Abstract: From September 2007 new and returning students at the University of Westminster have had a brand new way of staying in touch with their friends and classmates through an innovative new social networking site, Connect. The Connect system (powered by Elgg []) is allied to a re-development of the University’s online support for students called ‘My Westminster’. Available to all current students, it allows users to create their own profiles, upload photographs and documents, create and join discussion groups, send messages and publish blogs and presentations. So far (November 2007) Connect has over 3100 student and staff visitors and over 100 communities have been established. This paper will describe and present an evaluation of the initial use of Connect by staff and students. The nature and success of purely social type communities (e.g. the film club) will be discussed as will the creation and use of study groups that have been set up by students. An analysis of preliminary feedback from students and staff on the value of Connect in both social and academic life will be included

Keywords: web 2.0, social networking

Introduction
For well over a decade now there has been widespread interest and innovation in different forms of web based learning (e.g. learning material availability, online discussion fora, online testing) often to support and complement face to face teaching [1, 2, 3]. Despite the beacons of first class work that exist the bulk of e-learning across higher education has been concerned with reproducing old models of teaching leading to largely passive online learning opportunities [4]. It is a fact that despite the mass of proof relating to the value and effectiveness of e-learning, and the shining examples of effective practice and student satisfaction, the predominant methodology for the teaching of undergraduates remains the one-to-many lecture [5]. As pointed out by Barnes and Tynan [6] some would argue that this is not surprising as many university teachers were themselves taught in a class room and so as teachers who have not had much personal experience of online learning, they are likely to continue to teach in a way that is familiar to them. However several other reasons are also often cited for this relatively poor penetration of interactive e-learning into the mainstream, including a lack of understanding of the technologies available and what they can do, the belief that e-learning is a poor alternative to face to face interaction, the growing perception that students are paying for and therefore want a face to face experience and, perhaps most critically, insufficient time for staff to not only understand the technologies available but to really think about how best to incorporate the effective practice emerging into their own teaching context [7].

Much of the e-learning that has been attempted by staff in universities since the early 1990s has centred on so called Web1.0 technologies manifested mainly through the tools found collected together within virtual learning environments (VLEs) [8]. Most of these tools are by design staff led, often work best for someone working alone and require therefore much effort and direction on the part of individual staff to be effective in changing the predominant pedagogic model within the framework of a traditional face to face course. In contrast so called Web 2.0 technologies are not by design ‘controlled’ and can therefore be managed and used to the same degree by students as well as staff9. They are also designed to facilitate and stimulate collaboration and sharing. Whilst academic staff are currently still trying to work out how best to make use of older technologies, many students have moved on, certainly in their social lives, to using online tools that are much more flexible and user centred [4].
In recent years social networking systems, which make use of Web 2.0 technologies, have received much attention in higher education in the United Kingdom as increasing numbers of younger people (typically less than 30 years old) have made use of public systems such as Facebook and MySpace. Such systems, coupled to other Web 2.0 tools (e.g. social bookmarking and syndication technologies) help individuals or groups to readily create or find and then share knowledge [10]. Critically the capability of these systems to enable forms of communication controlled by the user makes them very different to the ubiquitously used and increasingly corporate virtual learning environments (VLEs). In social networking systems the individual user (or groups of users) can decide what they wish to discuss and who they wish to work together with [11]. This means that social networking systems truly have the capability to deliver a platform for learning where the student is potentially at the centre of activities.

The scope for such student led activity to complement and enhance the tutor led work conducted within VLEs is considerable and could contribute to a solution to the problem of teaching ever increasing numbers of students who have difficulty in attending regularly at a single physical location. In addition the use of social networking tools also presents a viable alternative to the engagement of students within large physical classrooms often not built to serve the purpose of interactive learning. As well as their potential in the learning of an academic subject, social networking systems also have a major role to play in the effective induction and integration of a very diverse student populations which in the UK is frequently made up of a large proportion of overseas students and others who may have travelled a long way from their local community.

1. Background to this investigation

The University of Westminster teaches around 24000 students undertaking degrees, Masters, research, professional programmes and short courses. There are more than 4,000 international students, from over 160 overseas nations, making Westminster one of the top 15 most popular UK universities for international students. Since its foundation in 1838 as Britain's first polytechnic, the University has been closely involved in the business, professional and academic life of London. The University is very much associated with courses that are taught face to face and currently has only around 100 students taking a distance learning course.

