

The role of the independent developer in edtech

Tom Knight

Hello and welcome to the Jisc podcast. My name's Tom Knight. I'm one of the press officers here. For this episode we spoke to Pat Lockley, a web developer and educational and academic technologist who has worked with, among others, the Universities of Nottingham, Oxford, London, Warwick and Loughborough. Pat has extensive knowledge of WordPress, Moodle, MOOCs and the Open Education Field and through his company, Pgogy Webstuff creates tailored digital solutions which allow researchers and educators to find new ways of doing things. In light of our naming of the fifty most influential higher education professionals using social media we were keen to get Pat's views on several topics, including how social media has affected the development of digital research in education tools, what emerging platforms are worth keeping an eye on, and more generally what role he thinks independent developers like himself have to play in future ed tech.

I began by asking how big a part social media plays in his own work and practice.

Pat Lockley

I run a disproportionate number of [inaudible 1.00] accounts and I say run in the loosest term. I mostly tweet as me. I have other accounts for other things because it's noticeable that I tend to give them distinct identities, like some of them are things that I think are projects that people wouldn't know about those projects without necessarily associating them with me. So one good example of that is a site that I run called Solvonauts. There's been a lot of talk about with OER is discoverability and finding things, and how you get OER out there and available and how you make these things more visible. So one thing that Solvonauts does is it's set up that via IFTTT, it tweets out every 15 minutes one OER and one OER with a picture, and using Twitter cards you see the picture of that. So it's a way of kind of seeing what OERs there are and what OERs are available and what OERs could get used. And the visualness of the Twitter cards is quite useful with Solvogram because there are a lot of very nice, very stylish pictures within the OER world which disproportionately are poorly serviced by the search engines because you don't see the visual nature of the picture. You often only see the text metadata.

So one of the other accounts that I use is an account called Huma Bird project and that was based on some work I did as part of another site that I run called OpenJoyce, where we developed a series of digital humanities tools. Thing that the Huma Bird project does with social media is that it allows people to do various bits of research using Twitter as a dataset. So as well as using social media for communicative purposes, also to recognise the research interests that other people have in social media as well.

Tom Knight Pat, how do you think social media is supporting moves towards openness?

Pat Lockley I think it does a lot. I think it's a key way of showing how people are working and the kind of, I would assume, perhaps the waypoint or the mileposts of day to day openness are more apparent because you will see when people have got funding, people are working on papers, people have finished papers, people's books and so on come out. So I did a project with Dr Dave O'Brien from Goldsmiths, doing some analysis of a hashtag, and that book chapter, but when that book came out I tweeted a picture of the book cover and you can see that that kind of openness and visibility and you don't have to worry about kind of people not seeing or people seeing it, there's the benefit of people seeing it who wouldn't normally see it or who would see it and you have a broader approach. I think in terms of the open educational practices that's definitely beneficial. I would wonder [inaudible 3.42] notion of the bubble and whether you want to, within your own area in that more people would know about it but they are probably the people who would perhaps, via some other way, find out about it anyway.

I think the major thing in terms of what openness probably does it allows for kind of perhaps weaker connections between people and slightly more informal connections between people. This is where it becomes very interesting, how you define open. Whether you can consider the removal of a restriction or a decreased formality as open is possible. I assume you'd be able to say it was opening or opening up at least, and I guess this goes back to this notion of openness perhaps as a door and that social media makes the door perhaps slightly more ajar.

Tom Knight How has social media affected the growth and development of massive open online courses?

Pat Lockley I think you could have easily had MOOCs for a long time, but I think with social media and the concept of orality that certainly allowed MOOCs to spread and become bigger than what they were. I think many MOOCs still seem to use hashtags and similar things to kind of foster a sense of community. Whether those dissipate out and so people follow the people they find on the hashtags and therefore kind of don't use the hashtags anymore? I think a large part of the use of social media in MOOCs is believe forum software is rarely any good and that when you have a kind of forum software that you're using already, i.e. either Twitter or Facebook, then the desire to use another piece of forum software is pretty low.

