



## Understanding the issues and benefits of social software

### What is social software?

Social software is not a new concept – for Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the World Wide Web, the internet has always been a tool for social, collaborative activity rather than an online repository of information. But it is only recently that the majority of users have been able to make the web a platform for their activities, editing and adding content to web pages and sharing the process and the outcomes with others.

Applications and services that enable such participatory, collaborative activity via the internet are aptly described as social software, since they bring people into creative interaction with one another, making the web an online meeting place where anyone can connect and collaborate with others.

However, the widespread perception that the web is moving into a new phase has produced a parallel term – Web 2.0. This is considered to be a broader concept which covers the increasingly democratic way that users of the web think and operate as a result of tools such as social software.

Defining the boundaries of the two terms remains problematic. Many commentators point to a set of characteristics rather than a single definition i.e. applications that are free and hosted remotely, rather than installed onto a computer, with user-friendly interfaces and system designs that support contributions by users. Some examples referred to by learners in the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies are outlined overleaf.

### Scope

In relation to the use of social software, this information sheet:

- defines key terms
- explores the benefits for learners
- outlines the issues for institutions
- explains how to find out more

### Audience

This guidance is designed for:

- senior managers with responsibility for learning and teaching
- deans of faculty/heads of departments
- heads of e-learning/ILT
- network managers
- practitioners
- learning resources and learning support staff

### Social software is ...

'... software that supports group interaction'  
(Shirky, 2003)

### Web 2.0 has ...

'a set of at least six powerful ideas that are changing the way some people interact.'  
(Anderson, 2007)

This information sheet forms part of *In Their Own Words*, a synthesis of the outcomes of Phase 1 of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning Programme. For further information:

[www.jisc.ac.uk/elp\\_learneroutcomes](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes)

“Being critical of myself scared me. But somehow, blogging with other people, and hearing their thoughts, I started becoming reflective.”

Jenny, post-compulsory PGCE student: The learner’s voice video case study

## Examples of social software used by learners in the JISC studies

The following applications and services are those referred to in the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies. As a result, the list cannot be considered definitive – links to more detailed analyses of the scope and meaning of the terms ‘social software’ and ‘Web 2.0 technologies’ are given in the conclusion. Examples below each category also provide further illustration. Instant messaging, chat and internet telephony are discussed in the Information sheet *Personal tools and technologies*.

**Blogs:** Web pages created by individuals as chronological journals or commentaries on their own activities and on events taking place in the world. Blogs can be commented on by others and referenced in other blogs, making blogging a communal as well as a personal activity

**Software examples:** Blogger™ for blog writing [www.blogger.com]; Blog Search™ for finding blogs on a given topic [blogsearch.google.com]

**Multimedia sharing software:** Websites that enable the sharing of multimedia content, e.g. digital images, videos and podcasts (downloadable audio recordings of talks and lectures)

**Software examples:** Flickr™ – images [www.flickr.com]; YouTube™ – videos [www.youtube.com]; Odeo – podcasts [http://odeo.com]

**RSS feeds:** A method of aggregating and distributing changes to designated websites to keep users informed of news and updates

**Software example:** NewsGator Online [www.newsgator.com/Individuals/NewsGatorOnline/Default.aspx]

**Social bookmarking:** Applications that enable lists of bookmarked sites to be stored online and made accessible

to others via a search tool, provided that users add keywords (tags) to their choices

**Software examples:** del.icio.us [http://del.icio.us]; CiteULike [www.citeulike.org]

**Social networking software:** Websites that facilitate sharing of personal data to form new contacts. Also used by some learners to create an online personal space with links to other personal digital resources

**Software examples:** Facebook® [www.facebook.com]; MySpace® [www.myspace.com]; Bebo [www.bebo.com]

**Wikis:** Web pages which groups can interact with to achieve a common goal by adding or editing content

**Software example:** TWiki™ [www.twiki.org]; Wikipedia®, an online collaborative encyclopaedia [http://en.wikipedia.org]



“My main use of it [computer] is, I guess, social networking. It would be MySpace and Messenger and e-mail, things like that, and then secondary would be information gathering ... I have alerts coming into me so I get information....”

Emma, undergraduate business student: LEX study

## Why is this information useful to me?

Emerging technologies potentially present both issues and benefits to institutionally based learning, but as familiarity with social software increases in the wider community, these tools are now being explored for their pedagogic value.

The following summarises some of the benefits learners may find from wider access to social software, and some of the issues that institutions and practitioners may encounter.

## What social software could mean for learners

### Interactive and creative ways of learning

- Reflecting on their own and others' experiences (blogs)
- Capturing outcomes of activities; sharing and repurposing content (multimedia sharing software)
- Building online communities; creating a personal online space (social networking software)
- Working collaboratively to compile and edit web pages (wikis; blogs)

### Supported learning

- Recordings of lectures for revision and reinforcement of learning (podcasts)
- Networking with peers, friends and families (instant messaging; social networking software)
- Sharing problems, processes and outcomes with a global community, including experts (blogs)

### Potential for skills development

- Behaving appropriately in online contexts (social networking sites; collaborative writing tools)
- Collaborative knowledge building (wikis; blogs)
- Working smarter (RSS feeds; social bookmarking)
- Managing information (multimedia sharing and social networking software; wikis; blogs)

## What social software could mean for learning and teaching

### Issues for the management of learning

- Support for staff exploring the potential for learning in social software
- Identifying and mitigating possible risks for learners
- Working to minimise digital inequality
- Updating provision and policies on a regular basis in a rapidly changing environment

### Network issues

- Managing differing levels of access to applications and services
- Monitoring for inappropriate use, especially by learners under the age of 18
- Enabling learners to link from their e-portfolios to content held on external websites
- Raising awareness of potential IPR issues arising from content placed on social networking sites
- Clarifying copyright, plagiarism and appropriate use policies for learners

### Issues for practitioners

- Understanding how emerging technologies impact on learning and teaching practice
- Integrating social software effectively and appropriately into learning designs
- Redesigning assessments to accommodate collaborative learning practices
- Helping learners to develop effective structures for managing online information, including information personal to them
- Maximising the potential in social software without invading learners' personal spaces

## Sources of further information

Anderson, P. (2007) *What is Web 2.0?* JISC Technology and Standards Watch

[www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf)

Conole, G., de Laat, M., Dillon, T. and Darby, J. (2006) *LXP: Student Experiences of Technologies – Final report*

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Creanor, L., Trinder, K., Gowan, D. and Howells, C. (2006) *LEX: The Learner Experience of e-Learning – Final project report*

[www.jisc.ac.uk/elp\\_learneroutcomes](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes)

JISC infoNet, *Social software*

[www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/social-software](http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/social-software)

JISC Users and innovation programme

[www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme\\_users\\_and\\_innovation.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_users_and_innovation.aspx)

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