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Original Citation

Tinker, Amanda and Byrne, Gillian (2009) From Entertainment to education: can social software engage the reticent writer? In: 5th European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing Conference, 2009: The Roles of Writing Development in Higher Education and Beyond, 30 June - 2 July 2009, Coventry University. (Unpublished)

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From Entertainment to Education: Can Social Software Engage the Reticent Writer?

Academic writing is traditionally associated with the individual practice of 'crafting' the essay, which for some students is often a daunting and lonely task (Catt and Gregory, 2006). This is in stark contrast to the enthusiastic generation of collaborative content within Web 2.0 environments, as "social networking sites not only attract people but also hold their attention, impel them to contribute, and bring them back time and again" (The New Media Consortium and the Educause Learning Initiative, 2007. p.12). The value of collaborative writing has been recognised (Christensen and Atweh, 1998; Storch, 2005); however, the question arises as to whether students can and are motivated to make the transition from writing for social networking to writing for social learning. The challenge for Higher Education is realising the potential and 'bridging the gap.'

In a bid to harness this creativity, energy and sociability, we have been exploring open source technologies and how they might enhance collaborative research, writing and learning amongst a range of student groups (pre-degree, first year undergraduates and postgraduates). This presentation will introduce practical case studies of these initiatives and their initial evaluation, illustrating how these tools (PBwiki and Ning) are being used to foster learning communities and encourage regular writing practice within a formative, collaborative environment.

Catt, R. and Gregory, G. (2006) The point of writing: is student writing in Higher Education developed or merely assessed? In: Ganonbcsik-Williams, L. (ed.) *Teaching academic writing in UK Higher Education: theories, practices and models*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Christensen, C and Atweh, B. (1998) Collaborative writing in participatory action research In: Atweh, B, Kemmis, S. and Weeks, P, (eds.) *Action research in practice: partnerships in social justice*. London: Routledge, pp.329-340

New Media Consortium and the Educause Learning Initiative (2007) The Horizon report. [online] Available at: <http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2007_Horizon_Report.pdf> [Accessed 16 February 2009].

Storch, N. (2005) Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 14(3), pp. 153-173.