‘If you build it, they will come’\textsuperscript{1}: The challenges of developing a social networking site in a university context.

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Abstract

Social networking software offers a powerful tool for institutions wishing to engage students who are Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – literate. Online communities offer alternative ways to communicate with and engage students that are just beginning to be explored. As university administrators and leaders increasingly seek to improve retention of first year students through early engagement with their campus community, the online environment is being seen as a complement to the learning and engagement opportunities within the classroom.

The challenges of developing a social networking site that allows all students and staff at one Australian university to build online communities are addressed in this paper. The lessons learned over the first year of the project are distilled, with advice on what to try and what to avoid in undertaking such a challenge.

Introduction

The challenges in developing an online social networking site in a university context have parallels with the movie, Field of Dreams. Kevin Costner, in his role as a struggling farmer with a dream of building a baseball field on his farm, faces the same challenge as to whether his vision will find favour with the general public. There are the usual setbacks and nay-sayers but, as in every Hollywood dream, there's a happy ending as streams of baseball fans arrive by car at the newly completed venue for the first game.

Social networking software offers a powerful tool for institutions wishing to engage a demographic of 17-30 years of age who are Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – literate (Anderson 2007; Millea, Green & Putland 2005). This demographic clearly coincides with a substantial percentage of most Australian universities' commencing undergraduate student populations. Students report in ICT surveys that they are spending time on social networking sites (Australian Flexible Learning Network, 2007; JISC 2007a & b; Skene, Cluett & Hogan, 2007): at the same time, lecture attendance is falling and the challenge of engaging students is a constant preoccupation for university administrators and leaders. If social networking sites engage students in their lives beyond the university, it is reasonable to assume that they offer a way to communicate with students and encourage students to interact with each other (Anderson 2007).

\textsuperscript{1} Reference to the quote ‘If you build it, he will come’ from the 1989 movie, \textit{Field of Dreams}, directed and adapted by Phil Alden Robinson and starring Kevin Costner.

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The possibilities intrigued the authors, who are both professional staff employed in a central administrative unit in an Australian university (Cluett & Skene 2007). They set out to explore how ICT could enhance service provision, improve communication with students and foster engagement. As both authors have a strong focus on transition, first year students were a key target group for the project.

The lessons learnt in the initial stages of the project, which had as its main focus the development of a social networking site, node.live, are distilled here as a guide for others who may similarly be intrigued by the potential of Web 2.0 technologies. Whilst some examples of the ways in which ICT was employed are offered here, the primary message is to encourage exploration of the potential of Web 2.0 tools, in order to ‘keep in touch’ with an important aspect of most first year students’ lives: how they communicate with one another. These technologies are evolving and many potential applications are yet to be explored or even imagined (as noted in the Horizon Report 2008, a review of emerging technologies over the next five years by New Media Consortium and Educause). Our commencing students may have better technical skills than many staff, but they expect staff to take the lead in exploring the pedagogical value of their personal communication technologies.

Background of the NODE project

NODE (Networking Online to Diversify Engagement) was born from awareness that the commencing undergraduate student population at the university in question was overwhelmingly Gen Y, born post-1982, or as Prensky (2001) dubbed them, digital natives. Although literature on Gen Y attributes certain characteristics to this age demographic (Tapscott 1998; Howe & Strauss 2000), there was little empirical evidence about the online behaviour, experience and expectations of our own students. A first step in the project was to survey first year students as they completed that year, to gain evidence about student preferences in relation to ICT and the university environment.

To this end, students who had completed 50 per cent or more of their first year units were surveyed by email, with a link to an online form. A response rate of 643 students (16.8 per cent) was received and of these students, 93.5 per cent were born in 1982 or later. The high response of Gen Y students is not unexpected in this first year cohort, as the annual intake of school leavers comprises approximately 82 per cent of all commencing undergraduates. Students were asked about their access to ICT, their use of, and their expectations of the IT environment in the university. A snapshot of the data as it relates to social networking has been reported previously (Skene, Cluett & Hogan 2007): a more comprehensive report is available from the authors.

Many assumptions are made by university staff about the availability of new technologies and students’ uptake generally. The NODE survey revealed a clearer picture of this particular cohort’s access to tools and their usage. As one example, although anecdotal evidence assumed most students owned laptops, actual ownership across all faculties was reported at 57%. International students are generally more likely to own a laptop with 75% indicating that they do compared with 54% of domestic students. Those aged 25 and over were more likely to own a laptop compared to those in the under-25 age group (62% compared to 56%). Mobile phone ownership was reported at 96%, a figure that compares with other Australian studies. Having a clearer picture of access to technologies and patterns of usage amongst our first year students has been valuable in establishing a benchmark against which to measure changing patterns of ownership and usage in future studies.

