Using collaborative resources to develop a programme for teaching and supporting information literacy.

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The focus of this paper is on the need for collaboration between technologists and educators in the development of learning resources to teach information literacy to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. It is designed as a starting point for a discussion on how we as a community might design such resources to address some of the issues that educators have been aware of for some time (i.e. students uncritical use of the web) but have now been quantified in a recently published report: Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World (JISC et al)

There has been much recent research at the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH) at King's College London focussed on the role and place of the digital humanities in the academic curriculum of Higher Education (Jessop 2005). This is based on the experience of both our undergraduate and postgraduate programmes focusing particularly on the way in which students are encouraged to integrate the content of a variety of digital humanities courses. This is a mechanism for the development of collaborative and interdisciplinary skills.

Our students come from a range of disciplines and backgrounds within the humanities and what is highlighted is the necessity to ensure that their projects meet the scholarly criteria of their home disciplines and the interdisciplinary aspects of humanities computing. This emphasises the need for training the students in collaborative method and reflective practice; the need to build a community of learning which will lead to a community of practice (Mahony 2007). Much expertise has been built up in the department concerning the needs of students in their use of online resources and general information literacy.

An additional dimension is that this research is also informed by the author's role as Student Support Manager for King's College's first wholly distance delivered e-learning programme. This enables recent research and initiatives within the field of distance learning, which is particularly technology based, to be brought to this study to see how they might be repurposed for campus-based students.

The recently published report: Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World (JISC et al) makes explicit many of the issues of concern to HE educators for which there was previously little other than anecdotal evidence. It has become apparent in recent years that with the increased familiarity with the web amongst the so-called 'digital natives' there has also been a developing dependency and

uncritical acceptance of whatever is provided at the top of the list of results returned by their favourite search engine. Until now there has been no way to quantify this.

The report acknowledges that the 'digital divide' still exists between those students that have pre-HE education experience of the web and ICT and those that do not (Key findings). This also is nothing new as there has always been the 'literacy divide' between those students that were introduced to books and reading at a young age and those that were not. However, ICT is the new 'divide' and the outcome is that as educators we cannot assume existing knowledge where there might be none. Experience tells us that there are still students who arrive at university with little (if any) previous experience of using the web or their computer for anything other than gaming.

An important finding of this report is that there is a significant and growing deficiency in students' "information literacies, including searching, retrieving, critically evaluating information from a range of appropriate sources and also attributing it"(Area 1: Learner skills). There is also the important issue concerning staff and their requirement to keep their skills current with regards to web-based materials and techniques (Area 2: Staff skills).

The report does make it clear that a need exists for support in this area for both students and staff. The project that results from this paper will initially only consider students although the materials and approach could well be re-purposed for staff. The author considers that combing this type of resource for both groups would perhaps undermine students' confidence in their tutors. In addition it seems (again supported by the report (44)) that there is a clear sense of boundaries between the students' personal and study-related online spheres. This shows students' "discomfort with staff-initiated discussion groups in social networking space when they are at ease with those they set up themselves for study-related purposes" (45). Self-help (asking their class-mates) in this area is what they are accustomed to although by its nature this lacks the benefits that come from a systematic approach (42). It seems that students generally turn to their friends rather than course tutors for technical help. Web-awareness should be given priority and become part of the curriculum so that students have the skills to make use of web-based services and activities in an informed way.

What is being considered here is an online interactive resource which will address some of these issues. Our strategy and the subject of this research is how we might bring together developers and technologists with educators to set up a collaborative resource or portal to teach and support these necessary skills. At present we have a class based non-credit module (developed by this author) aimed at taught postgraduates and new researchers. Things have changed and we need to be engaging in this area with first year undergraduates and at the same time making these resources more widely available. An important focus is to introduce students from a wide variety of backgrounds and skill levels to some

of the things that we in the digital humanities community take for granted: digital resources and how they can be used as research tools and also how they might prompt new ways of thinking. This is in addition to critical web skills.

One major problem for incoming students is that firstly they do not know what is available and, more importantly, what it is that they need to know to become successful learners. This is where their familiarity with online social networking can be used to advantage and something that educators can build on to scaffold appropriate learning activities using a new media approach.

Many of those coming to HE already have an online lifestyle in that they use social networking sites and this familiarity can be built on to support group interaction and collaboration. This requires the development of a group space that exists somewhere between study and social areas. Using the social web develops a sense of community which prevents the possibility of the sense of isolation (Mahony 2007).

A resource of this type needs to be more that just a series of static webpages; it must be interactive to engage the students and be set up so they can measure their progress against a set of defined tasks. It also needs a group and reflective space. Group discussion and particularly the opportunities afforded by peer support and feedback are not to be underestimated (Mahony 2007). Student feedback should be an essential part of gauging the effectiveness of the course and perhaps giving students the opportunity to add content where appropriate with a wiki and blog as a minimum. This would encourage a re-evaluation among the students (perhaps among tutors as well) firstly of the relationships between learners and course content, and then of attitudes towards openness.

By the time the InterFace conference is held this research would have moved forward a little but the questions it raises will remain. We need a conversation between educators and technologists in both areas (Humanities and Computer Science) about how we might address these issues around students' uncritical use of the web. Experience has for a number of years made this lack of critical engagement with web-based material clear (although we still cannot make assumptions that all students have the same exposure to the web and technology) and we now have opportunities to move forward in this area. The recently published report (JISC et al) points to the "students' need for help and support both in identifying and in evaluating information on the web" and their lack of rigour when checking the validity of sources (40). "The challenge is building a bridge so that Web 2.0 becomes as natural and reflexive in the study domain as it is in the social" (77).

Now is the time that this should be systematically addressed by our community. We have the tools to develop systems that promote learning with and through the use of technology; to develop best practice in the use of social networking tools in a pedagogical framework; to bring about a culture of participation and collaboration; "to sustain a learning society" (Dearing 1977).

Works cited:

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