The University uses a virtual learning environment (VLE) significantly to support its face to face course delivery. In most cases the VLE is used as source of content (largely static and text based) and only a relatively small percentage of courses use more active components of the VLE system (online tests, e-submission, discussion fora). In recent years it has become clear that within the Westminster context academic staff are finding it very difficult to determine the best ways to make use of the VLE and there is a growing feeling that its use is merely re-inforcing a model of teaching where the teacher controls and is at the centre of the process. However, the last academic year saw the introduction of 3 student centred tools within the VLE (e-portfolio production tool, blog and wiki functionality). To date approximately 4000 students and 50 staff have made use of these tools indicating some interest amongst staff in exploiting these more active Web 2.0 technologies with their students.

With this interest in mind and with the realisation that the majority of Westminster staff, in common with those at other Universities, have only a limited experience of Web 2.0 technologies, a decision was taken to provide a Westminster only social networking system. The Connect system provided a range of features typically associated with Web 2.0 systems including personal and community blogs, tagging, private and public communities, personal and community file storage and social networking capability including full syndication support. It was reasoned also that the Connect system could be instrumental in helping to combat the difficulties faced by students in developing a sense of community across an institution based within a busy metropolis across multiple physical sites.

For the purposes of this study our specific research questions were:

- Would students who already use social networking tools want to use and benefit from a closed, university only social networking system;
- To what extent would students use such a system for socialising versus informal academic learning;
- Would academic staff who generally are not Web 2.0 exponents explore the new technology to any significant degree.
2. Research Approach Taken

This paper reports on an analysis of the use by students and staff of a social networking system, branded Connect but powered by Elgg [12], at the University of Westminster. The study covered all staff and students who accessed the system between 10th September 2007 and January 8th 2008. The period of qualitative data collection occurred between December 15th 2007 and January 8th 2008. Quantitative data was collected via questionnaires early October 2007 and then again in early January 2008. The qualitative data, comprising personal blog posts and community forum posts were read and then categorised into types with the number of types being created spontaneously as successive blog posts were read. Once all blog posts were categorised a summary of the different categories was written and related to the research questions posed.

3. Results

3.1. Overall Summary of users of the Connect system

The Connect system was launched in September 2007 and by 8th January 2008 there were 3048 (approximately 2300 students and the rest staff) registered users of the system. A total of 107 communities had been established and 508 blog posts made. The majority of students who accessed Connect were from the Business School, Computer Science and Social Sciences/languages. A much smaller proportion came from Biosciences/Health Sciences, Law and Architecture/Built Environment. Amongst the undergraduates, more first year students tended to access Connect than second or third years (first years comprised 34% of the total number of students that accessed Connect). More postgraduate students accessed Connect than either second or third year undergraduate students. Similarly, the majority of students who maintained a personal blog were either first year undergraduates or postgraduates (64% combined of the total keeping a blog).

Amongst students who accessed Connect, 44% had logged in regularly (defined as an average of 2-3 times per week), 80% of students surveyed said the main reason that they used Connect was to look for people with common interests and arrange meetings, 14% wanted to share their views about University life such as reviews of museum visits for their course, whilst 18% said they needed the answer to a question or a problem they had. Some (about 5%) used Connect to sell things such as used books.

Quite a high proportion of students, 49%, logged in only once. The most common reason for not accessing Connect more was that they preferred using Facebook, while others mentioned that they used Blackboard instead to communicate with their fellow students or stated that they simply did not have the time. An appreciable number of students surveyed (about half) didn’t feel the need or see the point in Connect as they attend the University everyday and can talk to their course mates face to face.

3.2. Personal Blogs

Personal blog posts on the Connect system could be broadly divided into reflective contributions or those which were in some way providing or seeking practical information, help or support. The former type, which comprised 55% of the total, could in turn be split into reflections linked directly to the University and those which were focused more generally on life, personal problems or external news/events.

Overall about 2.3% of users kept a blog with each user writing an average of 3 blog posts. More students than staff started a blog, however students wrote an average of 2 blog posts, compared to 5 blog posts each by staff. The students mainly blogged to look for people with similar interests or for an answer to a question/problem or to advertise events and share feelings. Staff mainly blogged about their work or the subject they teach or to give their opinion on something related to University life. The blog post below is an example of a reflection related to a students’ course and shows how support was provided through the ‘comments’ feature by a peer.

