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Project Director	Dr Neil Witt		
Project Manager & contact details	Dr Neil Witt Technical Director, HELP CETL University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth, PL4 8AA 01752 587908 nwright@plymouth.ac.uk		
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JISC

JISC Final Report

UsPaCe project

Dr Anne McDermott and Dr Neil Witt

HELP CETL
University of Plymouth
Plymouth
PL4 8AA
nwitt@plymouth.ac.uk

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The UsPaCe central team at the University of Plymouth's HELP CETL worked in partnership with Cornwall College, the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies and City College Plymouth.

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Executive Summary

The UsPaCe project was a collaboration between the University of Plymouth's HELP CETL and three further education colleges (FECs), Cornwall College, City College Plymouth and the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies, which are partner institutions of the University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty. The aim of UsPaCe was to support foundation degree students, both full-time and part-time, whilst undertaking work based learning.

The UsPaCe tool integrated the Web2.0 technologies of social bookmarking, social networking and personalised web browsing pages incorporating gadgets and RSS feeds to create a tool for communication, personal development planning (PDP), group work and resource sharing.

It was found that levels of information technology (IT) skills and confidence amongst FEC students were different to that expected. Existence of the Google Generation¹ and the concepts of digital natives and Generation Y did not seem to apply readily to this group in terms of either use or understanding of Internet technologies in general and Web2.0 in particular. However involving learners in the design process for UsPaCe from an early stage was found to be an effective way of developing users understanding and use of the proposed tools.

Embedding UsPaCe within modules and including it induction has lead to the most positive deployments. These successes now present the challenge of continuing support for UsPaCe until the end of the next academic year when it is likely that policy changes at the University of Plymouth will entail transferring content to a new PDP system.

Background

UsPaCe is a regional, cross-institutional, collaborative project that investigated the application of suitable Web 2.0 technologies to support:

- Foundation Degree (FdSc, FdA and HNC) learners engaged in Work Based Learning (WBL);
- learners progressing from Foundation Degree to the final year of an Honours degree;
- WBL mentors.

UsPaCe aimed to support the needs of work based learners and mentors through the creation and sharing of resources and by providing online student support for learners in the work-place accessible via desktop or mobile devices. Additionally UsPaCe was to enable tutors, mentors, learners, employers and the South West Lifelong Learning Network (SWLLN) to interact, communicate and share ideas experiences and knowledge.

To contribute to the JISC eLearning Programme UsPaCe has:

- Facilitated the uptake of eLearning across several institutions, who are part of UPC, in support widening participation, work place learning, flexible delivery and personalised learner experiences;
- Created and evaluated eLearning methodologies aimed at improving the quality of learning for students involved in lifelong learning;
- Created a resource suitable for HE in FE, is transferable to HE and is able to follow the learner progressing to further learning or employment;
- Created a tool which provides learners a personalised learning experience
- Built capacity for involvement with JISC and with technology enhanced learning (TEL) but involving academics and support staff across a regional partnership of HE and HE in FE institutions;
- Produced guidance materials², evidence and in-depth lessons learned on the cross institutional use of technology to support lifelong learners,
- Explored the use of virtual Communities of Practice in supporting learners and tutors

¹ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/resourcediscovery/googlegen.aspx>

² www.uspace.org.uk/help

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UsPaCe also links to a number of the JISC priorities: assessment; e-PDP/e-Portfolio (as the learner's outputs can form part of a learner record); Collaboration and Discussion as the project will form a user community to share and discuss issues. The DfES' and HEFCE's emphasis on widening participation is also served as Foundation degree learners tend to have travelled non-traditional routes to HE.

Such research as exists with regard to HE students and their use of TEL suggests that learners would be familiar with many of the technologies used in UsPaCe. Putting them together to create tools in support the work-based learning element of a foundation degree would be an innovative application of recognisable tools rather than the introduction of revolutionary applications and concepts. In addition, UsPaCe would actively promote links between FECs and the University and support learning across different organisations.

