What's in it for me? The stick and the carrot as tools for developing academic communities

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ABSTRACT

Motivating students to contribute to learning communities is not a new problem, nor is it restricted to online learning. However it becomes especially obvious in large online courses where student collaboration is one of the intended learning outcomes.

This paper describes two models for driving student engagement in producing user-generated and user-reviewed content. It discusses the motivation for participation and gives results from two subject areas. The behaviour of students of second and third level language courses is compared to that of first level technology students when their participation is simply encouraged and when it is required for assessment.

A model for driving user-engagement is proposed and related to previous experience in online learning.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Online learning, User-generated content, Student learning communities, web-based resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many students are enthusiastic about the subject they are studying and keen to find out more than their course covers. The main collaborative tool used by Open University students is the online discussion forums associated with each course. A common activity there is the sharing of links to useful resources. Often those are related to assignments, but many are current news items of relevance to the course content. However these are only accessible to students for the duration of their course, which is usually three or nine months. Each new cohort starts afresh finding and recommending links. Although students could use external tools such as Delicious for this, a dedicated repository has been established for this purpose. The work described here has established a social bookmarking website called fOUndIt. Located at http://foundit.open.ac.uk it allows users to collect and rate online resources. Primarily these are intended to be relevant to Open University courses, but users from outside of the University are welcome to participate. The site is driven by the Pligg open source content management system [1]. Each submission is tagged and described, and a link provided. Other users can then vote for the articles they find most interesting or useful, and these are given prominence on the front page of the site. Users can also comment on and discuss individual stories, and retrieve them for later use.

The research reported here is evaluating the use of fOUndIt in a range of areas of relevance to the Open University, categorised as follows.

The overall aims of the research are:
- To evaluate the use of student-generated resources in a small sample of Open University courses, and inform their use in other courses.
- To find ways to increase student involvement in, and interaction with, course material and resources.

The main pedagogical aims are to:

- identify best practice in the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as social bookmarking to increase course content relevance
- investigate ways of increasing learner involvement and interaction with course materials and resources
- gain insights into meaningful tagging and categorisation while compiling these resources

The main course-production aims are to:

- provide up-to-date course materials in a more cost efficient way
- address the issue of course resources becoming quickly outdated
- explore the use of materials and resources found, shared and jointly evaluated by current, i.e. the potential use of fOUndIt as a "repository"

2. METHODOLOGY

Each subject area used a similar approach to introduce fOUndIt to the students. A few submissions were made before the students were invited to participate. These seeded fOUndIt with materials directly linked to topics in the student's course. The students were then provided with an introduction consisting of a description of features and potential uses, and a slideshow with voice-over [2]. This was followed by guidance to help them undertake the following:
- Submit links relevant to topics studied in the course (initially on the basis of specifically designed tasks)
- Add a comments to existing submissions
- Reply to existing comments
- Vote for an upcoming/existing news item

Later in the pilot studies, students were encouraged to continue using fOUndIt in a less directed, more learner-centred way.

The language learners were encouraged to work in the target language, but English was permitted as well. It was hoped that working with fOUndIt would help the students acquire and enhance their skills in researching, publishing, tagging and evaluating. Being based on learner collaboration, the activities were intended to foster the creation of communities of practice [3] amongst the users.

3. RESULTS

Convincing large enough cohorts of users to participate was much more difficult than anticipated. The search for a compelling reason to draw users into the service is on-going, and reinforces the experience often found when introducing new features into a course. Students are understandably reluctant to invest time in something they see no value in and which may be perceived as adding to their workload. This is despite the introductory messages being carefully phrased to try to show them how participating may benefit them. Indeed Kirkwood [4] suggests that 'most adult independent learners … are likely to avoid looking at resources that are recommended in coursework but are not obviously related to assessment.'

