UNIVERSITY OF Hull

Web 2.0 technologies and student engagement in Foundation year courses

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Introduction

We will consider some of the issues around student engagement, in particular

- What are the problems
- How can web 2.0 fix them
- Some experiences of using them and their impact

Retention: moving targets

- Retention rates are now part of university target setting and performance review
- League tables, HEFCE and government policy increase this
- Whilst this seems counter to the notions of increasing participation, improved scholarships and bursary the idea of offering opportunities without being sure of success is under scrutiny
- A number of institutions have/are suspending or reviewing their foundation year provision

Retention and funding

- Perhaps one of the more insidious issues is the link of funding to retention
- Failure to complete a module – by HEFCEs definition of completion – means a loss of funding
- The affect on departments and institutions can be large
- This strengthens the perceived need to improve retention

What about students' problems

- Some of the key problems faced by - and with - new students, are

a) understanding what to do

b) engaging with learning

c) getting help

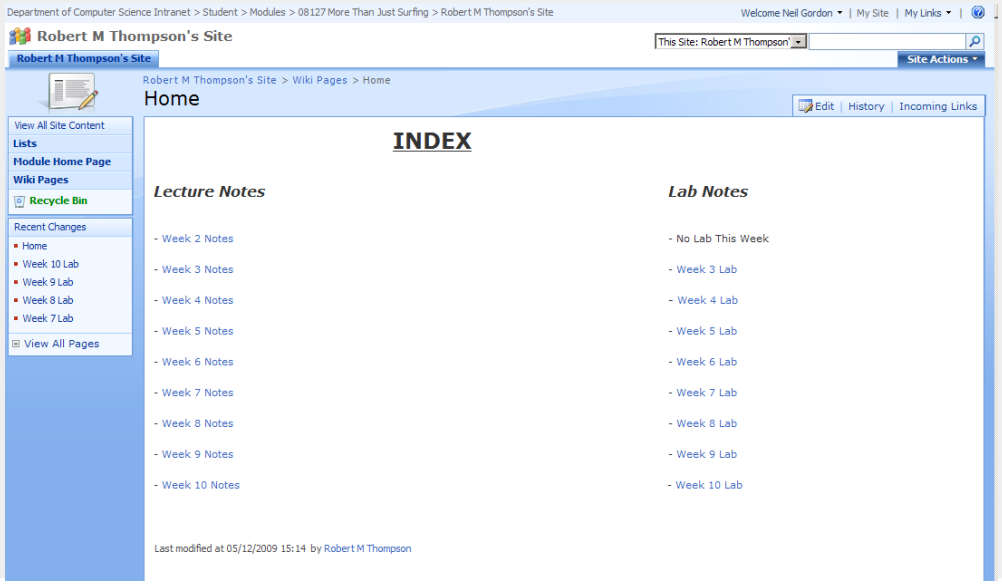
d) staying the course

Web 2.0 as a paradigm for teaching

- Web 2.0 comprises a number of technologies
- Perhaps the key characteristics of Web 2.0 are
  - the notion of user focussed content (user-centred design)
  - (User) aggregation of content to produce bespoke information
  - Collaboration and participation

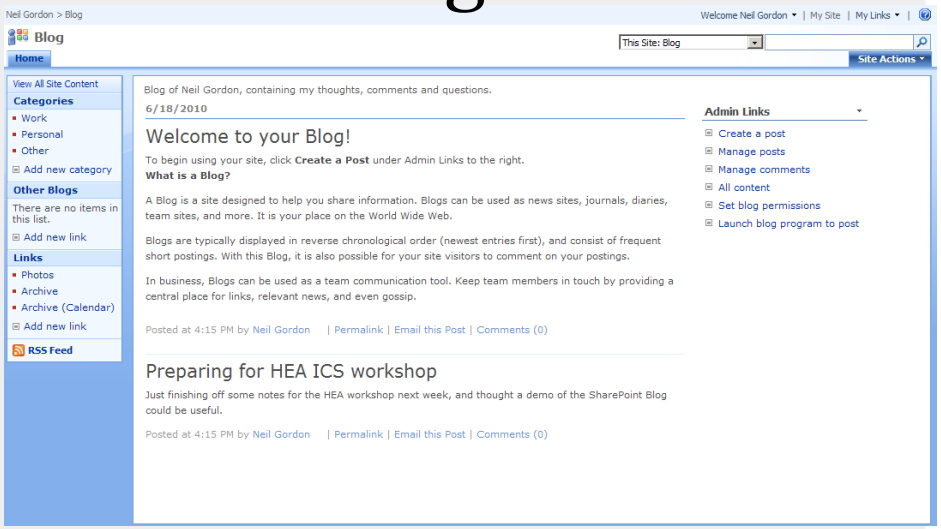
Wiki

- For example to allow students – in groups or individually to create a working portfolio e.g. of lab activity
- Influence to engagement: Encourages students to easily and regularly add content
- Pros - allows staff to monitor activity
- Cons – depending on implementation, tracking changes and keeping track of authors can be an issue, especially for group work