UsPaCe would utilise an effective approach to eLearning practice which is also an example of best practice in terms of pedagogy, technology and learning. Promoting both good and innovative practice in the area of feedback to learners and helping to embed the promotion of and recording key skill development across each learner's lifelong learning would also be a valuable part of the project.

Aims and Objectives

The objectives of UsPaCe were to:

- Develop the UsPaCe activity space using
 - **iGoogle**
 - **Del.icio.us**: web site which enables collecting, notating and sharing of useful web pages;
 - **ELGG**: open source social networking platform with eportfolio capabilities. ELGG will provide e-portfolio space and blogging facilities to allow employers and tutors to comment , enhance and feedback on e-portfolios;
 - **Mediawiki**: software which allows web pages to be created and edited collaboratively and can be interfaced with ELGG to provide community workspace.

To enable:

- Social Tagging via Del.icio.us
- Group work and community formation via ELGG;
- Social networking via ELGG;
- Resource sharing via Mediawiki and Del.icio.us; replace in ELGG by folio
- Resource creation via Mediawiki and Del.icio.us;
- ePortfolio creation via ELGG.
- Develop the user access space using iGoogle to allow users to create a personalised learning experience which would also be accessible using mobile technologies;
- Develop tutor support materials on the use of UsPaCe;
- Host outputs from the activity space within the HELP CETL repository;
- Tailor and repackage existing content e.g. from SURF WBL and SPAT as UsPaCe support materials;
- Develop suitable iGoogle Gadgets based on user needs;
- Include relevant resources from the HELP CETL and other CETLs;
- Ensure suitable outputs are placed on JORUM.

All aims and objectives have been met as planned with the exception of the following:

- For reasons discussed in the Implementation section below, Folio was used in place of MediaWiki group working in the UsPaCe Community.
- Outputs will be put into JORUM Open when it becomes available in Summer 2009.

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Methodology

From its very first inception, the team were determined that technology should not drive the UsPaCe project. Pedagogical principles and user requirements have always been the most important developmental drivers. In this way we have sought to avoid creating a technologically sophisticated software tool, which whilst challenging and interesting to create, provides little or no evidence to show who will use them or how they will contribute to learning.

It was planned that principal stakeholders, learners and teachers, would be consulted consistently to find out how they felt the tool should be developed. Although this commitment might seem onerous it actually smooths and enhances development and ensures that it stays on track and relevant. Using a *rapid prototyping* approach UsPaCe was presented to a group of students, tutors and support staff who gave feedback which was used to quickly redevelop the toolkit before presenting it to the next group.

To give the project team an indication of the level of support learners' might need they were also asked about their use and awareness of Web2.0 technologies and tools.

It could be extended to add more services and/or to address the needs of other groups but it currently uses: A series of focus groups with students, tutors and support staff were held at the outset. On each occasion UsPaCe was demonstrated and feedback about

Having identified what was believed to be core functionality for supporting FD students, a pilot with 6 groups of learners was undertaken. Key to this was using an authentic setting, with real students on real foundation degree courses receiving the amount of support and encouragement that would be encountered when rolling out any other institutional initiative. This approach was important to give the pedagogical evaluation of the tool validity.

It was an intrinsic principle of UsPaCe that it should adhere to standards defined as facilitating interoperability, and accessibility. All software produced by the project should also be open source.

Implementation

An initial period was spent on detailed project planning consisting of:

- breaking down work packages in to work package sub-elements (usually associated with an output);
- formulating method, output and quality test for work package sub-elements;
- developing a critical path analysis by determining the relationship between all sub-work package elements;
- linking all work packages together.

Previous experience has shown that though time consuming, this process offers the opportunity to:

- identify any gaps or inconsistencies;
- develop a shared understanding of tasks between project partners;
- identify a detailed time scale for the completion of each work package sub-element;
- get early warning of any part of the project which is encountering problems.

The team recommends this short period of intensive work as a means of avoiding stress in the long term.