By student:

“I don’t know where to start or how to even begin formulating how I am feeling right now. I have lots of pent up frustration and the only thing I could think of to release it all was to write. OK so I get this amazing "job" on a music/fashion magazine a few
weeks ago. I'm so chuffed as you can probably imagine. The actual title of the job is "freelance fashion writer" The editor told me to come in for a day so she could see how I work, how much work I can get done etc so I go in and I produce a brochure for an upcoming charity fashion show. The environment is nice, people are friendly and at the end of the day she says to me that she would send my work to another writer and that she would contact me after the Christmas period to let me know how I did etc. Its been 3 weeks and I've heard nothing and so I decided to e-mail the editorial assistant to ask her if she knows what's going on. That was at the beginning of this week. No news.

Comment left for the student above by another student

As the saying goes: Don't put all your eggs in one place. You should have applied to as many place as possible (more than one), that way you have more chance to be successful than just waiting on one. Even applying to more than one doesn't help sometimes. I've applied to over 20 placement vacancies and a telephone interview was the furthest I got and some as you've noticed don't even send you a rejection email (Google :)). I am some what surprised the number of connections the university has in some industries though, hopefully they have more connections in your area than mine.”

The following examples show how staff and students used Connect to seek or provide information from/to other users or to stimulate discussion on a topic. For example advice from a member of staff:

“If you miss being able to chat on instant messenger when you're supposed to be studying, there are a few ways around the university firewall. The easiest way is to sign in using “meebo”. It's free, and you can sign in with all the big instant messenger services in one place, and it rocks bells.”

Or news, again from a member of staff:

“Finally, the News Plugin problems in the SSHL site have been sorted out. Fabienne has done a great job co-ordinating the emptying of the page approval list then synchronising the staging and Live databases. Next week the Westminster Admin Root site will get the same treatment and all will be well with the world at last. Well at least with the News plugin ;)

Or updates on activities or hobbies or sports such as this from a student:

“Hi everyone, Just a quick post to let you know that the community for the Harrow Football team is set up. The address is: https://connect.wmin.ac.uk/harrowfc The Harrow football team won the BUSA4B division last season and were runners up for team of the year. This season we will be playing in BUSA Division 3A. For all those who are interested in joining the team, the trials will be taking place on Wednesday 26th September & Wednesday 3rd October at Chiswick Sports Ground, with buses to run from Harrow Campus. For information visit us at the fresher fayre next Wednesday between 11-4. Thanks, Tom Barbour “

All remaining posts could be categorised as either speculative attempts to stimulate discussion on topics ranging from recent government decisions related to the funding of universities to the ‘Green’ agenda or were simply attempts to introduce themselves to the Connect community.

3.3 Connect Communities

The communities established by individuals and groups within the Connect system could be classified into 3 broad types. Type I were typically staff led and were established to discuss or exchange ideas on an issue associated with the functioning or business of a staff department or sub-section of a department. Thus the most popular (in terms of number of staff signed up to it) community was one
set up to seek feedback on proposals for re-structuring the information technology services provision across the University. However in the event, although many staff proactively joined into the community very few actually made any contribution. In contrast a community set up specifically to consider a review of libraries in the University had a much higher level of activity and demonstrated through the community forum the potential for active discussion by staff on real issues. Type II communities were based around hobbies and interests and included for example a film and cinema community and one on domestic cats as pets. Other community topics frequently seen included food and beverages, music, the arts and favourite football clubs. The type II communities were set up just as frequently by students or staff and it was not unusual (the film and cinema and domestic cats communities were very good examples of this) to see students and staff sharing such communities and exchanging views and information and supporting one another.

Within the type II communities were student led efforts to engage students studying at a specific physical location to make friends across subject boundaries and to discuss issues that were affecting the student experience. So for example one student started a thread on the community forum seeking views to pass to the students’ union on what the ideal social space should look like/contain for students and this received appreciable feedback which could then be collated and returned ultimately to those responsible for managing and developing the University estate. The film and cinema community appeared to be a good example of a type II community. This community attracted a high number of potential contributors but in common with many of the communities only a small minority actually posted information.

Type III communities were those set up for the support of academic study, with about half being set up by students and generally excluding staff whilst the rest were more staff led/facilitated. Staff led communities of this type included those for the support of skills development (e.g. how to give presentations or how to make the best use of the institutional virtual learning environment) and others for specific modules of learning around an academic subject. So for example the Visual Culture Group community has the following as its stated aim:

This group is for sharing information about places, activities and events that you have been to, want to go to, or think you might be interested in going to and wondering if anyone else might go as well... Anything from a visit to a gallery, another town or a pub.