I wonder whether that's a more interesting statement within itself, that social media perhaps gave MOOCs a lot more than they would have done, but perhaps it's a reflection of the fact that MOOCs, positioned as they are as kind of the apogee of ed tech development, still haven't mastered forums because perhaps forums are unmasterable. And what Twitter has shown us is

that we don't perhaps want clean, neat, kind of single threaded forums, we want huge, sprawling spaghetti masses of information being shot at us.

Tom Knight Pat, what social tools or platforms do you use the most?

Pat Lockley I use TweetDeck most of the time just because I find it easier. For those that know me I'm quite stream of consciousness and I would struggle to use the web based Twitter client. I struggle to use the phone based Twitter clients because I can only see one column at once and I tend to like a timeline of my mentions and my DMs all to be visible at once to me. It's just faster. I like the idea that I'm seeing everything that I want to see and I like the idea that I have a level of control over that.

I really like Instagram. It's interesting because fundamentally it's a more visual language. It's a more visual form of sharing. I think perhaps it tends to perhaps a slightly more considered approach. You have to think about things a bit more. You're obviously not going to share every picture that you take. You're not going to just take a picture every minute or something, although you could do, I imagine taking a picture every minute and sharing it just for art. But I think within that it's an interesting thing and I think, perhaps not the visual, but perhaps it's more evocative, a bit more emotional. It's a bit more described. It perhaps tells more of a story.

I think WordPress is a good simple enough way of getting extra content onto line if you want to do that. Whether you would describe it as social media or not I don't know. I would, referring to the fact that it allows for commenting, and with certain tweaks here and there, so if you use the P2 theme you can create kind of like a localised kind of Twitter community should you wish to.

Tom Knight And what emerging tools are you particularly interested in?

Pat Lockley There's always this sad point with any social media that you're getting fifty ways to use it in ed tech and I think that's perhaps a neat way of predicting how developed an ed tech is. Like I think Yik Yak has kind of got to that point. In a way I enjoy the fact that it's anonymous and it's identity free and that within that it perhaps ... Whether you would describe that as more honest, whether it's darker. I kind of like the feel to it, but again I think it's interesting now whether maybe Twitter has become too dominant and there isn't the ... when you're building a new kind of social network you have to build it in the margins of the other ones. I'm always interested in slightly more informal kind of back channels. Slack seems to be coming along, although whether you'd bill it as social media or not, I don't know, but again it seems to be more of a specific kind of if you want to communicate outside of Twitter people are setting up Slack sites for team working and so on and so forth.

I'm interested a lot in Periscope. I think it could do a lot for lectures and for openness because you can imagine streaming lectures without thinking about it.

I think it's interesting in a way because perhaps the oncoming trend is not something outside of Twitter, but it's from something within Twitter because it's noticeable how often the Twitter client updates on my phone. It's noticeable how often there is a new feature – the whole 'did you like this? – no' kind of continual clicking to get rid of features that you weren't that interested in. I think I guess that's the interesting thing with all of these things, is where literacy's going and how people have got used to it. And I'm saying there's probably enough people out there now that knowhow are used to it or get Twitter that it has achieved a dominance.

I think there's still space out there for new things. I think it'll be interesting to see if some of the Indie Web kind of thinking, stuff like GNOME, Diaspora, ever kind of grow into something a little bit bigger. I think something a bit smarter in terms of how following people, finding things you're interested in, more like a dashboard maybe, more like Yahoo Pipes was or IFTTT is now, and that could bring together various social sources tied in with other things.

I think the interesting thing would be a social media that is going to encourage you to get off social media. Not that I'm against it, but the idea of a social media that tends to organising of events or tends to kind of more of a synchronised space in time experience than explicitly asynchronous thing.

Tom Knight

Pat, what do you think the role of the independent developer is in current and future ed tech?

Pat Lockley

I think that within universities there are movements towards various things, but obviously universities per se have core services, and the maintenance of those core services is best done by the people who work for, understand the culture of how that institution works, how processes, procedures are and have the kind of long term experience and also kind of ways of dealing with staff and knowing how those staff work so those relationships can be built up.