The core project team included representatives familiar with Web2.0, technical and pedagogical issues. At each project partner institution there was a key contact to monitor, champion and liaise and feedback to the core team. The first task was to put together version 0.1 of the UsPaCe tool which was made up of the elements specified in the project management documentation. For a while the possibility of using Mahara open source e-portfolio system in place of ELGG was considered but the more established track record and support community of ELGG made this the better choice for UsPaCe.

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UsPaCe 0.1 was presented to 6 focus groups of staff and students at project partner institutions. Having demonstrated and explained the function and purpose of UsPaCe, the project team was particularly interested in finding out:

- understand how confident users were about using IT in general and Web2.0 in particular;
- how UsPaCe type functionality might support the learning outcomes of each pilot module;
- what additional functionality might be helpful;
- what functionality did not seem useful.

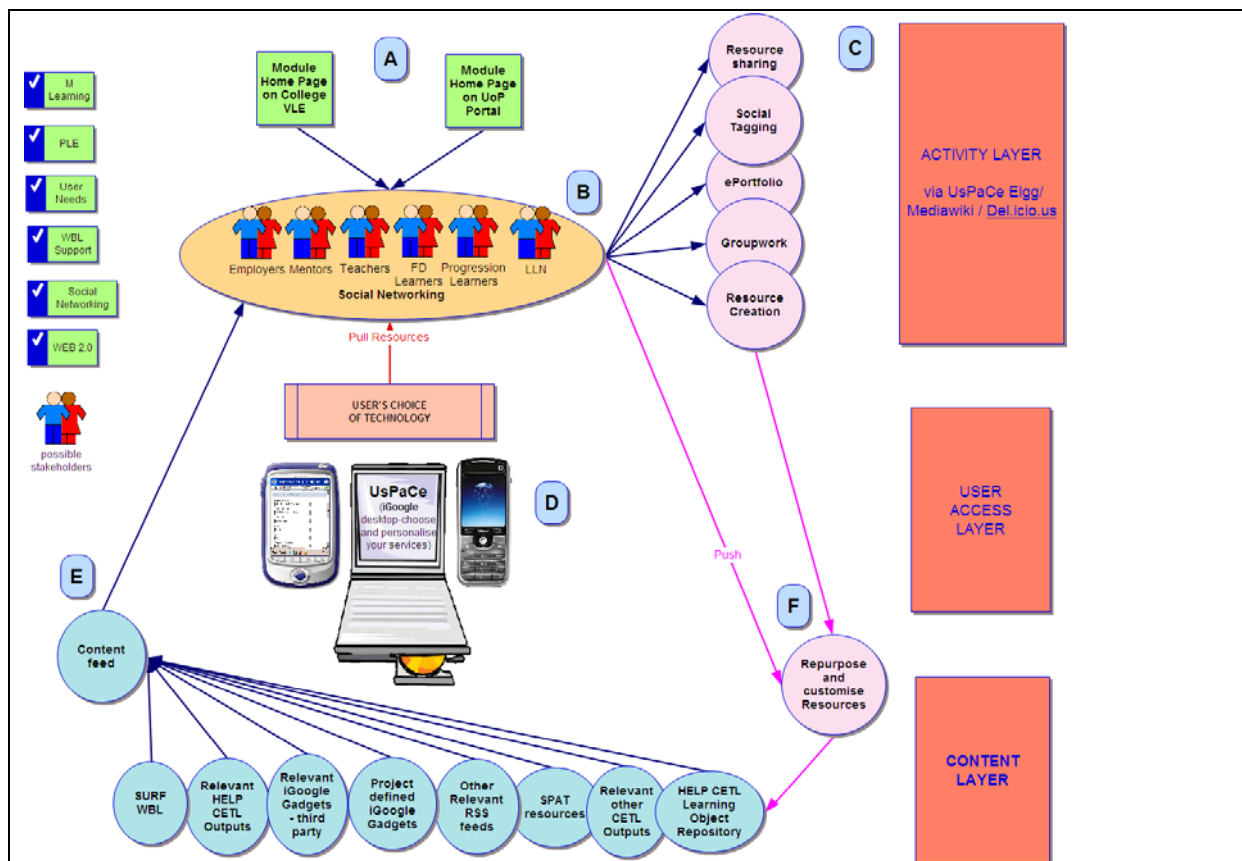
Frequent team meetings were used as a forum for exchanging ideas and discussing issues which were causing concern. At the same time each focus group report was analysed to identify developments which should be incorporated in to the next version.

