the widgets are to:

- Display your latest blog posts
- Display an RSS feed such as the latest headlines from The Guardian or BBC websites
- Leave notes for others or themselves such as to-do lists

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- Place a video on their profile from sites such as You Tube or Google Video
- Show a list of their friends complete with pictures
- Display files uploaded to their Elgg web space

These have helped users to personalise their profile as well as adding functionality for organising and accessing data.

After experimenting with Elgg under Linux and Apache, we found that Elgg ran much better than the Windows/Apache. All of the functionality that we had struggled with previously worked fine and did not require as many of the tweaks which were previously required under windows. As a result of this Elgg now runs under Linux (CentOS5) with Apache (2.2.3) as the web server. To achieve these setup options we needed technical staff with prior knowledge of both Windows and Linux Server setup and knowledge of how to configure them as web servers. However, there is a wealth of guides, tutorials and support forums available to help guide people in the setup process. All that is required is a good strong grounding in IT systems!

In terms of the team we used to deploy Elgg, the major bulk of the server setup and configuration was done by only two people.

Both server installs and configurations took one to two days to get running, this was helped by prior experience in such set-ups. The installation and configuration of the Elgg software took longer to get working correctly; time required will depend very much on the technical skills and prior experience of the team employed. The testing/evaluation are ongoing processes. We try to respond to both tutor and student suggestions providing they do not make a radical change which might affect others.

The LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL and PHP) environment remains a solid base from which to run Elgg. As the site has grown and more and more files, blog posts and forums have been added, the need for a more comprehensive backup strategy has emerged. Fortunately the Linux environment has made it easier to write and run our own backup scripts using some of the built in tools included. The backup scripts we have created use rsync, ssh and mysql command line tools. The database is backed up every evening and then using rsync and ssh only the new files are transferred to another server. Once every two weeks the whole site is mirrored so that we always have a backup of the PHP files, user files and mysql data.

Outputs and Results

Elgg Interface & Style

'A 17% of students were happy with the Elgg layout and navigation whereas a staggering 83% of students disliked the layout'. Student Research

Students particularly complained about the Elgg interface which in comparison to a many web 2 offerings is rather fussy. The interface was a particular issue with Art and Design, Media and Performing Arts students and some comments suggested they couldn't get past these issues to consider other functionality!

One student carried out his work placement project with the e-Learning development team. He carried out a survey of the students using Elgg for their comments and recommendations for the Elgg interface. A number of changes were made on the basis of his work especially the colour scheme used and the layout of the front page. A major issue identified was the top navigation bar being almost the same colour as Internet Explorer (College default) and as a result some students dismissed the toolbar as being part of internet explorer.

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To tackle these issues we have changed the colour scheme and some of the inline style elements to make it easier to read blog posts. We have also moved the top toolbar to below the banner to improve its visibility.

The front page was found to be almost useless with students spending little if any, time on it. A popular suggestion was to display News items aimed at students on work placements.

The front page has been modified to utilise the suggestions of students. There is now a 'News' block that shows topics posted to a News community by staff. Each of these topics can be commented on or discussed in the News community forum.

Display a user's friend's latest blog posts.

We have added a 'Your friends' recent blog posts' block that shows a user's friends latest 3 blog post over the last 2 weeks.

The modifications of the front page have improved the navigation of the site and made it more manageable as the site has grown. Lecturers asked for e-mail notification of activity and this also has now been implemented.

Growth brought a problem of discoverability. In the main most students know from their friends or tutors where to go or what to search for in order to get to course communities or friends blogs. Students had a problem trying to discover people with similar interests on other courses.

Elgg does come with a good Tag Cloud that allows students to search for blogs, files, forum postings or communities based on the tags associated with them. However this feature is not as prominent in the standard interface. We have added a tag cloud to the front page this makes a considerable difference to appearance and makes it easier for students to find and use.

Students also asked for a facility to see who is online and looking at Elgg.