3.4 The views of staff and students on use of the Connect system

3.4.1 The student views

Students were very evenly split about whether it was useful or not to have the Connect system. Students commonly commented that Connect should be invaluable for making friends and supporting each other, especially within the first few weeks after arriving at the University. One student for example said:

It could be the best way for students to socialise and possibly find partners and be there for one another all the time.

A frequently held view by those in favour of Connect was that the closed community which Connect provided was somehow better than the more diverse groups presented by systems like Facebook or MySpace. Even in circumstances where external systems provide a group function (e.g. there is a Westminster Facebook community) it was often felt that the local nature and feel of Connect provided something more personal and collegiate. Other students felt it was helpful to keep online social activities that are linked directly to university life separate from wider online social activity with friends and family outside of University, typically undertaken through a system like Facebook. There were also students who thought that having a University owned social networking system would help in knowing where to go for educational help although others made the point that the institutional virtual learning environment (Blackboard) was the best place for that. Linked to this view was the perceived need to better integrate the functions that Connect could support with Blackboard so as to provide a seamless transition between the more formal learning activities and a space where students had greater control and autonomy. However although Connect was seen as a space where students had greater freedom to do what they wished there was very strong support from students for their tutors to
use the Connect system as well, and for them to be part of at least some of the communities together with students.

Amongst students who thought that there was no point in having the Connect most cited either not having enough time or their being too many systems for them to interact with or most commonly, they already used Facebook and Connect duplicated what they could already do on that system.

3.4.2 The staff views

Most staff felt that they had very little time to use Connect themselves but 84% thought that Connect has a role to play in helping students to build a community either prior to or after arrival at the University. For example one member of academic staff said:

“I can certainly see the potential benefit to existing and prospective students. Existing students can, well, connect with others (albeit in a virtual sense) around common interests, as well as possibly to off-load, etc. Prospective students may find it useful in getting a sense of the nature of the social life at University.”

Academics main concerns were mostly about the fact students would have to duplicate efforts to maintain two sites and their access after completing their studies.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The results presented show that students can benefit in a variety of ways from the availability of a closed ‘university only’ social networking system, as evidenced from the wide range of activities that they engaged in. However it is also clear that one size does not fit all in the sense that whilst half of the students surveyed could see reasons to have something distinct from say Facebook, the other half could not. Selwyn [2007] notes how Facebook can function ‘in different ways depending on the preference of the user’ this degree of personalization seems to be fundamental to its popularity and is an important factor to consider when seeking to offer students a competing technology.

Whilst a significant number of students have engaged with Connect in this first phase of development, only a small minority of those have tried to use Connect for overtly academic related activities. In addition groups of students that did start communities with an academic focus were not able to maintain them successfully. Panckhurst [2008] suggests the value of ‘specific, focused tasks’ when trying to effectively use a social network for direct educational benefit. It is generally felt that the future that the future of learning lies in a carefully planned and integrated network designed to give autonomy to learners, whilst involving tutors in a facilitating role, stressing the importance of guidance rather than management in forming “communities of practice” [Lave, Wenger 1991].

Data derived from the questionnaire suggests that students were keen to see their tutor’s active in the Connect system and this is almost certainly a contributing factor in the lack of academic use of Connect by students. It is worth noting that where academics have encouraged and worked with students to engage with Connect for academic purposes (e.g. the visual culture group) more significant contributions have been made.

Staff, perhaps not surprisingly, used Connect for quite different reasons to students, with their academic work often forming the focus of contributions. Whilst it was refreshing to see so many staff explore Connect, they, like students, found it difficult to maintain momentum in the activities that they started.

Taken as a whole, the results obtained from the evaluation show that significant numbers of students and staff can see a role for Connect within the University of Westminster context. However it is clear that wider acceptance and precise definition of that role needs to be established and accepted before the full potential of Connect to support students and extend their learning can be realised. In this respect one of the most common pieces of feedback from staff and students alike was the need to integrate Connect with the more formal learning environment provided by Blackboard. It is hoped that having dedicated student led, module based discussion groups, with all learners automatically assigned, would assist in establishing and maintaining meaningful “communities of practice”. This, coupled to a focused campaign specifically to explain the role of Connect in the wider picture of academic life would be likely to lead to a more successful and beneficial exploitation of the system than has been achieved to date.
References


Authors:
Federica Oradini,
Gunter Saunders
Online Learning Development
University of Westminster
115 New Cavendish Street
London W1W 6UW
Tel: +44 20 7911 580
Email: oradinfi@wmin.ac.uk
saundeg@wmin.ac.uk