During this period existing user support materials were collected together, gaps identified and further materials developed.

At the end of the 6 iterations UsPaCe 1.0 emerged, as shown in Figure 1, with several important changes to the original plan. MediaWiki was replaced by Folio to provide portfolio and WIKI capabilities. Folio was chosen over MediaWiki as it integrated well with ELGG and bore less resemblance to Wikipedia. It was not marketed to users as a WIKI but as a shared workspace branded as the UsPaCe Community. Support for Google Docs was included as it offered an alternative means of collaborative working.

The software used was

- ELGG
- Folio plug in for ELGG
- Del.icio.us
- RSS feeds
- iGoogle tab – termed 'My Noticeboard'
- IGoogle gadgets



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Figure 1. Structure of UsPaCe 1.0.

It was felt to be important that the six pilots represented an authentic trial of UsPaCe. Therefore the amount of support provided should be in line with that offered with the roll out of any new piece of technology. Staff and students on all pilots had seen previous versions of UsPaCe and they were each given an induction consisting of an overview of functionality, guided through the various accounts they would need to set up and downloading their course iGoogle tab. To help keep this manageable an induction checklist and a card to record usernames and password prompts was created. One college introduced UsPaCe as part of its standard induction package, the other did not.

For the use of tutors, SURF WBL and SPAT materials for learner and mentor support. support materials were made available through a Moodle installation.

Outputs and Results

There were several common themes found during the initial focus groups; foundation degree students were not confident or skilled in the use IT and the idea of using a WIKI for group work was strongly resisted as both tutors and learners associated it with Wikipedia (which was strongly discouraged).

Based on feedback at the focus groups seven Google gadgets³ were written for the iGoogle My Noticeboard tab:

- University of Plymouth web sites e.g. library, email
- log in for UsPaCe community
- link to relevant college VLE
- users' Google Docs pages
- Del.icio.us bookmarks
- Intute web resources
- Question or comment for the UsPaCe team.

Some of these were part of the original specification but others were added as a result of asking students and tutors what they would find helpful. An example of this was the addition of the Intute gadget as a result of requests for high quality learning resources.

The focus groups identified the areas with which each module needed particular help and it quite quickly became evident that different modules would be focussing on using UsPaCe for one of its possible purposes

- PDP, ePortfolio and reflection
- Group working
- Social bookmarking for sharing of resources
- IGoogle tab and calendar.

There was a high degree of support for the use of UsPaCe by email, meetings and the help community. Technical support was available at both colleges and an iGoogle gadget was created to make support easily obtainable. UsPaCe also had help pages consisting of text based guides and links to video explaining concepts such as social networking⁴. To create an evaluation that would be high in authenticity and validity it was decided that after an initial induction period the level of use of UsPaCe would be left develop naturally

A major issue became obvious at inductions in that users did not know their college or university usernames and passwords and that having to have more for UsPaCe, Google and Del.icio.us would be compounding the issue. The card to record usernames and password prompts only partially solved the problem.

Due to staff leaving at a crucial time it was decided to end one of the pilots but this was more than made up for by other foundation courses using UsPaCe. By the end of the project the original 120

³ All available at <http://www.uspace.org.uk/help/materials/docs/gadget%20replacements.doc>

⁴ All available at <http://www.uspace.org.uk/help/>

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users on 6 foundation degree courses had grown to 248 users on 15 courses. With the exception of the online questionnaire, evaluation was restricted to the remaining original 5 pilots.

