A new(er) dimension to online learning communities: using web tools to engage students

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Abstract

Gen Y students (born 1982-2000) are an increasing proportion of student populations. Their familiarity with Information and Communication Tools (ICT) is claimed by generational researchers to influence their approaches to learning and their expectations of university IT capabilities (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Jeffries, 2003; Prensky, 2001). Universities are challenged to attract and retain these students who increasingly face competing demands on their time and expect institutions to respond with flexible services. This paper details the response in one university to the challenge of using the web tools that Gen Y students themselves adopt to enhance communication. It is from the perspective of a central unit charged with communicating with, and providing services to, the entire student body in a multitude of contexts. The applicability, usefulness, obstacles and associated pedagogical principles of ICT are explored and reported in this pilot project.

Introduction

Universities in Australia are increasingly recognising the importance of student engagement and the related issue of student satisfaction. As competition for students intensifies and, concurrently, student expectations rise, providing evidence of a quality student experience is a priority in most universities' strategic plans. The importance placed on student evaluations as part of the quality assurance process was a key theme of the recent Australian Universities Quality Forum, and these concerns are reflected in other similar discussion forums throughout Australia. The increasing use of survey instruments, such as the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), aims to provide quality assurance but also findings that translate into marketable outcomes that will attract more students.

Elsewhere in the media there is much discussion about generational change, particularly on the differences between the ‘baby boomers’, Gen X and Gen Y. Social and cultural research has turned a spotlight on the different ways successive generations think, make decisions, adopt change and spend money (Crawford, 2006; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Stereotypes abound in generational observations but a common theme is that the Net Generation has familiarity with, and preference for, what are termed Information and Communication Tools (ICT) or web tools.

Recently these two issues have conflated as focus turns to ways of engaging the new generation of students with their university experience using the tools and technologies that are second nature to them outside of the university setting. As Williams and Jacobs (2004) note, however, the scholarly literature on these initiatives has been slow to develop, due they surmise, to a preference by those interested in these technologies for the immediacy and interactivity of publishing in the media made available online.

Student Engagement

Universities place a high priority on providing students with an experience that goes beyond the traditional focus on academic performance. A positive student experience arises from
having a sense of connection with the university, both within and beyond the classroom. As Krause, McInnis and Welle (2002) argue, ‘integration into both academic and social domains is important for enhancing student engagement’. Building a sense of belonging in first year undergraduates is particularly important in fostering engagement and retention. Students who get involved both in their study program and extracurricular activities are more likely to complete first year and perform better academically (UWA, 2003). They are also more likely to go on to graduate.

From the students' perspective though, engagement can take on alternate meanings. Krause (2005) defined engagement not just in positive terms of feeling part of a learning community but alternatively as merely another appointment among many in a busy student's life. Alternatively, for some students, the campus experience is a hostile engagement that leaves them feeling isolated and unvalued. Communicating with students effectively is integral to helping them gain a sense of belonging and purpose on campus. If students are busy, stressed, have language difficulties or are shy, they are at risk of slipping through the net and might be better served by having access to a greater range of delivery options including more flexible communication strategies, both in the classroom and in the delivery of administrative and support services.

*Learning across generations*

Observing the differences between generations is largely a post-modern phenomenon that has become a preoccupation since the Second World War. Generational 'labels' such as Baby Boomers and Generation X are coined as we attempt to reflect on the complex behaviours and tendencies of our society and discover patterns that might aid understanding and, in the marketing industry, help identify consumer trends (Colley, 2006).

The more recent focus of such reflections is “Generation Y” (born 1982 – 2000) also termed the Net Generation (Net Gen) (Tapscott, 1998) as well as Millennials, iGen, Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001) or even Gen Why Me. Descriptions of the Net Gen, often prompted by market research (Crawford, 2006), variously list the characteristics as

- grew up with the internet, instant messaging, downloading, so do not view these technologies as new
- used to having choices and flexibility – in entertainment, shopping etc
- used to quick responses at any time of day or night
- open-minded towards immigration and multiculturalism
- believe technology can solve problems, including environmental problems
- live at home longer
- prefer to take advice from peers (or work out problems themselves) rather than being ‘taught’ or following instructions
- are intrinsically motivated by their own interests and curiosity

Net Gen stereotypes are presented positively in some forums but are often portrayed negatively in the news media. Crawford (2006) attempts to put these characteristics in a broader context, and one that is relevant to Australia, by explaining that the Net Gen live subject to a range of conditions significantly different to other generations. For example, they have greater HECS debts, pay more for health services, and face inflated property values in most Australian cities, which are all reasons why this generation might not be able to buy a house rather than simply a selfish lack of desire to be tied to a mortgage.
While stereotypes abound, some things are clear: there are differences in the generations that marketers, businesses, schools and even churches are taking note of, in the ways in which they seek to engage this generation. The question now is how are universities responding?