This feature was added to the front page using the built in Elgg modules and the template system.

Since updating the colour scheme and layout of the Elgg site we have been continuing to tweak the appearance to aid clarity and readability.

The CSS for the sidebar has been rewritten to make the titles for each section stand out and clearly mark out where a section begins and ends.

Some users had expressed a wish for there to be a differentiation between staff and students in the list of friends for people and communities, as students or tutors with the same name were being confused for one another!

We have written a new function that is called up as the names are being rendered down the page. It looks up username and examines its structure to determine whether or not they are staff or student. Once this has been determined the staff member's names are rendered with a note indicating they are, in fact, 'staff'.

A cross college version of Elgg integrated into Moodle

Service areas in the College have always been particularly good users of Moodle. As we disseminated the progress of the project through Committees which contained both service staff and academics a number of service and support areas asked for access. The interface changes prompted by students were underway at the time we therefore created a separate Elgg and incorporated it into Moodle instead of the Moodle blog module. This has allowed us to experiment

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with a slightly different interface. Using a blogging mechanism for communication to specific groups in the College is really worth while. During 2008 the pressure grew in the College for social networking sites particularly Face Book to be 'banned'. This led to a widespread on line discussion on how we should react to external sites and what we require as appropriate behaviour for what is a semi professional site at least for students within College. When JISC Legal brought out advice there was a forum into which we could add their advice and a place where discussion could take place without having the limitations of a committee, although the final Policy will still have to go through the normal committee routes. Community use varies IT Services used a Community to share large documents during the recent merger with Harrogate College and kept up to date with each using the other's forums.

See Appendix 3 for screen shots of the two different interfaces.

Appropriate Use Guidelines

We actually had very little inappropriate use, rather more inappropriate language; however one incident on Elgg and a number of incidents on externally hosted sites prompted the College to draw up appropriate use guidelines. JISC Legal issued advice soon after on the legal implications of Web 2. Their advice and the student guidelines are being incorporated into College Policy.

During the first few months of the project we also develop a user guideline manual for Elgg this rapidly looked dated and the educationists in the second pilot did not find it useful.

Staff Development - technological awareness

Except in the case of courses from the School of Business and Computing it is true to say that recruitment to the project at both stages was difficult. There was a general mistrust of the technology and a mistrust of possibly letting go of some face to face interaction and for some face to face equals quality and any distance meant second best. The project has provided sufficient learner and tutor experience with exemplar posts and portfolio use to enable case studies to be developed to demonstrate both the educational benefits; how to use the facilities effectively and be able to proceed towards mainstreaming the project. Although we have a well established 'Moodle' we have some hesitation in saying it's a learning environment as its main use is as a passive repository. With some exceptions in computing courses, pilot course teams were not mature users of Moodle. Using Elgg has been quite motivational and its relationship with learning. Demonstrating where technology may enhance that learning is more apparent than the more static VLE.

'Today I am trying out Elgg for the first time. It seems quite easy to use; I've already added a few friends, started my profile and am currently trying out the blog facility. The students have described Elgg as an 'educational my space' which is a good description.' -
Tutor

Audio Case Studies and a short Audio Video montage of the studies available

Work Placement Module

Hull College already had a standard work-placement contract, and it was relatively simple for the e-learning development team to transfer it to electronic form, incorporating the new suggestions. The form was put into a special tabbed section in Elgg called 'Your Placement' This section allows users marked as 'tutors' to create new projects and add an 'employer' and a 'student' to the project. Both

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mentor and student details are added into the first form – these automatically go into Elgg's individual user 'profile', where they are marked as 'private' access as default.

A second form allows the creation of as many learning outcomes as is needed for a specific project. This makes the online brief useable by many units with different numbers of outcomes. The outcome is then entered, along with a specified deliverable to match that outcome. This makes requirements and deliverables of the work-based project clear to all parties. A start and end date can also be entered.