Similar surveys have been carried out in other Australian universities (for example at the University of Melbourne by Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray & Krause (2008) and at Curtin University by Oliver and Goerke (2007), and across institutions in the U.S. (Hartman, Moskal & Dziuban 2005) and the UK (Anderson, 2007; JISC 2007a & b). The survey findings, both from our own student cohort and from others across the Western world, show that there is a growing interest in social
networking (JISC 2007a &b; Oliver & Goerke 2007; Kennedy et al. 2008). The pattern is also changing rapidly: when this survey was undertaken late in 2006, Facebook had not made an impact. One year later, the impact of Facebook is clear to anyone engaging younger students in discussion about their online activities and for some, the amount of time students admit to spending on Facebook and similar sites is a worrying large proportion of the time they have available to study. To explore this dynamic and to focus more on the student experience with ICT, rather than access, a further survey is underway that includes questions about students’ perceptions of the value of various technologies for their study and their sense of being part of an online learning community.

Some messages are very clear, both from the NODE survey and surveys undertaken by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) of prospective students in the United Kingdom. Gen Y students value flexibility. They want their lectures recorded and to be able to access them when it suits them – even if many still acknowledge that they prefer face-to-face teaching if the lecturer is knowledgeable and enthusiastic (NODE survey comment 2006). They also expect their lecturers to have a reasonable level of expertise with ICT, but in findings that reflect the value Gen Y places on peers, students also reported relying heavily on informal networks (JISC 2007b). High school students surveyed in the UK and in Australia expected to learn more skills in ICT whatever their course of study (JISC 2007a; Australian Flexible Learning Network 2007). The JISC study, ‘In their own words’ (2007b: 7) observed that ‘the boundaries between learning and other aspects of learners’ lives are increasingly blurred’ and that it was important to be able to personalise the learning environment by ‘selecting technologies meaningful to the learner’.

Students in the UK, who are more inclined to move away from home to study than Australian students, recorded seeking out information on IT infrastructure and policy on subjects such as unrestricted web access as part of their decision-making process when choosing where to apply (JISC 2007a). Students in the NODE survey, many of whom are still living at home and with access to broadband (85% of respondents) were not as critical of access to IT infrastructure: ‘I think on the whole it works pretty well’ (NODE survey comment 2006) but some expressed frustration at a lack of flexibility sometimes evident, for example, when lectures weren’t recorded. Others noted that they expected ICT to be integrated into their learning environment: ‘I’m all for the use of web-based materials but I’d rather that they were relevant than just used as a token attempt at being “with the times”’ (NODE survey comment 2006). An integrated approach mirrors the interest many university administrators and academics have in the emerging technologies and how they are developing in parallel with more personalised approaches in education – as in the ability to tailor course materials and information to students directly through portals and platforms like Web CT (Owen, Grant, Sayers & Facer, 2006) and seeking ways to respond to the changing ICT environment.

Students will experiment to find the most effective strategies of learning in a digital age, using the tools at hand. It is good educational practice to learn from learners and to recognise, in this instance, that those newest to the institution may be best informed about changing communication strategies (JISC 2007b). This desire to hear directly from students about their expectations informed both the initial NODE survey and the follow-up currently in process. The technologies are evolving at a rapid pace and inevitable impact on the changing nature of learning: this can be both exhilarating and daunting to university staff faced with bridging the gap between institution and learner.

Nevertheless, understanding the expectations about ICT of commencing students is a vital step in either making sure that they can be met or explaining clearly why this is not possible. Unmet expectations lead to frustration and disengagement at a time when the focus should be on ensuring that a sense of engagement is developing for first year students. First year students, especially those enrolling straight from school, often face a challenge in becoming independent learners. There is a lot to learn in a short amount of time, so it is valuable if students can use technology to overcome

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problems and any sense of isolation. Being able to stay connected to former personal networks whilst developing new networks, both in person and online, can ease the transition to first year.