To obtain triangulation of data, pedagogic and usability evaluation of UsPaCe was undertaken via focus groups, online questionnaire and case studies. The team much of the feedback was the same across groups. Findings may be divided up into technical issues, pedagogical issues and some ICT wider issues. The first group include feedback on design and functionality e.g. ease of navigation, the tagging system in the Community (ELGG) and the addition of a spell checker. These issues are relatively straightforward to deal with though there is quite a lot of contradiction between student on ICT based courses versus non-ICT. Curiously the former were more negative with 85% not recommending UsPaCe to their friends as opposed to 100% of non-ICT users who would recommend it.

Aspects which were valued were the gadgets, particularly the link to Intute, being able to record events as occurred for later reflection.

Positive comments about UsPaCe included that it had

“revolutionised the way I work”

This had other benefits as knowledge and information gained in this way was fed back to colleagues and managers.

Most such comments came from non-IT students for whom using TEL was a new experience. These users, though initially lacking confidence, enjoyed being able to do something that their children did on a daily basis

“now I can BLOG”.

This leads on to the second group of issues, the pedagogical. It is difficult to sometimes distinguish between feedback aimed at UsPaCe the tool and the purpose to which it was put. It was valued for being a place to For example, the suggestion to add some games

To some extent UsPaCe was seen as a system competing with other tools (e.g. Moodle, university portal, etc.) because of perceived overlap in functionality. Although this is a situation that institutions and learners will meet increasingly, through feedback at the focus groups the team concluded that users sometimes prefer to stick with an inadequate but familiar system rather than investing time and effort in something unfamiliar but ultimately more appropriate.

The finding from both the initial and final focus groups and the questionnaire was that, contrary to expectations, there was little evidence to support the notions of Generation Y, the Google Generation or the ‘digital native’.

A number of issues that arose were outside of the control of the project:

- multiple logins requiring a range of usernames and passwords
- coinciding with an academic year.

More detailed analysis of the effect of UsPaCe on learning in the longer term has been hard to find as it has yet to run over a complete academic year. There has been some assessment of work e.g. presentations created through Google Docs but the deeper learning of reflection and portfolio building will not be assessed until several months after the evaluation of the project. It would seem however, that UsPaCe is most successful when rolled out at induction to first years, particularly where they will be undertaking groupwork.

A significant challenge for Foundation degrees that had been identified by the University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC) partnership was finding sufficient workplace mentors. It was intended to investigate the application of UsPaCe as a means of alleviating this problem, perhaps enabling existing, committed mentors to support more learners. As planned, support materials developed by the SURF WBL and SPAT projects were made available and a UsPaCe Community was set up. However, the

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focus groups revealed a profound lack of mentors and a scarcity of formalised agreements. One group (without mentors) stated that that it was expected that they would become mentors for future cohorts. The lack of mentors on UsPaCe is also down to timing as they will be invited in to review portfolios when these are assessed.

An analysis of the areas in which the project has been more and less successful, highlighting the implications and challenges of implementing Web2.0 to support cross-institutional delivery of lifelong learning using the UPC partner colleges will be presented at a national conference in April.

As previously mentioned, outputs from the project will be placed in JorumOpen when it becomes available in Summer 2009.

Outcomes and Impact

UsPaCe has promoted both good and innovative practice in the area of feedback to learners and helped to embed the promotion of and recording key skill development across work based learner's lifelong learning experience.

UsPaCe has contributed to the JISC's eLearning Programme by:

- Creating and evaluating eLearning methodologies which can improve the quality of learning for students involved in lifelong learning
- Exploring the use of virtual Communities of Practice in supporting learners and tutors using.
- Create a resource which is suitable for use HE in FE as well as in HE, and which can follow the learner progressing to HE or employment
- Providing the learner with an personalised learning experience
- Involving multiple academics as module leaders
- Facilitating the uptake of eLearning across several institutions, who are part of UPC. to support widening participation, work place learning, flexible delivery and personalised learner experiences;
- Producing evidence and in-depth lessons learned on the cross institutional use of technology to support lifelong learners,

The UsPaCe project has worked with tutors and learners in partner further education colleges in the UPC Faculty to

- Increase awareness of Web2.0 technologies;
- Increase awareness and access to WBL support materials and to encourage sharing of across the Partnership;
- Introduce the idea of reuse of materials.