Finally, each outcome has a set of three check boxes. These can be 'ticked' by tutor, mentor and learner respectively when each party feels the deliverable has been achieved – the outcome can be deemed completed when all three boxes have been 'ticked'. This gives an instant view of project progress to all parties.

We have made the placement module for Elgg freely available from the project site,

<http://HELPP.hull-college.ac.uk>.

The module will work with any version of Elgg from 0.8.x to 0.9.x.

Down Load Facility

The down load facility allows all content Blogs files comments e-portfolio content placement contract to be down loaded as a single zip file with an index page to run locally.

See also Elgg Technical Challenges

Outcomes and Impact

1. We succeeded in establishing a secure social networking system. We have two versions running which are stable and reasonably flexible to our needs.

Impact

On the project site we have 18 communities plus the project team community. We have approximately 430 students and 130 staff users. Some lecturers who teach on both HE and FE have begun using Elgg with their FE students, this activity will continue beyond Helpp.

We see this type of technology having potentially greater impact on the teaching and learning than the VLE has had to date. It moves some of the curriculum away from any concentration on instructional delivery as it's harder to do using Elgg, while collaborative learning and its links with reflection are very much easier. Use will continue after the end of the project and will expand.

2. We aimed to make more effective use of social networking to encourage both reflective writing and sustained writing.

Impact

We have good examples of the development of these characteristics. Active participants seem to be encouraging others to write more. (Engineering) Dyslexic students have been among the best contributors. (Social Science) There was a period of complaining where students articulated various grievances however it rarely became aggressive and frequently prompted modifying discussion. This activity itself was reflective and sustained.

3. For students whose learning style or area of study is less text base we aimed 'to explore the benefits of the e-portfolio facility where images, sound and video can be used to record

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experience and reflections.' The blog modules have had far greater success than the e-portfolio module. Disappointingly modest use was made of the portfolio by A&D and Media courses who we had anticipated would make great use of it. Students shared images and discussed the images. Sufficient use was made to test the technology and Engineering found that the ability to upload and share technical drawings extremely useful. In both Media and Photography students preferred their already established 'flickr' areas. For the less AV biased we need to address how to embed AV in much the same way we addressed the Elgg implementation. To our surprise Engineering really liked the e-Portfolio as it aided the methodological and structured approach to their work. They had 'missed' the 'presentation' module as navigation on Elgg is not intuitive, but intend to use it now they have found it!

Impact

We have exemplars of working portfolios to use in staff development and student induction. We understand better what requirements are of an e-portfolio for a number of different curriculum areas. Sufficient demands are being put on our technologists to develop what the different teams require.

4. The project successfully established a successful methodology for introducing social networking into teaching practice at tertiary level. Elgg is not particularly intuitive and required some investment in time to get the navigational flow easy enough to use.

Impact

We have moved from reliance on 'enthusiasts' or early adopters to having a number of communities of users who find the technology sufficiently usable for them to adopt and incorporate it in to their course. Once we had established the problem areas in navigation it became possible for a wider range of users to understand its potential and have a go.

5. While we raised the awareness of social networking in the educational context we had very modest success in the work placement context. We are not entirely discouraged and continue to offer training to work placement mentors, who continue to attend that training. The shift in emphasis within FE towards work based learning will raise the need for tools to facilitate tripartite collaborative working. As the need becomes more apparent to educationalist through the undeniable justification in terms of pedagogical advantage and cost we expect take up to improve, skill to improve and that additional confidence in this form of delivery will start to be more acceptable to employers. We are, therefore, committed to seeking ways in which to use the technology to enhance our relationships with employers.

Impact

We have the tools available for collaborative work with employers should they wish to take part. There were problems for students getting timely support and advice previously Students having become use to using asynchronous communication know they have a friendly supportive environment where tutors can give them support during work placement. The support is not time constrained to quite the same extent however the possible 24/7 nature of student support has raised discussion about changes to working practice.