Online communities also have the potential to improve their students' experience. The pressures of modern student life make this generation time poor as they juggle multiple roles. The online environment enables communication 24/7, which is strength for those who value flexibility although administrators and academics have to resolve how to meet expectations of fast responses (Hartman, Moskal & Dziuban, 2005; Wager, 2005). Online communities allow groups to form across the artificial boundaries of course enrolment, year of study and the student/staff divide, thereby offering possibilities for information-exchange, peer mentoring and other learning opportunities. This is particularly valuable for first year students, who may be less confident and appreciate gaining access to personalised information as in the transition blogs of other first year students, whilst remaining anonymous.

Developing a social networking site that would allow students to post their ideas, questions and suggestions and interact with each other and staff was an attractive proposition. The institutional location, within central administration and with responsibility for providing services to the entire student population gave many options to recruit particular cohorts within the student body, who could use the site to blog and run forums on topics of interest to themselves. In theory the site seemed like a good proposition but the question was whether in practice, such a site could attract attention and compete with the attractions of Facebook or other smaller, subject-specific communities already thriving in cyberspace.

First steps: building the site node.live
Node.live developed as part of a broader pilot project that had a focus on trialling ICT within individual Student Services programs. The project steering group included staff from IT Services who were keen to collaborate in trialling a purpose-built online environment using open-source software. Input from the steering group broadened the focus from students to include all staff and students. The benefits of enabling those types of interaction were immediately obvious to the project team, who then adapted their original objectives to include the expanded brief. There was no additional cost in terms of website development in offering access to both staff and students, although there was an added incentive to promote the site more widely to staff to gain their input.

The node.live website was built with Drupal, an open-source software offering read/write capabilities. Drupal is a modular system so users can design functionality by choosing modules such as blogs, wikis ('books' in Drupal vocabulary), groups, forum, email, chat, and so forth. Initially node.live was developed with four modules: blogs, books, forums and groups. In acknowledging one of the lessons learnt to 'keep it simple', the number of modules adopted initially has been limited so that attention could be focused on these modules.

The exploratory nature of the project, use of open-source software, and support from IT staff has enabled the website to be built without major resources being required. The first stage of Node has been funded with a budget of less than $20,000, most of which has gone on project officer salary. The hidden cost has been the time committed by the two coordinators, who although at times daunted by the scope to the project they have undertaken, have been energised by the varied potential applications node.live offered in being responsive to students' changing modes of communication and learning. As Tracy Mitrano of Cornell University noted, 'From the very beginning of the early applications, something was different. People had the opportunity to burst out of their parochial communities and make connections around the world' (cited in Berg, Berquam & Christoph, 2007: 34). Social networking tools offered the chance to connect with students in new ways within our university community, and we were willing to experiment. Seven lessons, and some practical suggestions learnt in the first stages, are highlighted below.

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Lesson 1: Attract funds for a pilot project and be prepared to innovate and seize opportunities as they present themselves.
Understandably, most university IT infrastructure plans are long term in their focus and do not always respond quickly to new developments (Moore, Moore & Fowler 2005). Get backing for your project by concentrating on the potential contribution to learning and engagement. There is growing recognition, as in Richard Light’s study of students at Harvard (2001), that important learning takes place beyond the classroom and particularly, when students are discussing their study together or with staff, outside the classroom environment (Markwell 2007). Fostering these conversations, in person or online, requires innovative solutions. It is clear from survey results that almost all our first year students spend significant amounts of time online, whether that is web-based research, playing games, or communicating via email, chat and social networking sites. Attracting them to a university-sponsored site is a challenge in itself and requires a willingness to be open to opportunities. There may be specific communities already online, like the University Computer Club, who would be early adopters of a site open to all.

The temptation to keep your site ‘closed’ until it is perfect will be strong. But only by opening up the community will the project thrive. Users will forgive you some teething troubles if you let them know you are fixing things and will want to offer advice. They will also think of applications that you have not considered.

Lesson 2: Establish the ground rules for your site early in the development
Write some protocols for behaviour before you launch your site. Your university will probably already have various policies and a code of conduct which can provide the context for your protocols. Make sure new users are provided with a link to your rules as it will help them as well as protecting you from criticism should someone take exception to any post on the site. Having clear guidelines is especially important for first year users who may need to be educated on ‘net etiquette’ and on protecting their privacy.

Establish a Steering Group with a high level sponsor who can advise you of issues in the wider university community that can impact on your project. The issue of bad behaviour was a concern in the early stages of node.live but it has proven unfounded thus far. Nevertheless, issues of online communities should be discussed openly and agreement made on how to handle them at the outset of the project. Questions such as: ‘how will staff react if students post criticism of particular units on the site’ or ‘do students need to be educated about protecting their own privacy online’ were dealt with in the early stages.

