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Re-designing an MA module to foster agency, engagement and production in online social software

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the process of re-designing a module on the MA in Media, Culture and Communication at the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London. This process took place as part of the "Pedagogic Research to Embedded E-Learning" (PREEL) project at the IOE and involved moving a module largely concerned with offline production of teaching resources into online engagement with Internet culture. Course participants were encouraged to think about issues around production in social software in ways which were relevant to their professional and personal activity online. The early stages of the re-design process were recorded in a course tutor blog and there were further attempts to reflect on the process using two evaluations, one in the middle of a pilot version of the course and the other at the end. The article concludes with a series of lessons learned which can be taken forward during the revalidation process.

Web 2.0, Education and the MA Media: Cultural, theoretical and pedagogical drivers behind the re-designed module

Studies show that there is widespread and increasing use of social software in web-based communication and production and that online environments such as Facebook, MySpace and Blogging sites are where most web-authoring and hypermedia content creation are taking place amongst non-specialist users (Owen et al., 2006; Green and Hannon, 2007; Kohut et al., 2007). In educational settings, researchers have also begun to explore the pedagogical possibilities of engaging in activities which are said to be characteristic of web 2.0 authoring technologies, such as writing in a reflective and collaborative way, working with a wide range of media, organizing resources into easily referenced collections using collaboratively generated categories and others (Bartlett-Bragg, 2004; Downes, 2004; Williams and Jacobs, 2004; Duffy and Bruns, 2006).

In response to the cultural and pedagogical changes brought about by the growing development and uptake of web 2.0 in education, the decision was taken to update and develop an existing optional masters level module which would give course participants the opportunity to reflect on the use of social software in education whilst simultaneously developing their personal skills in production. In other words, they would design, publish and maintain their own online spaces, using these personally and professionally alongside relevant readings to reflect on what the issues may be for teaching and learning with web 2.0.

The unit chosen as the vehicle for the new course development was an existing 30-credit optional MA module entitled "Multimedia Design and Communication" which had previously been validated within the Masters Programme at the IOE in Media, Culture and Communication. The stated, over-arching aim of this MA is to provide

“...both theoretical and practical bases for educators, professional communicators, and others concerned with the production and analysis of media texts, contexts and cultures.” (IOE MA Media course handbook, 2007, p.7)

The handbook also makes it clear that the MA as a whole intends to keep pace with contemporary trends in media culture by being “...intellectually and practically dynamic and relevant” (IOE MA Media course handbook, 2007, p7).

“Multimedia Design and Communication” had previously focused largely on making offline resources using specialist software in hypermedia on CD ROM. In theoretical terms the focus had been largely on visual design elements rather than the cultural and pedagogical effects and influences of new media technologies. In order to reflect the cultural and technological change brought about the growing use of online social software, and thereby meet the needs of its “educators and professional communicators” the MA would need to update its provision. The aim of the re-designed module, inside a suitably updated VLE which allowed the easy use of new authoring technologies, would be to immerse students on the course in the world of web 2.0 as active and reflective participants. This change would ultimately be reflected by replacing the existing module title, “Multimedia Design and communication”, with “Internet Cultures: Theory and Practice”.

Re-designing the course in the PREEL project

Re-designing the course took place as part of the “From pedagogic research to embedded e-learning” (PREEL) project at the IOE which aimed to provide pedagogical and technological support to course tutors engaged in devising new e-learning programmes in their courses. Further, the PREEL project promoted the use of established and emergent literature in the field of e-learning as a way of linking research and teaching in the active process of course design.