The UWA NODE Project: Networking Online to Diversify Engagement

NODE is the authors’ response in one university to the challenge of communicating with students through use of a range of technologies. We are investigating the applicability, usefulness, possible obstacles and other issues associated with using web tools to communicate with students and to engage them in learning and other collaborative communities. This research project arose from our awareness that we face an ongoing challenge keeping up with our students’ preferred methods of communication and responding creatively to their need for flexibility in our service delivery.

We are particularly interested in the use of web tools outside the confines of Faculty teaching (i.e. teaching a defined cohort a certain unit) and as such will focus on the perspective from a central unit charged with communicating with and providing services to the entire student body in a multitude of contexts.

Background

The NODE project’s focus is from the perspective of Student Services, a central unit committed to the excellence model in provision of services to our student population. Student Services is composed of smaller teams whose student cohorts often overlap: Learning, Language and Research Skills; Diversity and Transition programmes; Careers Centre; Counselling; Housing and Finance Office. Teams have common goals but each program has different communication strategies and types of information it needs to share or ways in which the program interacts with students, either individually or in groups.

Our approach might be classed as a ‘whole student’ approach where administrative, curricular (academic skills programs) and cocurricular activities (transition and student leadership programs) all form part of our responsibilities (Evenbech & Hamilton 2006). Student Services has an important role to play in facilitating student engagement because of this unique relationship with students and has a responsibility to ensure that the ways in which we communicate reflect best practice. This includes being in touch with what students’ personal communication environments are and assessing how we can constructively use the tools they use amongst themselves to communicate with them. If communication and engagement can be facilitated by the use of web tools, then there will be a positive, flow-on effect to the classroom.

We were confident that ICTs could add value to our programs and what we can offer students but we were mindful that adopting different tools would require some learning on the part of all staff within the unit. Our intention was to trial and to adopt those tools that were useful for the communication needs of particular programs, not to use technology just because it was available. Heavy workloads and in some instances, an inbuilt resistance to change and experimentation noted in the literature (Fitzgibbon & Jones, 2004), meant that the interest of staff had to be engaged and benefits to them explained, to gain their cooperation. Staff awareness raising and professional development has become a significant component of the project as individuals recognised the importance to being familiar with the terminology and applications of ICTs.
Indeed, the National Research Council in the United States has concluded that competency with information technology is imperative in contemporary higher education and has labelled these attributes as fluency in information technology: FITness (Moore, Moore & Fowler 2005: 3). FITness requires three kinds of knowledge: contemporary skills, foundational concepts and intellectual capabilities, that latter being the capability to apply IT to complex situations. To bridge the gap between staff expertise and student needs, according to Moore, Moore and Fowler, universities ‘must address awareness, enablement and integration:

- Awareness of students’ approaches to meeting their learning needs and what technologies are available to them;
- Enablement through professional development so that staff have the skills needed to implement systemic change;
- Integration, or the ability to bring together the disparate pieces needed – pedagogy, learning space design, technology, support, policies – to enable successful learning’ (2005, 3-4)

Both professional and academic staff must be FIT to create the learning environments that their students expect. We would argue that we need to be FIT just to have the skill of integration, to keep up with what our students already know about technology and think about how we can apply it for their benefit.

The initial stage of the NODE project, then, focused on assessing and improving staff awareness of ICTs and their potential applications in different program contexts. This was achieved initially by raising the topic as a subject of discussion in a staff open space forum, dedicated to determining strategic directions for our unit in the coming year. The value of this technique was that it allowed interest to surface as part of a wider discussion of staff IT training needs within an informal and non-threatening environment, but at the same time sparked an awareness in some that there were applications that they were unfamiliar with although keen to learn more about. Another outcome was that there was a wider group beyond the project team that were keen to develop IT skills.

The next stage involved this group developing a comprehensive on-line IT skills audit and administering it to staff. As the skills audit would provide useful information in areas needing further development generally, the exercise received strong support from management and staff responded to the request to participate. The audit identified for the project team the degree of knowledge of ICTs held by staff. Respondents could choose from the following choices of answers (adapted slightly to relate to each statement/question):

- Not familiar with this
- Familiar but have not used
- Have used
- Am confident to train others

One aim was to identify 'local' experts within different teams who could act as first contacts with the project team and champion adoption of different ICTs in that program. We were mindful of the need to sell the idea of being ICT-FIT, when the time and energy required within a busy schedule creates the same resistance as most have to finding time for physical fitness, despite the best intentions.