I think we're coming to a period in which the classical kind of provision of system, so there's a lot of discussions over how kind of one central service provider, VLE, is a good thing or whether they should have multiple things, or whether there is a case for using other services. So a lot of the cMOOCs that I mentioned earlier were all reliant on blogging software. They didn't have a central point for people to visit and they tended to use WordPress or similar things, and so there are spaces around kind of the edges of the shadow, kind of the [penumbral 11.10] kind of places where the university probably in itself doesn't necessarily have that space.

I think one of the things that social media has brought about is a scope for other projects to exist. So a lot of the web that I do is for academics who want to set up individual projects or projects that they will run probably outside of the university itself. So not just university hosted projects or projects that ran explicitly as part of that university, but using their own time and their own space. So I work a lot with a couple of academics from the University of Warwick on projects. Global social theory is that and that's one that we've played outside, and I think it's the kind of thing that if every university had every academic creating their individual projects then the university would be swamped. And whether there's an economic benefit for the

university in developing one of those projects and certainly the maintenance of them would be quite sizeable. You sign up for social media and almost always you're asked for a URL, and I think a lot of people have perhaps kind of started to see that there's probably a requirement that in terms of visibility maybe for things like REF, maybe just for general, almost like modern life you're required to have your own website, so people would have their own website and I think a lot of the time those websites feature educational content and various other things.

I think the other thing is one of the benefits I suppose of me, like I mentioned earlier, whether I'd say fingers in pies or farts in both camps, I see a lot of the benefits of working for different organisations and doing things with different organisations and different approaches that those organisations bring, and then those organisations also I can take that back into ed tech or can share those things around, or can play with something here or can see the way that this thing has been doing here.

So I recently did some work for an American company using some fairly advanced code and looking at something in a way that I've never seen anything work in ed tech, and once I've got a bit more free time I'm going to bring that back over and see if I can find a way of kind of integrating that approach into some of the e-learning that I do because it looked like it had tremendous potential for reusability and for openness and better ways of doing things, more rapid ways of doing things. I'm trying to think without sounding silly whether it's like a Walter Raleigh or something figure in that you're kind of going to these new places and coming back with new things.

Tom Knight

How can institutions and organisations like Jisc support innovative independent developers?

Pat Lockley

I've done a lot of work for Oxford but there's not direct links between that work other than contacts in that people have recommended me. So I've done two projects for the English department but I don't think any of those were ran by the English department; they were very much the individual academics involved. Now I'm working doing some work for the department of zoology, and I think there's the first contact and how people want to do things and various things.

I could see it being interesting for Jisc for example to have like kind of a 'looking for' board, something perhaps Craigslist-y in nature, where if people wanted an idea on how to do something in Moodle and whether they would like ... so like you could list people looking for work and it could be somewhere where people could drop into and say, "Oh okay, so university X is looking for someone to develop X or Y. What do you think it would be? What do you think it would cost? Is this possible? What would you use?" that kind of thing.

One of the strongest things that will help e-learning move forward is the idea of seeing how people have done things, making it more visual, more easy, and I think a lot of that is by its very nature behind a password for the institution so you can't see it. But the idea of having a way of submitting a neat way of doing X or an interesting way of doing Y, and without sounding too primitive going back to almost the early Yahoo days where everything was within a tree. You

remember early Yahoo, in that you basically went to a category and then in that category there was six or seven sub-categories, then there were some more sub-categories and some more sub-categories, and eventually you got a link to something which took you off, and the idea of it being a bit more of a menu and the idea of the central single service perhaps or central single product not perhaps offering enough.

And I think the idea of kind of going ... something perhaps more Pinterest-y, almost scrapbook-y where you could have a kind of, oh these are ways you could do this or these are ways you could do this. So a bit like the kind of somewhat clichéd top ten ways of doing things, but rather than limiting it to ten, just kind of saying here are a lot of ways that people have done this, here are a lot of ways that people have done that. And so going back to the comment about Drupal as the VLE, the idea that, wow, you could do this, and I think upon seeing that a lot of people would be like, "Yeah, that's what I want."

Tom Knight

With many thanks to Pat. For more information on Jisc's project work supporting innovators in education and technology please visit www.jisc.ac.uk.

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