For this particular module, two interrelated themes in e-learning research were more salient than others in the re-design of the Multimedia module, namely, **design** and **engagement**. Both of these themes underpin a view of course participants as active and agentive which were essential in considering the nature of learning around production in online social software. As a result, the course re-design was led by two interrelated driving processes, namely:

- How to ensure that the module **design** encapsulated specific pedagogical approaches which engaged participants with production in social software environments, rather than with traditional and less agentive VLE features such as resource distribution and management
- How to ensure that tasks and discussions alike supported learners in their **engagement** with the complex and interrelated strands of activity on the module (in other words, both the blog production and discussing the blog production)

Design and engagement

The impact of the VLE design itself on the learner’s approach to the module has been seen to be important in a recent study (Vogel and Oliver, 2006). The authors describe, on the basis of a detailed investigation of a range of institutions with a range of VLEs and course designers, how it is possible that learners may not have direct access to the experience as it was originally conceived. This is because the course designer can only

arrange the elements of the course in the way that the VLE allows within the course area. This represented a problem in this particular course design process since the major underlying principle under investigation through production was learner agency and engagement through a process of personal production and reflection. This led to a decision to change the pattern of residentials, from the end of the course to a split position at the beginning and towards the end, in order to close the gap between the learner and the designer's vision of the course.

Technology and education are described as areas, which, in some important respects, "challenge each other", and not least, as Diana Laurillard points out, because of the ways in which, in order to meet the needs of learners, an online course needs to carry out...

"...contextual experimentation, and to continually adjust its functionality to the needs of the users. Teachers are not keen to have to work out how to use the digital tools offered to them. Neither do they need any additional administrative burden requiring "self-discipline". Using them has to be simple and transparent." (Laurillard, 2007)

The level of engagement was to be determined by the choice of the main production tool and by its seamless integration within the VLE. This was seen as a major determining factor in the shift away from the previous version of the module where production was previously separated from discussion by use of a text-based conferencing system over several weeks of term time followed at the end by two days of production in specialist software.

The production tasks in the new sequence of activities in the module were designed to run concurrently with discussion of relevant readings, thus ensuring a closer relationship of theory to practice. Edublogs, a blog provider with free educational accounts, was chosen because of its friendly publishing interface with familiar icons and layouts. This rendered detailed specialist training unnecessary and yet still provided powerful web 2.0 publishing possibilities to course participants. The previous text-based conferencing system in the First Class VLE was abandoned in favour of the more visual environment of the Blackboard VLE which also embraced the possibility of tight integration with Edublogs through RSS feeds. The experience was designed to be holistic and simple whilst allowing for continued higher-level engagement with pedagogical concepts in online social software.

Piloting change

By initially retaining the core elements, requirements and concepts of the module which had been validated as "Multimedia Design & Communication" it was possible to produce a halfway house between the two versions allowing some elements to be tested before a final version was sent for revalidation and re-titling. Comments created during evaluation could be used in preparing the eventual direction of the new, re-designed, re-titled module.

Evaluation was a key part of the re-design process and was carried out in three main forms to enable a range of different reflections and evidence gathering to take forward into the final version. There were two fixed evaluation points in which student views were taken. The first of these was an activity just after the midpoint of the course and the second was the eventual end of course evaluation. In addition to the student

evaluations, a blog was written which recorded key moments in the process. The sections below will outline in turn the contributions made by each of these evaluative processes.

Evaluating and reflecting the re-design process: The course tutor blog

Course leaders and/or teams engaged in the PREEL project were given access to blogging tools to record in a diary format their responses to the process. The idea was to call on the reflective possibilities of the medium and provide a dataset and an evidence base for the whole PREEL project which would be useful in evaluating the wider remit of PREEL.

In the case of this particular module the act of blogging had an even greater significance and affordance with the overall aims of the module itself. The course leader was required to blog a course at the same time as moving the course into an engagement with blogging.

At an early stage, the advantages of this were clear. It enabled the rapid capture and display of ideas and allowed for spontaneity of a kind which would perhaps have been lacking in formal written submissions of reports. This included the ability to post pictures and one such illustration, a photograph of an early mind map of the course, was important in a number of ways, namely:

- exploiting the rapid publication of visual images in the medium,
- learning the tools of the blogging system
- discussing ideas and responding to comments

This is a quotation and image from a post in the early stages of the course re-design:

“Blackboard seems a good option at this point in time and Tim and Fitri have been very supportive with ideas that embody the kinds of things we want to do. Namely, running discussions of readings alongside web/blog construction. We also talked through some of the issues around assessment and tools that might support e-submissions and written work. So, back to the drawing board for some thinking about the functionality of the online course that we need to build in...” (Potter, 2007b)

Figure 1 shows the mobile phone photograph of the drawing board which accompanied the above post. I photographed this early version of the sketch I had made and posted it to illuminate the comments and make an early attempt at an overall schematic design. It is possible already to see that the Blackboard VLE was proposed as the central vehicle for course delivery with the blogs hosted externally in order to allow for the ability for course members to engage with the wider Internet as part of their course experience.

