Abstract

Assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Students know what is expected when we ask for an essay as an assessment for a module but how do they feel when we assess them by wiki? Do new technologies offer assessment formats that test the learning smorgasbord of the 21st century or are we merely ‘pouring old wine into new bottles’? This paper discusses how students felt about being assessed by a non-traditional method in their final year of an undergraduate degree, how they negotiated the shifted learning relationships between themselves and their teachers within the context of a 24-hour CyberSpace learning environment and the support needs identified through this process. The paper also raises questions about the sustainability of the latest social learning portals and networks. These may make us feel connected and Second Life is certainly mapping a whole new learning environment but as VLEs now feel as stodgy as a school dinner we need to consider how long the latest ‘new thing’ will last. As we mash-up learning on the Internet in wikis, Facebook and YouTube, the classroom still exists but does it either get smart with wifi and other mobile technologies or risk increasing attrition rates as students vote with their feet, preferring the camaraderie of cyberspace and internet cafes to the peeling and graffitied surfaces of rooms too hot in the summer and freezing in winter? VLEs allowed us the convenience of rehashing our old material to deliver it in new ways but this paper will argue that the new experimental menu of Web 2.0 mash-ups requires a little more thought, a little more imagination and a lot more hard work.

Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of the learning process. We assume that students know what is expected when we ask for an essay as an assessment for a module but how do they feel when we assess them by wiki (an online application that allows multiple users to draft and re-draft text, add links to other online locations and add other media such as photographs, YouTube video clips, slideshows and surveys).

Do new technologies offer assessment formats that test the learning smorgasbord of the 21st century or are we merely ‘pouring old wine into new bottles’?
years old. This makes them part of Generation Y (Figure 2):

“This is not a generation of mavericks. This is not about self-reliance; it’s about teamwork ... And there is not infighting - gen Y hates conflict - which is no surprise because they’ve been learning negotiation skills since they were kids”


The students were following a range of degree routes including single honours Sociology, single honours Criminology, joint honours within the Sociology programme and Combined Honours. Their learning aims were:

• to examine from a sociological perspective the contemporary changes in human interaction via computers, with particular emphasis on the Internet and the World Wide Web;

• to investigate the social construction of the on-line world and the virtual communities based on the Internet, and the new cultures, institutions and norms emerging in cyberspace; and

• to gain experience of the relevant information and communication technology skills appropriate to exploring the on-line worlds.

Their assessments included a group project to construct a wiki and populate it with relevant content. The wiki application used was PBwiki and full instructions were provided via the institutional VLE. Although wikis are intuitive to use, it was assumed that few students would have prior experience of creating a wiki (although a pre-assessment survey showed that they were all aware of Wikipedia and other forms of existing wikis). Their learning needs were therefore supported by step-by-step guidance on setting up their wiki and a demonstration site was also provided as an illustration of what could be achieved (Figure 3).

A pre-assignment survey found that: 87% of students used the Internet at least once per day (see Table 1).

When asked which types of Internet based sites they use, students replied with a list of commonly known sites. Interestingly few of the students surveyed were using MySpace and a few others specified Ebay, Bubbleshare and Hotmail (see Table 2).

In relation to the wiki, curriculum issues that arose included the need to establish group rules, how to deal with students who did not participate fully and clear marking criteria so that everyone would be aware of what needed to be achieved in order to succeed. Although we may assume that students are more familiar with the world of blogs, wikis and social networking sites, it is important to check out such assumptions to establish their existing knowledge base (see Tables 3 and 4). So the pre-assessment survey also asked about this:

Welcome the Sociology of CyberSpaCe Demo Wiki

This is a real wiki. Please try to get a feel for what you are expected to achieve for your group work assignment. Not all pages are completed, instead they are in draft form to show you how you can build your own site and then provide tips that you might find useful.

The site was constructed by virtual students. You can use the sidebar on the right to navigate around or click on our names below to see the pages we constructed. We added pictures to create 'avatars' of ourselves and we have added links etc., where ever we felt it was appropriate.

We thought this would be a good way to begin with but learning how to put a wiki together was only once we had read the instructions. We also thought we would have to pay for the site but then realized there was a free version so make sure you aren’t caught out by that.