Evaluation Matrix

Purpose/ Context	e-portfolio Process	Information capture	Information retrieval	Planning	Reflection	Feedback	Collaboratio n	Presentation	Technical requirement s
Personal Development Planning / Continuing Professional Development				Pod cast Interviews with Tutors + engineering student (s)	Pod cast interview with students			✓ video	
Transition/ Application									
Work Based Learning/ Employment						Pod cast interview with two work based mentors			
Assessment									
Life-long learning									
Technical progress									Final Report

Conclusions & Recommendations

Stakeholders Issues

Engaging Academic Staff

- Initially we relied too much on good will.

Preliminary Demonstrations and Pilot user recruitment should, from the start, have involved more direct demonstration to a wider audience which should have included Heads of School. Without buy in from senior managers, lecturers can be diverted to other priorities. An agreement about ground rules, contract time, feed back to students, project reports needs to be established.

Preliminary demonstrations should not be about technology but about raising awareness of the project and its possibilities.

- Early in the project we relied on the enthusiasts.

This approach is essential. The enthusiast can really kick start a project and provide valuable experience to other colleagues. However, it is important to widen the base of expertise and motivate others as soon as possible. Take care however, that those who are especially less confident with technology don't get the impression that very high level IT skills are required when as in this case, they were not.

- Initial training should go beyond simply showing how to use the technology.

Getting the staff development framework right early on was found to be important to maintain momentum and foster enthusiasm. In our case when we used Elgg in simulated real life situations with tutors rather than a shorter instruction on how to use the software, we had more successful buy in. We concluded that we should then have excluded from the pilot those who were unable to contribute to the simulation development. This would have prevented disappointing drop out at a later stage. We have some concerns that courses which dropped out may be more resistant second time round or reinforce the negative perceptions of the sceptical.

- In presentations to staff we emphasised the semi professional nature of the site and, although we seemed to convert some of early sceptics, we suspect others did not to engage with Elgg because the perception remained that its use was for somewhat lightweight chatter.

We regret having to use the term social networking but it is rather easier than computer mediated communication and look forward to the development of better terminology. We needed to have the discussion with students about the difference between social networking and our semi professional environment while being really clear about our individual course requirements.

- While only modest word processing ability is required on behalf of the tutor and the student, navigational competence is critical. Where tutors and students had only modest ICT skills it took longer to learn the navigation skills and getting lost was a familiar complaint.

We only surveyed the IT skills of students to put in effective support for any cohort but we needed to look at both staff & student skills.

- For most students the problems were not with the technology but with reflection itself!

'Having had Myspace and Facebook for many years you would assume that all this technical mumbo-jumbo would be second nature to me, yet I have never written a blog before, I haven't even considered writing one'. **Student Blog**

- We learnt some interesting lessons about user acceptance by tutors and students. Tutor attitude is key to students' acceptance.
- As project team we started off considering the communication advantages of the blog followed by its advantage for reflection we over stressed the blog in communicating with academic staff. This may have underlined the assumed relationship with social networking sites.
- The most successful initial implementation took place in engineering where the early stress was placed on the portfolio. When work is in the portfolio there is something beyond how the day has been on which to reflect and something with which the tutor can really engage.

We recommend initial training exercises of uploading something to the portfolio followed by commenting in the blog. Students need practice about how to comment on others work but this may not be necessary for all courses.

- Feedback from the lecturer to the student is vital.

We also need recommendations for minimum standards about what students can expect in terms of support, advice and lecturer comment.

Students

- Many students were expecting Elgg to provide a similar forum to other social networking sites like Facebook. They were disappointed!

These expectations needed managing. Social sciences staff and students particularly discussed the aim of educational social networking, not replacing other social networking sites, but providing something new and different to support opportunities in building a portfolio of learning evidence and a community of learners from a diverse range of backgrounds.

- You cannot make assumptions about student knowledge of web 2.0.

What is blog? Who is blog? Who thinks of a name like blog? **Student Blog**

- Some students' initial expectations were disappointed as some wanted to build a more personal space, as they could with other web-services. We put no constraint on personalisation but it was not very clear within Elgg as to how to do this.