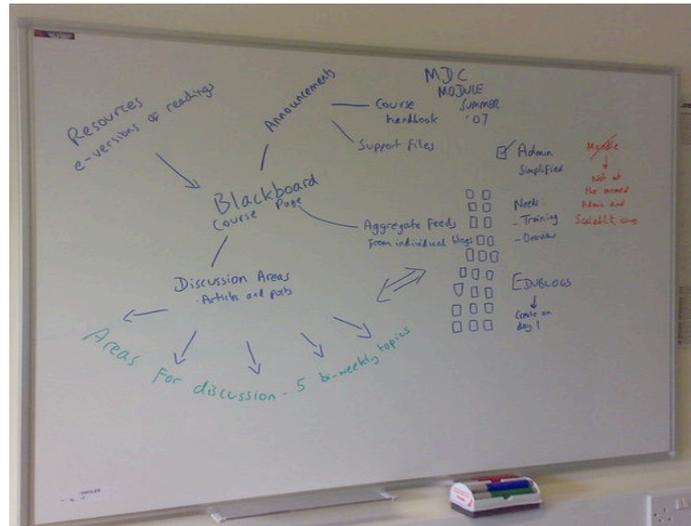


Figure 1: Early schematic diagram of the course: mobile phone picture posted on the blog

The blog continues with a discussion of each step of the process up to the time of running the pilot version on the summer of 2007 and beyond. Each of the INSET sessions where PREEL focused on a pedagogical issue afforded a chance to reflect and to develop ideas further.

A session on designing for learning provided course teams with the chance to think more deeply about the pedagogy involved in the process and stimulated further formative recording in the blog for the module. Immediately after the session, the following post became an important indicator of the direction in which the course was going to move:

“Some of the research was presented around the interviews with tutors after the courses in the project took place... What happened was that VLEs were not being used to do the things which they said they were - they were just used as repositories - there was actually far less time for innovation, time to design etc. There was an element of response to outside accountability pressures etc. as well as to the actual tools being used themselves.”(Potter, 2007b)

It became important in reflecting on this session in the blog to build in an equal weighting to activity, innovation and design and to privilege this in discussion. In order to foster a shared understanding of how this might happen within the course sessions, in the blogs outside the VLE and within the VLE itself, a visual representation of the course at the pilot stage was abstracted from the sketch on the office drawing board. This was refined into the version in Figure 2 and a decision was made to use this in the opening residential and to place it prominently within the VLE as a form of visual identity within the course plan.