Blogs

- Natural technology to record thoughts
- A digital diary
- Timestamps
- Personal thoughts but intended for others to read
- Should emphasise reflection
- Good model (potentially) for PDP diaries and activities



Twitter

- Simple interface
- Can be useful for announcements
- Potential for interactivity in lectures
- Requires students to connect and read
- Some RSS feeds from twitter unreliable
- Can be used via text messages (but then can cost per twitter and to read)



Facebook

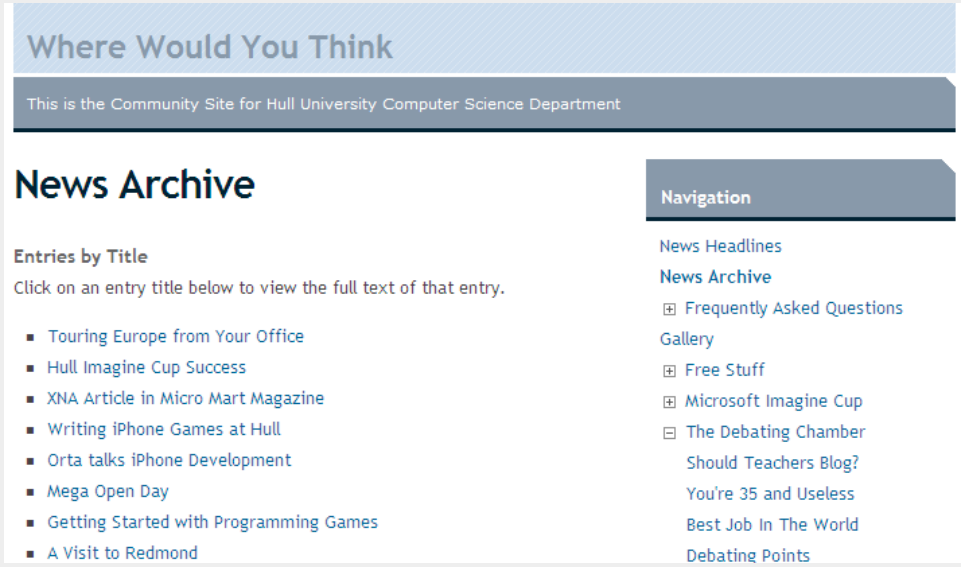
- Many students (and staff) extremely familiar
- Now offers “fan” and commercial sites

- Cons
  - Students may be reluctant to have intrusion into their personal space
  - Can create confusion between professional and informal status