A further section of the audit focused on preferred learning styles when undertaking training. Some resistance to new technologies arises from the fear of not understanding or having one's ignorance exposed and so being able to tailor training to meet individual needs, where possible, would make it more attractive and effective. An ongoing training program is being developed to provide general introductory modules for the whole unit, sessions with program teams on particular applications and individual sessions where necessary, particularly for
those who have responsibility for implementation. Both online and hard copy resources are being developed, available to all staff on the intranet. The effectiveness of the training program and uptake of ICTs are performance indicators that will be evaluated throughout the course of the project.

Further incentive to explore these communication strategies is found in our student profile, which shares the characteristics of Net Gen to a large degree. The University of Western Australia (UWA) enrolls the highest percentage of school leavers of any Australian university, 82% in 2006; our students are also younger on average than their peers in other states. They are also very capable students academically, as they have faced fierce competition for entry. These two characteristics, young and academically capable, do not necessarily equate to technologically competent, although this is an assumption made by the University, in that they do not provide introductory computer training courses for commencing students, expecting them to be proficient in basic skills. Within a diverse student population however, there is always some variation in the degree of competency.

The UWA Transition programs had observed some students over the past few years seeking additional IT support and undertook a survey of commencing undergraduates in January 2006 to determine their competency in achieving a set of six basic IT tasks. Of the 939 responses collected, surprisingly, 20.4 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not know how to do one of the tasks, the most common being 'participating in an on-line discussion: 10.2 per cent' (Skene & Allen 2006). The few students, however, who accessed additional computing support offered once semester commenced were all mature age students returning after a significant break. The Net Gen students demonstrated the Net Gen characteristic of exploring and finding out for themselves or asked a friend, because by that early stage of semester, many were participating in WebCT discussions as part of their unit requirements.

Other assumptions about student knowledge and competencies, applicable to the NODE project, are made around issues of access to ICTs and the preferred communication technologies of our students. What are students’ expectations of IT services available to them on campus? Do all students have access to internet off campus and what percentage have access to broadband, mobile phones and PDAs? A further stage of the NODE project involves determining the experiences and expectations in relation to ICTs of our student cohort through a comprehensive survey sent to all first year students in 2006 who had completed 50 per cent of a standard course load – approximately 3,500 students. This information will allow us to determine where the gaps currently are between experience and expectations in communication technologies and how NODE can respond.

Principle

Do students learn differently because they have grown up with access to a range of technologies? Gen Y students report in surveys, focus groups and interviews that they access information differently from their digital immigrant elders (Prensky, 2001). Their learning of new(er) technologies is almost intuitive and their capacity to multitask is highly developed. These skills in themselves do not guarantee academic success. The Net Generation must develop critical thinking skills to evaluate the mass of information that they can access and not be passive recipients.

There is considerable resistance in some sections of the tertiary community to increased use of technologies that are sometimes viewed as alienating and potentially inhibit engagement rather than promoting it. It is often argued that only technologically able, high socio-
economic status (SES) students will adopt these tools but as Calder (2006) writes in his case study at James Cook University, many JCU students live in rural, remote and/or low SES areas of Northern Queensland and may not have fast internet connections, but they still need these tools and appreciate the flexibility they offer. It is important to keep equity firmly in mind when devising communication strategies that rely on access to particular tools but we should also not lose sight of the needs of all students for flexible delivery and how the use of ICT can facilitate that access.

Writers on the subject of ICTs are careful to highlight that educators should not have their teaching dictated by the technology (Jeffries, 2003). Conversely it is frequently reinforced that the face-to-face, personalised approach continues to be of utmost importance – not least of all for the Net Generation. While students like personal interaction, whether in lectures or tutorials or being able to ask a question directly of administrative staff, they are often time-poor and increasingly must juggle commitments of paid employment, family commitments and study. Flexibility is important because choices have to be made: sometimes studying for a test takes precedence over a lecture that can be downloaded later or finding information online is preferable to waiting in queues.

A common misconception of the ‘baby boomers’ who tend to dominate academic and senior professional staff is that Gen Y students value technology at the expense of personal interaction: that placing podcasts of workshops online or using the Lectopia system to record lectures will result in diminished attendance, making the lecturer redundant. Student surveys in North America do not confirm this apprehension. Passion and specialised knowledge were still central to the qualities that Gen Y students valued in teaching staff (Roberts 2005). They also valued the ability to use technology effectively, with a mix of 50% face-to-face lectures and 50% on-line contact the most popular option (Roberts 2005:3.3).