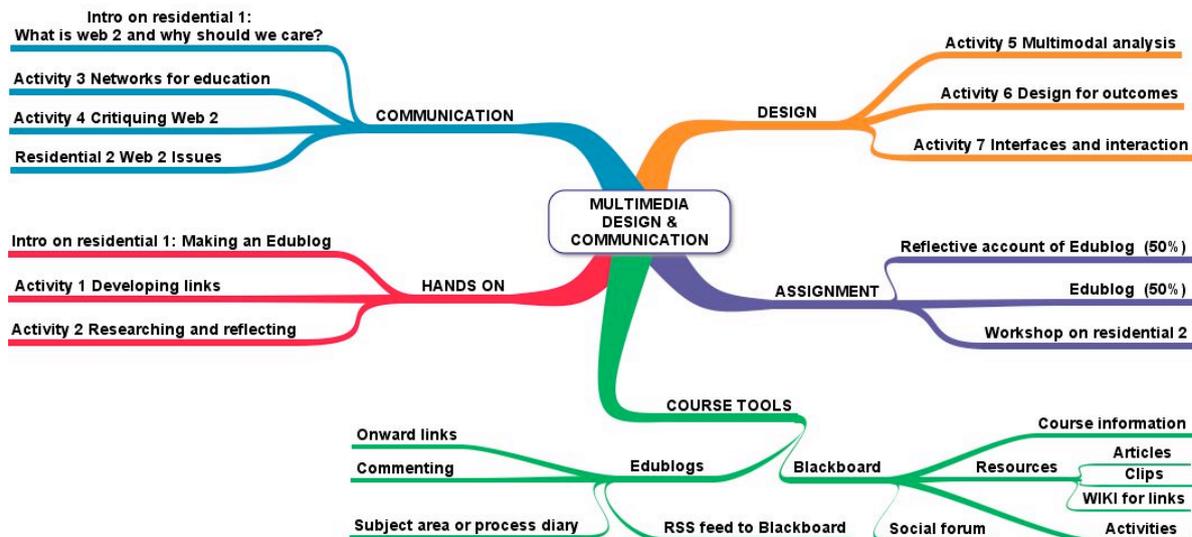


Figure 2: Module re-design map (Potter, 2007b)

Planning for differentiated experiences and outcomes

The dual nature of the input by course members, in either course forums created in the main VLE and related to activities or in the blog itself allowed differentiation for two differing sorts of students. For students who were in educational workplaces, an option was to present curriculum material and experiences in their blogs whilst using the tools created in the activity forums and social forum in Blackboard to reflect and engage critically with the field of study. For students with a media background, another option was to create content which was reflective of the medium itself whilst engaging with it in a productive way.

The assignment was set in such way as to incorporate both of the main target audiences for the module. Students would be encouraged to write about one of the following topics:

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- The uses of social software in educational settings: some reflections based on practice and theory in the course
- Being social online: extracting and critiquing the arguments around Web 2.0 based on experiences of blogging in the course
- Author as designer: reflections on how visual elements are handled by the tools and templates in blogging sites in web 2.0. What are the limitations and in what ways do they constrain you?
- Ethical issues in the uses of web 2.0 areas: gains and losses ”(Potter, 2007a)

Mid-course evaluation

A mid-course evaluation was introduced to enable the students to give the course tutor feedback on the form and function of both the blogs, the timing of the activities and curriculum content of the course. A forum was created in Blackboard and the students were invited to report on their experiences of both the content and production processes.

Initially, responses were mainly grouped around issues to do with the medium itself, dealing with access to the activities and the forums within the tools of the Blackboard VLE. Later responses provided valuable qualitative feedback on issues such as the pacing of activities. The general tone was positive and supportive and negatives were always qualified with aspects of the course which had enabled students to engage with aspects of Internet culture including some of the available theory and practice.

Some responses to the questions commented on the two different spaces, the blog and the VLE and the relationship between the two, the former seen as a more experimental area and the latter as a more traditional text-based medium. The salient positive features of the mid-course evaluation statements were as follows:

- Excitement over the design of the blogs themselves and the degree to which students had agency over the form and function of these;
- For the teachers, a sense that they could incorporate the tools with which some of their students were familiar outside school into formal learning inside school;
- Blackboard offered more opportunities to the students than the VLE in current use in the wider MA (First Class);
- VLEs are of enormous benefit in organising personal workload (personal agency again);
- People have been helpful in sorting out difficulties with each other within the course VLE
- The 2 residentials were a popular part of the overall course design allowing for contextualising the course, for student interaction and shared experience of learning the VLE interface and the blogs before undertaking asynchronous, distance-based activities later in the module.

On the other hand, some negative feedback was introduced on the theme of the pace of activities and sat alongside other salient negative features as follows:

- Technical issues in the edublogs resulted in some difficulties in completing tasks when it was most pressing;
- More face to face sessions – at least one more – would have been of benefit;
- More emphasis on synchronous tools or other multimedia input in the course design could have been beneficial;

Although some elements were predictable from earlier work with VLEs, from reading and INSET in the PREEL project, some of the positive and negative feedback was unexpected. This personal response called to mind a PREEL session with Caroline Daly at which learner voice and experience was the focus, again based on work at the IOE (Daly et al., 2006). An entry from the course re-design blog includes the following:

“... don't second guess what learners are feeling about the process. Some will be comfortable with writing and appearing online. It may already be a part of their lives - they may already be immersed in it (and increasingly over time this will be the case with courses in HE as VLEs become more commonplace in all settings and learners bring comparable skills from other parts of their lives).”
(Potter, 2007b)

End of course evaluation

A 40-item questionnaire, devised in collaboration with Dr Magdalena Jara from the

PREEL team, was used as the tool for an end-of-course evaluation. Certain questions allowed for open text comments to be placed alongside ticked responses for further explanation. A 70% response rate from course participants reported high levels of approval of the module in respect of its content both online and offline, meeting of personal needs and expectations and final overall impressions (92%). Similarly, online activities were rated as good or very good with the residentials similarly gaining high approval ratings (at 80%+).

Open text responses revealed more complex views about the advertised course and the actual course. Again, residential days were regarded very positively whilst more face-to-face work was regarded as being welcome, perhaps not all of it focused on working on the blogs. The online components were mainly well regarded and tutor support was considered good. However, a source of slightly lower rating was the interaction level between students in the forums within the VLE and this would need to be addressed in the final version.

Final re-design of course elements

The final stages of the re-design occurred some weeks after the evaluations were in and there had been time to think through the responsiveness to student need and student voice which had already been identified within the PREEL project. The final blog entry records the experience during this stage as follows:

“PREEL has been many things during this year and the course under redevelopment has undergone many changes. From learning about the technicalities of Blackboard, edublogs ... through to the pragmatics of how to engage learners in more than just article feedback...
...it's still very much an ongoing process so if I have anything at all to feed back it is from being in the middle of it all...Here goes:
Slow the pace sometimes, don't allow a rhythm of a repetitive activity like “reading-response” dictate what happens.
Create mid-term evaluations - stop and ask people how they think things are going.
Be responsive to people who share aspects of their lives with the group - usually around workload.
Don't be afraid to experiment and to be frank about what works and about what doesn't.
Listen.” (Potter, 2007b)

As noted above, the new module was to be taken through the revalidation process as “Internet cultures: theory and practice”. This is because the overriding concern in the new module is to engage participants with the culture of the Internet through self-publication in online social software. Design and multimedia elements are not privileged within this but subsumed within a new emphasis on interaction and publishing online as a cultural phenomenon as much as a technical one and on learning about this through practice.

In response to the concerns raised in the pilot evaluation about interaction online, the residentials will explicitly address issues raised, building on the current successful elements of the face-to-face days. The residentials will also address what will happen next and bring the asynchronous elements to the forefront of conversations during the days. In addition, new strategies for activities will include breaking out of the cycle of

reading and response and introducing more multimedia elements alongside direct questioning, groupwork and advocacy.

The timing of activities was to be different, allowing for overlapping sequences of fortnightly engagement with theory to be tackled alongside the making and doing. In response to concerns about the literature, wider sources have been consulted in building the indicative reading list to include emerging theory from internationally refereed journals. Students will be asked to engage with this at a high level whilst they simultaneously engage with making a personal space online.

In response to technical difficulties within the course which were mainly to do with the blog hosting rather than the VLE, solutions will be sought nearer the time of the first running of the module which have stability and support. It is still intended to pursue an external solution for the blogs in order to allow the students to face outwards onto the wider Internet and to bring their reflections back inside the more formal dedicated spaces of the Blackboard VLE.

Finally, the stated aims of the new module will include the two elements which develop an awareness of both structure and agency in online social software, namely:

- the theory and analysis of web culture, online communication in social software and the implications for learning at all ages and in contexts inside and outside formal education
- practical skills from initial design to the publication and maintenance of a personal/professional web space (or blog)

The re-design process has been shaped equally by the student evaluations in the pilot version, the contact with research in the field of online learning, the INSET sessions during PREEL, the opportunity to reflect in the blog and by the affordances between the course content and the experience itself.

Postscript

The course revalidation has been shaped directly by the PREEL experience and I would like to thank the team who provided support for the technical and pedagogical aspects of the process, in particular, Dr Magdalena Jara, Fitri Mohamad, Tim Neumann and Caroline Daly.

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