Meet the wiki members:

- Amber
- Bruce
- Grace
- James
- Tom
- Lisa

To join the wiki, request access. Already have an account? Log in.
Students typically search for Internet-based resources by using Google and similar search engines. Very few students had heard of Google Scholar and less than 30% were using university e-resources such as journal databases or e-books. Even in their Google searches, the majority of students used listings from the first few or some on the first page only the first page (69.5%; Table 5) of the search engine return.

**Are we teaching and testing the right things in the right way?**

So how did the students negotiate the shifted learning relationships between themselves and their teachers within the context of a 24-hour CyberSpace learning environment? Certainly the volume of enquiries by email increased but not substantially. Students were made aware that just because they could access the VLE 24/7 that did not mean that I, the teacher, would be available 24/7.

This cohort was asked about how they are typically assessed and how often (see Tables 6 and 7):

When asked if they felt they were being over-assessed there was a split opinion with 62% saying that they did not feel over-assessed and the rest answering that they did feel over-assessed and many comments were made about how assessments tend to be bunched at certain times of the year and take the traditional forms of essays and exams. Students were articulate in their criticisms of these forms of assessment and queried why essays were so prevalent when the likelihood of them ever writing an essay ever again was dubious.

**Are wikis and other formats sustainable?**

The paper also raises questions about the sustainability of the latest social learning portals and networks. These may make us feel connected and Second Life is certainly mapping a whole new learning environment (although 70% of surveyed students had not even heard of it!) but as VLEs now feel a little slow, top-down and lacking in interaction, we need to consider how long the latest ‘new thing’ will last. All students surveyed found the VLE to be useful as a learning tool (Table 8) but further questioning revealed that they...
liked it when links were made to relevant sections of their course and they got more than just lecture notes. When asked, students did not notice the difference between the VLE, tutor-designed resources and external links. Even though external resources are presented via a link that opens a new page, all students think of these as just part of the VLE.

Some examples from Sociology of CyberSpace and student feedback

Students expect more than just handouts and lecture notes and so it is timely to consider the benefits of mashing-up learning on the Internet.

Using wikis to promote collaborative group work, students can learn how to work in partnership and teaching staff can track participation and progress through the process. Figure 4 shows an example of how students can create and re-use resources to construct an artefact of value that has a longer shelf-life than a typical essay. In this example, the student has created a short video, found a relevant video on YouTube and mashed these and a number of other resources together accompanied by a narrative and discussion from his colleagues within the wiki group.

The environment is student-centred because although the wiki can act as a repository of resources provided by the teaching staff, students can add and modify either as teams or as individuals and the original ‘demo’ does not have an elevated status over the versions created by students.

Indeed the students went well beyond what I was capable of and really expanded my knowledge – for example, one student showed how Photoshop has an online version and used a photo of me as part of her demonstration of this (Figure 5)!

It was not an easy assignment and marks ranged from a 35% fail to a 78% first class pass with an average mark of 59%. Comparing the marks in this module (Figure 6a) with marks gained by the same cohort of students in a second year essay (Figure 6b) shows that while the average mark there was 57% (just two percentage points lower) and the same pattern of marks is evident at the lower end of the scale, there is a bigger ‘slice’ of higher grades.
Conclusion

VLEs allowed us the convenience of presenting our old material in new ways but working with wikis shows that the new experimental menu of Web 2.0 mash-ups brings benefits but also challenges. Wiki spaces such as PBwiki are free to teaching staff and students (although the small price of purchasing a site brings many enhancements) and it is easy to use the editing functions as they mirror the type of word processing interfaces with which we are familiar.

The classroom still exists but by utilising the online possibilities of Web 2.0 technologies, this can act to enhance the perceived relevance of ‘face time’ in the class and increase engagement by reducing the distance between the physical and the virtual.

Adding links to websites, locating and presenting photographs, videos and newsfeeds is relatively straightforward and we no longer are alone in a one-way transfer of knowledge because students can also create content.

Without doubt this type of approach is time consuming and demanding but brings more rewards than the marking of 100 essays or exams ever did. Just as the written examination grouped students together in a central location to save on the time and effort of individual viva voce at a time of early massification of university education, so it might be that collaborative online learning becomes the norm of the twenty-first century university.

This article will form the basis of a paper delivered at the C-SAP conference: ‘The Virtual University? Social Science Critiques of Learning and Teaching in the Age of Digital Reproduction’ 16th January 2009, London.