Next steps: developing the environment
Development of the website has been a major part of the first year of the project but this is in the context of part time involvement, with other aspect of the project such as conducting the student survey, analysis, report writing and dissemination and staff training consuming much of the available time for the project. Node.live grew incrementally, as the project team learnt through trial and error and users uncovered bugs in the system that needed attention. This incremental process of building content on the site before widespread promotion has been valuable, allowing the team to gain expertise and ‘seed’ content through recruiting a few keen user groups so that the site is active when promoted to students. Transition for first year students has been a key topic of ‘seeded’ content in the early stages. Some of the first users of the site were rural students who were scholarship holders who had a requirement as part of their scholarship to engage in some forms of community activity and chose to blog on node.live about their transition to university. The best of their blogs were then compiled and a link to them posted on the home page for easy access by this year’s commencing students.

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Lesson 3: Don’t be put off by your own ignorance - see it as a challenge to learn new skills

Learning a new technology can be daunting if you are a member of the generation of ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2001). The best approach is to take a leaf out of the Gen Y’s book and learn by doing. There is only so much that you can learn from others’ experiences and the manual: reinvent the wheel if you want to or need to. Sometimes you will have to work through issues yourself, even though you have tried to gain the benefit of others’ experience and have read research about how to go about things. Your context will dictate which specific issues you are going to come up against and how best to deal with them.

Just as your project team is likely to have variable skills, remember that the student population, even when they are mostly Gen Y as in our first year cohort, have very diverse backgrounds and a variety of skills and interest in ICT. Node.live has quite detailed instructions on aspects of getting started for those for whom this is a first experience of blogging or posting comments. The team has also put time into training staff and students in a computer lab situation so that participants can learn in a hands-on manner.

Although it is valuable to have complementary skills within the project team, it is important to get the ‘right’ project officer. This person is critical to the project's success and probably needs to be Gen Y who is in tune with what is current, because you will need to be responsive to changing trends.

Lesson 4: Have confidence in what you are trying to achieve

It is vital to have a vision and be flexible about getting there. Building a community will not happen overnight (Haughey 2007). As the site develops you will start to see possible uses that add value to current programs and services. It might be starting forums to align with academic skills workshops or a transition blog to welcome commencing students and give them access to ‘insider information’ such as where the best or cheapest food on campus can be found. Students will also blog about their own interests: node.live posts have included observations of birds (feathered) on campus; reviews of upcoming movies; and favourite ways to procrastinate.

Be prepared to defend your site as well as your pedagogical perspective. Both students and staff can question the pedagogical value in Web 2.0 technologies and argue that universities should not use alternate modes of delivery just to appear innovative. The view that social networking belongs outside the university is one that is advanced by some students, who do not want their personal communications tools adopted officially by universities (JISC 2007b). Many students will say that they don't want their university administrators on Facebook: others will see the value in belonging to select online communities that reflect their interests and value most what is useful to them personally (Berg, Berquam & Christoph 2007).

Ongoing steps: maintaining the community

It is one challenge to build a social networking site and yet another to maintain a community (Haughey 2007). The work of building and promoting the site runs parallel in the developmental stages. Our goal is that node.live will gain a momentum that will sustain it, so that word-of-mouth promotion of the site amongst students will lead to a lively community, albeit one that may consist of many smaller communities and groups. That stage is still distant: at present the administrators are actively seeding content and recruiting students to do the same. Getting those who have signed up to get involved in the creation of content is difficult, as most users are still ‘readers’ and not ‘writers’ in the process. This phenomenon is not unusual, as there is a generally accepted 'rule of thumb' that of every 100 web users, one will create content, ten will comment on content and the remaining 89 will be lurkers, the term commonly given to those who view content (Guardian online July 20, 2006 cited in White 2007) It seems that there is not enough incentive for a lot of students to post their thoughts/opinions on node.live. As administrators, we question whether we will always

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have to seed content on a site like this, or will we reach a critical mass of users that will spontaneously create their own content?