Advocates of ICTs have a long and convincing argument. They argue the advantages of using ICT to deliver on-line learning and build communities as cited in the literature are that:

- it has a democratising effect (Steeples et al, 1996 in Jeffries, 2003)
- it removes the bias towards the tutor or dominant student (Veerman et al, 1999 in Jeffries, 2003)
- the dialogue is available for students to return to at a later date (Jeffries, 2003)
- it develops shared resources and spaces and improves collaboration (Wheeler, 2001)
- it gives students access to seamless, mobile technology (Wheeler, 2001)

Like any tool it has to be wielded appropriately. Using ICTs properly can encourage critical thinking, team work, and creativity (just like in the classroom) as well as self-paced learning, flexible/out of hours delivery and non moderated peer interaction not possible in face-to-face teaching. Moss (2006) puts it very appropriately in calling it ‘technology in the service of education’.

**Practice**

The UWA NODE project is a pilot project undertaken in 2006-2007 to investigate use of web tools in Student Services’ programs to facilitate communication with students. Key stages of the project are:

- create awareness and support for project objectives amongst staff
investigate staff knowledge and training needs
develop training resources and undertake training
assess student experience and expectations of the IT environment on campus
develop protocols for use of web tools
identify individual program needs and implement web tools as required
report to steering committee and wider university community at regular intervals
evaluate and report to stakeholders

When implementing the pilot schemes, the tools were split into four types; each with slightly different requirements in terms of technology, training and support.

The first type, AV-based tools, includes podcasts, video-on-demand and Lectopia (UWA’s lecture capture solution). Applications for Student Services include recordings of study skills workshops and guest speakers, video tours of facilities and audio files of student testimonials and comments.

Discussion communities are the second group, making use of existing technologies to host blogs (web logs – a form of interactive on-line diary), discussion boards and instant chat facilities. At UWA, the platform available is a Drupal website, allowing more interactivity that the content management system, MySource, usually used for website management. These tools allow the Student Services’ staff to maintain contact with students who aren’t always able to come onto campus, for example, MBA students who only study on weekends (Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and to reach out to prospective students, especially those in rural areas.

In 2007, the Transition programs will host blogs written by commencing students about their experiences during first year. A range of experiences will be canvassed, including students in residential colleges, as their experiences of campus life are of interest to prospective rural students and their teachers and parents. The Admissions Office will make use of students blogs as a reference when visiting rural schools throughout Western Australia, as well as making use of webcams and Skype software to hold discussions between rural secondary school students and current UWA Uni Role Models - students trained to talk about their university experiences to younger students. The informality of blogs is attractive to students as a less threatening communication medium (Crowe & Tonkin, 2006) and the advantage for Student Services is that bloggers talk about services from an integrated perspective (their personal perspective as they experience different services) rather than using a program centred approach.

The third type of resources are flexible resources developed by Student Services staff and available in modular form on-line. As well as tutorials and courses, a range of wikis (on-line encyclopaedia edited by its readers) allows, for example, students to demystify the university environment for their peers and share information about their own experiences. Similarly, staff use a wiki to access and update the workplace procedures manual.

The final type of tools is subscription services that require users to register or ‘opt-in’ to the service. Examples include using SMS to inform students of upcoming events at Student Services or remind them of appointments. RSS feeds are an online tool whereby users are sent summaries of ‘news’ to their personal data collection ‘aggregators’. This allows students to be informed, for example, when event registrations open or when new resources are available.
Conclusion

Using ICTs in education has been described as the solution not directly related to any identified problem (JEM Editorial, 2003). However, the attributes and skills of the Net Gen (and subsequent generations) must influence the way universities store and share information, and teach and communicate with students.

The ICT environment is developing rapidly at present as a new generation of tools and applications create ever more demand to be instantly responsive, always connected and increasingly flexible and mobile. At the same time, the flood of information accessible is creating needs for even more effective searching, storage and retrieval systems. Net Gen students are comfortable in this changing environment, or at least, are more so than most of their academic and professional staff. Projects like NODE aim to keep staff in touch, so that they can make informed judgements, whilst utilising ICTs to provide more communication options.

Effective use of ICTs will not result in less interaction with our students. Net Gen students value personal interaction as much as any other students, but they also appreciate flexibility. If we make our services relevant to them, we will be more successful in engaging their interest, retaining them and providing them with a positive student experience.

As educators find ways to engage with the tools and think about incorporating them into their programs, it is almost impossible to look forward to what may be the next technological innovation to spread into the Australian University sector. Changes already seen in the US indicate that it may be that networked gaming explosion that will become more mainstreamed and start to influence other areas of life including education. Whatever changes occur, the challenge of responding innovatively will remain with us.

References


