Chapter 12

Constructing Disciplinary Inquiry Communities Using Web 2.0 Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the utility of Web 2.0 technologies for supporting independent inquiry-based learning, with a particular focus upon the use of blogs and social bookmarking tools. It begins by outlining the key issues confronting practitioners wishing to engage with such technologies before moving on to describe the approaches that were adopted in a range of first-year History seminar classes in two research-led universities in the UK. The chapter closes with an evaluation of the positive impact of the use of Web 2.0 on student learning and any drawbacks that were encountered. Web 2.0 is judged to have had a positive impact upon student engagement with course materials, encouraging student to conduct independent research outside of class and generating significant interactions between students and their peers as well as with tutors. Future avenues for research include investigations into how the use of such technologies can be scaled up for larger student groups and what impact summative assessment might have upon student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Inquiry-based learning (IBL) is a form of active learning that seeks to engage students, either individually or in groups, in a process of self-directed and reflexive inquiry and research. Unlike the closely related problem-based learning (PBL) where learners are typically presented with a problem at the outset and tasked with defining and sourcing their own research questions, methods, and data (Barrett, 2005), IBL embraces a range of pedagogic frameworks and learning outcomes, linked only by their emphasis upon active student engagement and inquiry (Hutchings, 2006; Kahn & O'Rourke, 2005). Both IBL and PBL have strong links to constructivist epistemologies, which place emphasis not only on the active and experiential construction of knowledge by the subject but also

on the essentially social nature of this process (Dewey, 1938; von Glaserfeld, 1989).

Web 2.0 is a term used to designate a range of internet-based technologies–blogs, social networking sites, social bookmarking sites, wikis–that facilitate active user engagement and collaboration (O'Reilly, 2005). As such, IBL should be strongly aligned to such technologies (Armstrong & Franklin, 2008; Cotterill, White, & Currant, 2007). Likewise, the social nature of Web 2.0 and the fact that IBL is often imagined as a collaborative venture, particularly at undergraduate levels, means that a priori we should expect a significant level of convergence, synergy even, between the technology and the pedagogy. Additionally, given existing student familiarity and engagement with social networking sites and other such technologies outside of formal learning situations (Thelwall, 2008), the use of Web 2.0 may minimise the uncertainties and anxieties that often mark students' first experience of IBL (Brew, 2007).

This chapter, therefore, will explore the various methods that the authors have employed to develop online inquiry communities through the use of Web 2.0 applications, specifically blogs and social bookmarking services, in History teaching at undergraduate level. This chapter will focus on the use of IBL-based pedagogies to facilitate and support these processes and the benefits and challenges the authors, students, and other teaching staff experienced. We will also reflect upon the reciprocal nature of this relationship: the extent to which inquiry and research-based learning is supported by Web 2.0. This will be accomplished through a series of case studies drawing upon the personal reflections of the authors, and evaluative feedback from students and fellow staff members. We will situate this discussion against the backdrop of the well-established literature on IBL and the emergent scholarship of Web 2.0 pedagogies, two areas which have, as yet, been insufficiently related on both the theoretical and practical levels (e.g. Armstrong & Franklin, 2008; Selwyn et al., 2008).

Indeed, because the Web 2.0 field as a whole is in its infancy, little research has been conducted into its pedagogic potential and impact.

BACKGROUND AND ISSUES: INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING AND WEB 2.0

We set out below the issues that interest us in particular in the use of Web 2.0 technologies to develop inquiry communities, ending each section with the key question that is to be explored.

1. Student Engagement

Despite the frequent perception that History is effectively applied common sense (Lloyd, 1996) and the avowal of some scholars that there is little specific historical methodology beyond the traditional *Hilfswissenschaften* (i.e. the 'Auxiliary Sciences' of palaeography, codicology, diplomatic, numismatics, etc.) (Elton, 1967), much work over the past few decades has emphasised the unnaturalness of historical inquiry and the concomitant need to encourage active student engagement with and reflection on historical methodologies as well as historical data (Warren, 2007). Promoting this active engagement, this inquiry, presents particular problems at first-year undergraduate level. History teaching at 'A' level may often have a relatively narrow, exam-driven focus (Lang, 2000) and the somewhat restricted syllabus, the so-called 'Hitlerisation' of History (Booth & Nicholls, 2005), means that first-year students may be encountering ancient or medieval history for the first time, at least in a formal educational setting. Whilst inquiry-based pedagogies, such as formal IBL or PBL projects, offer an obvious mechanism for promoting critical engagement and reflection, such open-ended learning can often be daunting or intimidating to students making the transition from 'A' level to university (Brew, 2007) and require a level of background

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