The carrot
The first phase of the project being run with staff from the Department of Languages invited Level Three German and French students to use the system to submit articles of interest to fOUndit. One of the main aims of this work was to try to establish a community around the subject resources. However, although this started off with a relatively large volume of submissions, it did not reach a self-sustaining level. The majority of the articles were submitted by staff from the Department of Languages. Student engagement was very low and the next most active participant was an Arts tutor with language experience who became interested in the project and joined in despite not studying any of the courses covered by the project. The experience of relatively low student participation in the Languages trial is also evident on two presentations of the level one ICT course where students were invited to use fOUndIt. Despite the encouragement of the course team and of their tutors, very few students used the system for any length of time.

The stick
In view of the difficulties in encouraging voluntary participation, it was decided to run a second phase, this time integrating the use of fOUndIt much more closely into the courses.
For the language learners, this took the form of a short pilot that involved Level Three students of Spanish and German. They were asked to research a series of specific topics related to their course, post the resources they discovered to fOUndIt, comment on resources posted by others, and then use those resources to discuss the topic in question in a synchronous online tutorial. The tutorial gave students the opportunity to practise their speaking skills, and was intended to serve as a "hook" to motivate students to participate in the project. This aspect of blended learning is being explored as part of the production of the new version of the Level Three language courses, as it would enable students to have access to up to date and relevant materials. Indeed, an email from one of the participants in this second phase of the project picked up on this aspect, saying:

'As a student who has regularly used additional material from the Internet (and has sometimes felt penalised for using newer material when it was more relevant than the material in the coursework), I would certainly be interested in anything that encourages the OU to encourage students to do their own research. I have always (even on lower level courses) been meticulous about citing any additional resources'. (Personal communication)

A similar approach of integrating the student use more closely into the course material was also adopted for the second trial on the level one ICT course. An assignment question and online tutorial were written around the use of fOUndIt, giving a specific topic to research and submit resources about. The online tutorial and linked assignment were scheduled for April 2009, with the next cohort reaching this stage in September 2009.

These directed approaches generated more traffic to fOUndIt than the previous activities, and the results of them are currently being evaluated. The early indications are that they provided a reason for the students to use fOUndIt. In addition, a few users are going beyond the specific instructions for the activities and starting to add articles covering other subjects also related to the course.

4. CONCLUSION

We believe that the Open University has to find different ways to write and maintain its courses if they are to remain relevant. One way of providing up to date materials is to teach the students to generate and share them among themselves. That already happens to varying extents on most courses, but tends to be done informally and sporadically by keen students posting resources to their course or social forum. We should be able to harness this enthusiasm and direct it into a repository which all students and tutors can access, comment on, and assess. The extent and sophistication of their comments and assessment of resources contributed by other students varies considerably, but **if integrated into a course or study programme**, could be developed as a key skill for their OU study as well as for their personal and professional development outside of the University. Such facilities also have the potential to establish and develop communities of learners around subject areas and programmes. As Pegrum [5] writes "In a digital world, knowledge is, less than ever, an individual possession. It's a property of the network. [...] What counts is the ability to access, evaluate, collate and synthesise information from a variety of contacts and sources--and contribute to it yourself. As David Weinberger [6] puts it: 'knowledge isn't in our heads: It is between us' Digital tools give us unprecedented opportunities to link up this distributed intelligence, harnessing it in a form known as 'collective intelligence'. Collective intelligence is shared rather than individual and collaborative rather than competitive." [...]"

It has become clear that there are two key methods in which fOUndIt might be implemented:

- as assignment-related activities for students to share resources
- as a space for subject communities to share resources

The investigations to date have demonstrated limited participation with fOUndit when students were not required to use it, leading to the following conclusions:

- The use of Web 2.0 tools such as fOUndIt for the learning of languages and culture should be linked to some element of formal online moderation, if not teaching (synchronous or asynchronous).
- In order to increase student participation, the use of technologies such as social bookmarking should be part of the formal teaching, and preferably the assessment, of a course.

The potential benefits and opportunities provided by the features incorporated into fOUndIt are still being evaluated. However a number of courses are planning to introduce some of the features of fOUndIt from 2010. These will either be within the existing stand-alone site, or via the Open University's Moodle-based Virtual Learning Environment.

5. REFERENCES

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