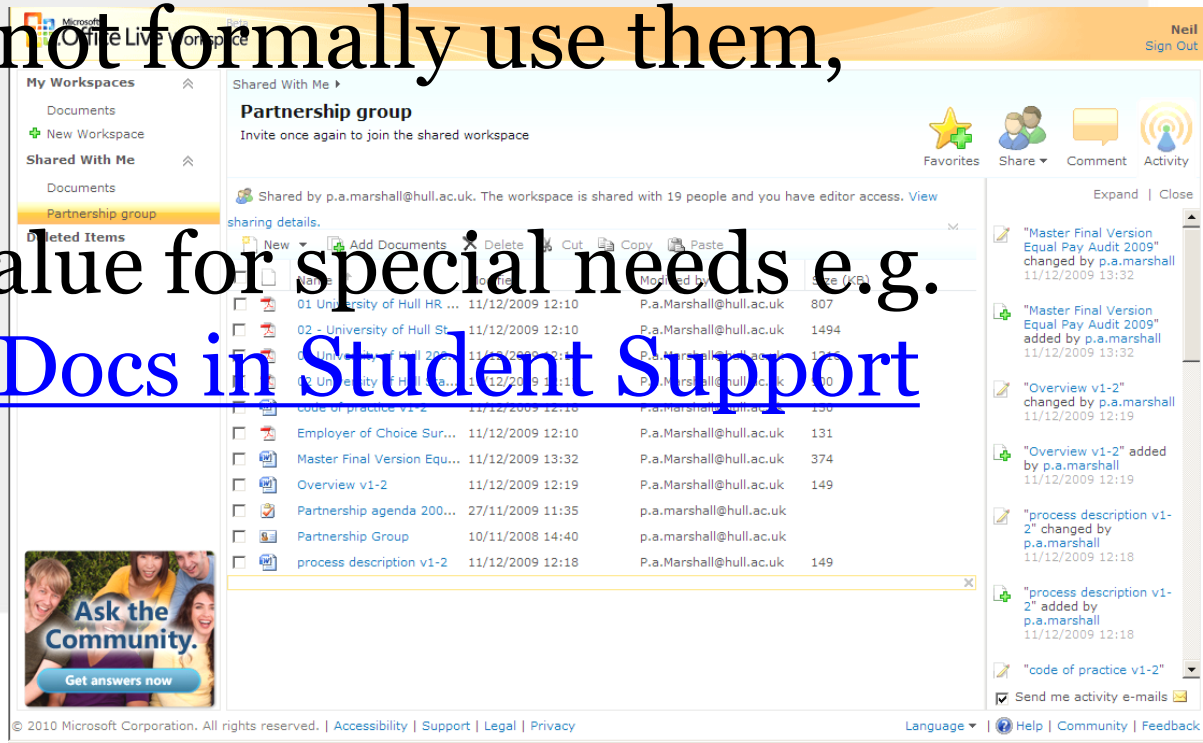
Wherewouldyouthink.com

- Supports admissions
- Acts as an online community
- Similar to Ning @Bradford
- Uptake for our dept is low



GoogleDocs/OfficeLive/....

- Offer good facilities for students – in teams or groups, informally or formally, to share and work on documents together
- Even if we do not formally use them, students will
- Offers some value for special needs e.g. [Using Google Docs in Student Support]