Having raised this concern, it is worth heeding the advice of those who have been maintaining communities online for some years. Matt Haughey, creator of the site MetaFilter, offers some tips that include 'Be the best member of your site. Lead by example by participating as much as you can in your own community'. His post hit a note of accord with other site moderators, with one commenting:

_The ones that really thrive have a lot of “pump-priming” on my part, and it’s thrilling to see new members come onboard and adding to the conversation. Communities are a lot like gardens in that they need thoughtful and thorough preparation, then feeding and weeding to keep them healthy._ (Sunfell, comment in Haughey, 2007)

Realistically, then, a project such as node.live is a long term commitment if the site is to be a viable community.

**Lesson 5: Have an ongoing commitment on a daily basis to contribute to the vitality of your online community**

It is vital to stay in close contact with the site (having an RSS feed for new postings makes it easy to keep an eye on activity). If as in node.live, the website is only one small part of your daily tasks, try and find ways of ensuring that the site does not get neglected. The NODE team has scheduled days when each team member will check content and seed content if they think it is necessary.

**Lesson 6: Promote your website as widely as possible**

In promoting your site, think about how Gen Y access information and promote your project in ways that will attract them. Promote your site through other sites that students use, both within and external to the university. Encourage your keen bloggers to link from any external blogs or forums and direct other students to your site.

Node.live was promoted extensively to first year students attending enrolment sessions by current student volunteers, who handed out information on a variety of services for commencing students and chatted informally with them. There were also opportunities during orientation to promote the website, especially when students were in computer labs, enrolling in their tutorials online, to introduce them to node.live.

Staff who promote student engagement are always interested in finding ways of connecting with the student ‘voice’. NODE has promoted the project and node.live through a feature article in the staff newsletter, and through a presentation and workshop at the state-wide Teaching and Learning Forum. In-house events like Teaching Month, an annual event within the university, provided an opportunity to offer introductory sessions in the computer lab to staff interested in learning more and was well supported.

It is absolutely vital that you are strategic in promoting your project to colleagues who will be interested and supportive. Find champions at all levels and especially as high in the organisation as possible. Let them know about your successes through project updates and reports, papers that you present and any evaluation or student feedback that you receive. Acknowledge their support wherever possible.

**Future directions and outcomes**

The website has progressed to a stage where it can be actively promoted and energy is focused on growing and maintaining the online community. Although as moderators, you are busy promoting your website, seeding content, seeking feedback and resolving technical problems, there are other
issues that you need to consider. If you have started your project as a pilot, do you have access to funding to maintain the website? How will you evaluate your website? What are the unexpected outcomes, both positive and negative that might impact on future stages of your project?

Lesson 7: Justify your project outcomes as broadly as possible
Evaluation of the website can take various forms. Make use of webstats to monitor traffic on your site. You can differentiate between external viewers and local viewers. It is difficult to evaluate the benefit to lurkers (those who visit and read but do not comment), but if you can demonstrate that a lot of local viewers are at least visiting the site, there must be some benefit. Adding questions about the website to future student surveys is another way of receiving feedback.

The NODE team has charted the progress of the project through exploratory and reflective papers during the course of the project. When supplemented with comprehensive survey data of students from our own institution, research output has helped to gain recognition of the credibility of the project.

In the future:
The short-term future direction of node.live will be to continue to grow the community of users so that the site develops an authentic student voice and becomes a lively forum for debate on a wide range of topics. Student-created content in formats other than the written word, like the videos that are starting to appear, offer alternative ways to communicate information. Current programs such as Learning Skills workshops can link their content to forums on node.live which can extend the learning not just within the class group but to a broader audience and complement other learning resources -as in podcasts and online resources. The site’s potential as an avenue for engagement with prospective students, both in Australia and overseas has been noted, with an e-link project planned to build community between current first year students and prospective international or rural students. These are but a few of the possible directions that could develop in the next stage of expansion.

Conclusion
Any space where students meet to converse, discuss, debate and engage is an opportunity to encourage valuable learning (Light, 2001; Markwell, 2007). The online environment is no less important than the coffee-shop, garden courtyard or study room in providing space that facilitates peer engagement. It offers opportunities for those who do not have the time to linger on campus or are reserved in personality, to still engage. As survey data confirms, commencing undergraduates have well developed skills in emerging and personalised technologies and many expect these tools to inform their formal and informal learning at university.

Online communities supplement the physical environment and can add variety and richness through their potential to grow across boundaries that institutions impose through their structures of classes, disciplines and years of study. They are, to date, an under-utilised resource awaiting further exploration and experimentation. As demonstrated in this account, the obstacles to beginning exploration are not great and the potential seemingly unlimited.

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