Generic college wide training workshops for students to drop and get training on widely used ICT tools are recommended.

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- Many students posted careful thoughtful work both text and images inviting comment and either got nothing back or the language and behaviour of social networking started to intrude after a few weeks and this wasn't challenged. Some staff felt obliged to give longish replies to content that would not ultimately be assessed.

Guidelines are needed about student behaviour and course expectations.

Employers, work based mentors

- A more selective approach to third parties was required. We feel we have developed greater expertise in approaching the communication issues with work placement and have an efficient tool and a model for introducing training but were over optimistic about the employer engagement after initial introduction. We will continue build on this original aim but it will take longer than the confines of the project.

General

- Technology and how it works is seductive it is really important not to be seduce and to keep a clear vision that what we are about is, 'learning', but it is the students who need to do that learning. The College is striving to move Moodle from a mainly passive instructional area. The use of an asynchronous communication platform demonstrated the possibility of a different teaching methodology where the student really was in more control of their own learning. In terms of technology skills using blogs and e-portfolios is probably less demanding than course creation in Moodle.
- One of our aims was to encourage both reflective writing and sustained writing but the written word doesn't have to tyrannise a whole course. To utilise the full potential of the technology use both audio blogs video blogs. To achieve this and maintain technological development additional training opportunities may need to be available for staff and students. We envisage a buffet of mini courses open to all to support the use technology in learning. Staff and students differ in the skills they acquire, new applications come along which can radically increase the learning possibilities.
- Consideration will need to be given about the technical support of students in their own home. This will need some redefinition of IT Service contract time, details of student home PCs, permissions for IT Service staff, training for IT staff.

Implications for the Future

The College will continue to use Elgg, however, many of the issues which have been exposed relate not just to Elgg, but generally, to any similar web 2.0 products and underlines issues which were already emerging from other forms of e-learning.

There is still a view, strongly held by many, that e-learning is about 'distance' learning or that it is second best to face to face. The challenge is to demonstrate that technology can support and enhance learning and teaching in the classroom, in the workplace or in the home, wherever that may be.

Staff development needs constant review to ensure that the technological innovation can go hand in hand with the appropriate pedagogy. Both strong pedagogical skills and effective ICT skills will enable academic staff to make creative modifications to their teaching approaches as technologies develop. There is a greater imperative for team working and for staff development focusing on whole teams.

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The special dynamics of asynchronous communications and 24/7 learning brings to the fore issues around time and pressure on time leading to increased stress; the nature of IT support in an on line and distance environment.

Web 2.0 products do have significant potential for innovative and exciting learning; the potential has not yet been tapped. The opportunity for students to revise and update their portfolio through mobile technology has only been tested in this College at the 'entry' level and we would wish to explore the use of mobile devices to support portfolio development in work-based learning at HE along with the use of wiki as further routes to engage work based mentoring.

References

Salmon, G. *E-tivities*, RoutledgeFalmer

Baume, C., Martin, P. & Yorke, M. (2002) *Managing Educational Development Projects*, Kogan Page, London

The modules developed for Elgg within the framework of this project were built to the standards set out within the Elgg developers' documentation wiki available at <http://Elgg.org/mod/mediawiki/wiki/index.php/Development>, so as to be compatible with any Elgg installation, up to the latest release of Elgg.

Appendixes

Helpp web site: <http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk>

Appendix 1 Record of initial students testing Pilot 1 & Pilot 2

<http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/index.php?page=appendix-1>

Appendix 2 Examples of both paper based and Elgg based contract

<http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/index.php?page=appendix-2>

Appendix 3 Screen shots of the two different interfaces

<http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/index.php?page=appendix-3>

Appendix 4 Podcast interviews with end users

<http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/index.php?page=appendix-4>

Appendix 5 Video montage of end user feedback

<http://helpp.hull-college.ac.uk/index.php?page=appendix-5>