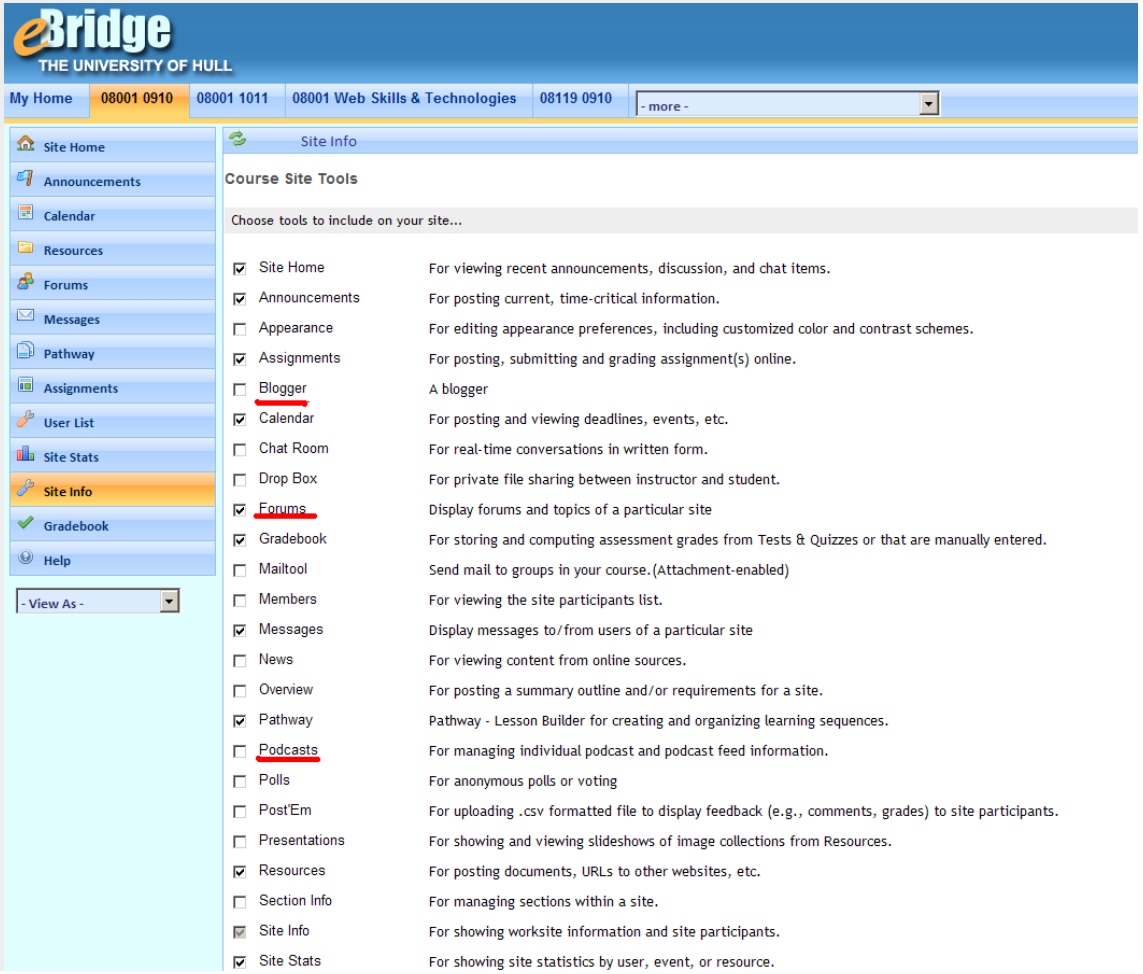


ePortfolios and PDP

- Blogs, mysite and other technologies offer potential for ePortfolios, as do systems such as PebblePad
- Sites such as Flickr, GoogleDocs and OfficeLive all support facilities that can provide ePortfolio and ePDP solutions
- As do technologies such as SharePoint
- These may be more popular with students than specialist ePortfolio solutions
- JISC provides some advice on *Effective Practice with e-Portfolios*

Web 2.0 and VLEs

- Virtual Learning Environments can offer a number of Web 2.0
- Problems include resistance by students to use "non-standard" ones rather than the popular ones



Other technologies

- Email and forums also have much to offer and should not be discounted merely for familiarity
- However, email does suffer from the SPAM syndrome
- Our students complain of the number of announcements and general mail sent by university admin, so departmental notices get lost
- Further, email is not effective for large group discussions
- Forums are better, but students may not engage
- Also use surveys (part of VLEs, SharePoint and stand alone – e.g. BOS, surveymonkey)

GroupWare

- A general term, can include many of the above – used for *collaborative software*
- Indeed, modern groupware usually implements many of the above technologies
- E.g. *SharePoint*– part Intranet, part Internet, provides document sharing, communications and process organisation
- Whilst the standard features may not be focused on teaching, they are close to a VLE and many can be extended to improved fit

Content delivery

- Other technologies - such as podcasts - fall under Web 2.0
- Less about participation itself, they can be effective ways of delivering content
- For retention and engagement, they do offer the benefits of mobility and accessibility
- Particularly useful for induction and supporting mainstream teaching
- Also used by some colleagues for feedback

Reviewing the impact

- With technologies embedded and used throughout our courses, it is difficult to find objective data to show the impact
- However, review of retention rates shows that this has remained consistent in spite of a more diverse and larger cohorts
- Furthermore, pass rates on modules utilising these are higher than modules remaining closer to the traditional model

Student engagement

- Where Web 2.0 has been used formatively or without direct support, take up has been low or erratic
- E.g. **Twitter feed** – has 94 followers (student population ≈400); **MySites (ePDP)** 3%; Blogs 5%
- Where used as part of modules, with some form of summative assessment (potentially even low): engagement much higher (all students created Wikis and used team sites)
- General forum activity is quite low, but team based forums (related to ACW) are relatively high

Monitoring, intervention and discipline

- When using technology of this nature, one issue is whether we become older brother or BIG BROTHER
- Tendency – with perceived audit culture and increasing student appeals – is to gather data on student activity etc. to pre-empt appeals, and inform decision making (e.g. RNP)
- But then students may work simply because they HAVE to
- Better if we can find ways to encourage them to WANT to – education for education's sake

Information overload

- So many forms of communication increase the danger of overload
- An issue for staff ("did I create the announcement on the module site, email the module list, tweet it, place it on the forum, SMS it….. and put it on the physical noticeboard")
- For students, they can simply stop following the information – "if it is important someone will tell me…"

Conclusions

- When offered web 2.0 technologies, students often ignore them
- Embedding their use into teaching, with some form of summative assessment seems valuable
- Students do engage with them – but comments from students indicate many prefer to keep their Web 2.0 social and study lives separate

Other approaches

- Of course, the above focuses on Web 2.0 alone
- In practice, technology is used alongside teaching methods and approaches
- Other useful ones for engagement – in particular with foundation students – include
  - Attendance monitoring;
  - personal supervision;
  - Peer and self assessment;
  - inquiry based learning;
  - effective use of assessment
    - formative and summative;
  - appropriate learning materials and events;
  - .....