In many ways the UPC partner colleges are already more engaged with TEL than the University of Plymouth itself as they have the advantage of having a VLE, mostly Moodle. It is evident that there is now an increased awareness of Web2.0 technologies at the colleges that were part of the UsPaCe project and this has changed practice in a number of ways. The use of Google calendars is now embedded in practice and the UsPaCe Community has become a virtual space for users to interact and work.

Although it has been able to overcome many of the difficulties in providing cross-institutional delivery by linking together disparate elements Web2.0 functionality, it has been unable to deliver a seamless experience because the need for multiple usernames and passwords.

A fundamental part of the methodology of this project was to consult the users as much as possible and this approach has shown us that there is desire for the kind of collaborative working spaces that UsPaCe offers and those who took part in the initial focus groups were enthusiastic about the prospect of a full working version. Learners have reported that they are changing the way access materials to support their work and study. To build on the work already undertaken, a short guide provisionally entitled *The Busy Tutors Guide to Web2.0 Tools for Learning* is underway. This will be pointing out the existence, benefits and drawbacks of the technologies UsPaCe has used and will be distributed throughout the UPC partnership's 21 institutions, to the HELP CETL's network of other

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regional partnerships and within the University of Plymouth. It will also be available from the HELP CETL and UsPaCe web sites.

The UsPaCe tools and approach have been presented at institutional, regional, national and international conferences and symposia through presentations, posters and newsletters. This has brought it to a wide audience where there has been a huge amount of interest.

Conclusions & Recommendations

A number of factors were identified as important to the successful deployment of UsPaCe were

- rolling it out at the start of an academic year;
- running induction events;
- introducing it to year 1 students;
- having a clearly defined aim for its use
- embedding its use in to a module assessment
- using it to support group activities.

Contraindications were the converse of success factors because asking students to learn a new system when they are already established in using other systems in not productive. Therefore introducing in part way through an academic year or to Year 2 or 3 students was more problematic.

For the UsPaCe team, one of the most interesting findings was the lack of confidence and skills in using TEL. This may be a true reflection of learners in general or it may be a feature of the group of learners associated with this project. The team hopes that the final report of the *Learning Literacies for a Digital Age* should be able to shed some light on which is true.

The need for a single sign on to obviate the need for managing and remembering multiple usernames and passwords is a general problem and one that needs addressing at national level.

Implications for the future

The project team will remain in contact with tutors to see how the use of UsPaCe progresses as it was originally planned to be in use until the end of July 2010. However the University of Plymouth is now in the process of deploying Pebblepad to partner colleges and it may be that over the coming year this will replace the Community. The other elements of UsPaCe are available any institution and these will be promoted at forthcoming UsPaCe conference presentations.

There are a number Web2.0 tools that are potentially very useful to support learners in a wide range of learning settings but there use will be hampered unless and until a means of removing the need to enter usernames and passwords for each individual application is arrived at.

The skills and confidence of students and tutors will also be critical to the success or otherwise of these deployments. The findings of this project indicate that there may be wide variations between different groups and a deeper understanding of influencing factors is urgently needed.

References

All project outputs can be found at www.uspace.org.uk

Our current list of UsPaCe dissemination activities is:

one poster

2 newsletters

1. McDermott, A.P., Witt, N.A.J. & Stillwell, R. (2009) UsPaCe: the Journey to Version 1 (invited poster presentation). *JISC Symposium: Effective Strategies for using technology to enhance lifelong learning*. Birmingham; Aston University, 4 March.

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In production

A guide to Web2.0 for busy academics

A scholarly paper on UsPaCe and its evaluation.