



Case Study

Using a Social Networking Site to Build an Academic Learning Community

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Summary

In 2009, I created a social networking site based on the ELGG open source system and started to use it to build a learning community of academics within Edinburgh Napier university. Last year the site was trialled with a group of professional MSc students and an evaluation run on the site functionality. Since then many improvements have been made and a repeat evaluation is planned.

About the Institution

Edinburgh Napier University is a modern institution focusing on student centred learning. Colin works as an Academic Development Advisor, promoting the enhancement of teaching practice through technology enhanced learning.

The Challenge

The driving factor in beginning this project was a growing sense of disconnect between staff members across the university thanks to numerous and disparate campuses. This feedback was gathered following a number of our professional development events, run on a face-to-face basis with staff from all faculties. Staff members often stated that they enjoyed meeting academics from other faculties and often, at these events, discovered people working in parallel on similar work in a different part of the university. Our challenge was to create a space where academics could share their work, discover others with similar interests and then collaborate with those people from a distance. We also aimed to increase staff support following our professional development events, building small communities around areas of interest and encouraging collaborative projects.

The Activity

Initially I started research into the best platform on which to build our collaborative community space. Our virtual learning platform was WebCT but this was considered to be too restrictive, with no flexibility to customise the community space. Our requirements centred around communication and collaboration, with the ability to create special interest groups and share resources two more key considerations. I presented a poster on this research at the ECEL 2009 conference which showed that ELGG had emerged as the platform with features best fitting these requirements.

I developed this system, branded as an Edinburgh Napier website, and deployed it on the URL <http://www.napiereducationexchange.com> A short pilot was run to test the system, including small groups of academics who were invited to trial the system's features.

An already established open source platform, ELGG didn't require much tweaking and it was soon released to the public on a small scale, advertised through a number of our professional development events and at staff conferences.

In Sept 2010 the platform was introduced as a support tool for the MSc Blended and Online Education. Students on this course were required to sign up to the system and create a profile. They were then encouraged to use the system to communicate with peers and keep up to date with course news.

An evaluation was run early in 2011 including surveys and focus groups with both MSc BOE students and Edinburgh Napier academics. This evaluation uncovered a number of weaknesses in the system. These weaknesses centre around usability, learning curve and lack of time for another social space. As a result of this evaluation, new video tutorials were created to induct new users and avenues are being explored to reduce other barriers for entry, particularly that of creating a new account.

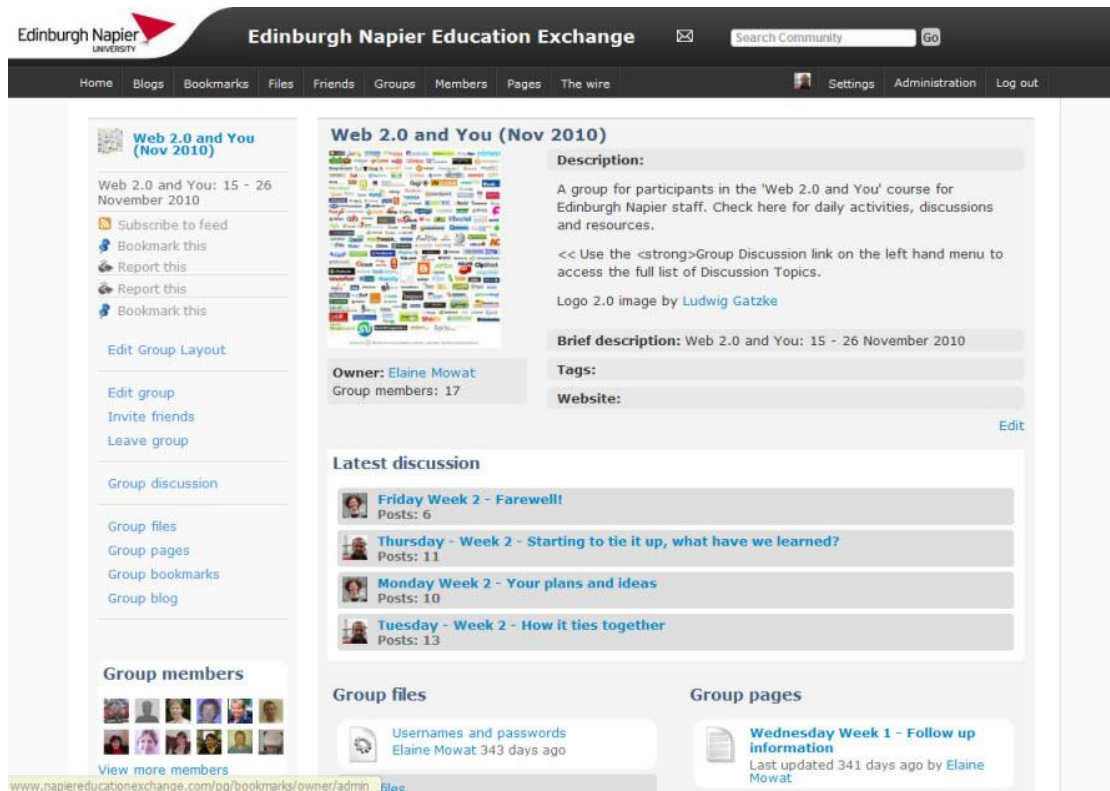
“As a group owner it’s just lovely to see people appearing in your little area... the little photos... it’s really heartening”

The Outcomes

The evaluation carried out early this year was very encouraging in terms of staff engagement with the system. Typically, a small number of staff create a large amount of the content, but the sentiment for future use was high across the board. The general opinion was that a 'critical mass' of use was necessary to encourage the general populace to engage and, with numbers continually growing, we are confident this can be achieved over time through promotion on our development programme and at faculty events.

Referring to the materials shared and collaborations currently in process, it is likely that the system has already saved many staff hours and money in terms of travel. It is hoped that the system will reduce the university's carbon footprint by reducing the amount of cross-campus travel required for meetings thanks to it's distance collaboration tools.

The system has already been used by a 30 – 40 groups to collaborate on projects and share resources, so this is one area in which the system has already succeeded, and its use for this purpose is constantly growing.



Web2.0 Group on Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange

We are currently encouraging more engagement with the system by our professional development facilitators and we hope to offer ongoing support through the system for the majority of our workshops and development strands in the future.

ELGG is a very easy to implement system and could be adopted by any institution for a very low investment. The system itself is free and anyone with a little web development experience can deploy the system. Use and administration of the system requires no specialist knowledge.

Lessons Learned

Through this project I have learned that you should never skip early use testing with a general audience. The ELGG system was chosen thanks to its reputation for ease-of-use and the fact that it's a very simple, focused system. This combined with my own computer proficiency gave me a false belief that everyone would be able to use it straight away. Early trials were generally carried out with the most computer literate of staff members as it was accepted that they'd be the most keen to try out the system.

All of these circumstances led to a false belief in the ease-of-use of the system. It was only when carrying out the evaluation early this year that very big flaws became apparent when average users were interacting with the platform. Much more user guidance was required than anticipated. I believe we could be far further forward if this was considered from the beginning, and, to be honest, I'm slightly embarrassed I didn't find out about this much earlier!

Useful Links

The site can be found at <http://www.napiereducationexchange.com> and anyone with a .ac.uk can sign up.

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