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Assignment 4: Information Literacy Learning Module Project

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Overview of the Project and Literature Review

While universities struggle to assimilate the first wave of web-based teaching tools, an increasing number of students have already arrived in a Web 2.0 world (Barnes & Tynan, 2007). Web 2.0 is a collection of concepts with supporting technologies. There is no clear boundary between the conventional Web and Web 2.0, as most of the technologies used in Web 2.0 are not new. However a few important factors of Web 2.0, including metadata and tags through the use of folksonomy, and collaborative authoring by way of Blogs and Wikis are hallmarks of Web 2.0 (Shih, Li, & Yang, 2007). Web 2.0 technologies have begun to transform and will continue to transform the Distance Education landscape. Just as the theoretical framework of DE has shifted from didactic to constructivist, the tools for DE have shifted from the old one-directional web to the new multi-directional Web 2.0 of the relatively recent past and future. There is a need for DE professionals and students to have a correct understanding of Web 2.0, and to realize the potential ways by which it can be used for their benefit.

The purpose of this learning module project is to describe the theoretical backbone and underpinnings of the Web 2.0 shift, then provide an overview and describe benefits and uses of Web 2.0 technologies as they relate to DE, and end with words of caution about the appropriate use of these technologies for learning. The specific technologies that will be reviewed are blogs, wikis, and social book marking. They will be reviewed in relation to both faculty and students in DE, along with a critique of existing learning modules about the topics. A component of this learning module is provided by way of a presentation (see supplemental PowerPoint).

Conrad (2008) clarifies the importance of Web 2.0 technologies in DE by linking it to key concepts that define DE's response to our evolving society at large: community, passion, and creativity. These concepts through the use of current web technologies allow additional avenues

for self-presentation, which may lead to a new learning culture that uses the whole mind including its pop culture and personal influences. Conrad (2008) specifically describes six essential elements of conceptual, artistic, and holistic learning that may benefit from Web 2.0 technologies: design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning. Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) further solidify the usefulness of Web 2.0 by explaining that its functionalities respond to the need of educational systems of the future responding to learner differences dynamically, and not based on predetermined programs, as the learning process evolves. Careful consideration about how to best utilize Web 2.0 technologies for DE and, rethinking those uses as new possibilities emerge are important considerations.

The main technologies reviewed in this paper are blogs, wikis, and social book marking. Blogging tools are one of the most familiar Web 2.0 examples. Blogs allow for students to post reflections or stories online, which may in turn receive written comments or critiques from a teacher or perhaps from other students (Oliver, 2007). Students enjoy blogging and find it beneficial from both educational and social perspectives. Students use their blogs in several ways, including community building, resource-consolidation, sharing ideas, catharsis and emotional support, or as a personal journal. A concern that some students have is revealing their own perceived academic inadequacies to other students in the class and feeling they have nothing to say that would be of interest to those other students (Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2008). Students who are anxious at first may develop their blogging skills and become more confident over time (2008). In a DE course where a personal blog was a required portion of the class the students found it to be both challenging and rewarding since it allowed deep introspection about their learning in the course. This is a very good example of constructivist theory in practice that allows the student to stretch beyond their comfort zone in wonderful ways.

Wikis are another commonly cited web 2.0 tool in education that allows students to collaborate on the creation of a web page about a topic under study (Oliver, 2007). Wikis may use a similar underlying technology as a blog, but with a focus on collaborative publishing. A Wiki (2007) also allows its users to edit and add content and is therefore a suitable platform for collaborative authoring, where instructors can design online distance learning materials together. Project reports and research papers can also be collaborated through Wiki. Social book marking tools like del.icio.us allow teachers and/or students conducting online research to capture links and then add tags, categories, and annotations to organize and make sense of the data. Teachers who have experimented with the collaborative features of social bookmarking say it has helped them organize the many saved links and to find a needed link quickly. Distance education learners can expect similar benefits and efficiencies within their overall digital learning environments (2007). There are other benefits to Web 2.0 technologies including cost savings, and cloud computing which allows a learner to be able to work from almost anywhere where an internet connection is present.

Analysis of Learning Modules about Web 2.0

Lefever (2007) has prepared a series of short youtube clips to explain Web 2.0 technologies. These videos are excellent primers for those that do not know anything about Web 2.0, but the videos do not provide detail on how they may be used for DE. The videos follow a similar format by explaining the old way we have done things and the new Web 2.0 method, along with how and why the new way is beneficial. The videos are wonderful for any interested person that knows little about Web 2.0 technologies but the videos are not a complete resource, nor are they necessarily meant to be, for those in the DE field.

Lefever's (2007) video on blogs discounts the old way of a few central sources publishing and broadcasting news, and explains how blogs allow many people to publish news on more specific subjects. Blogs' ease of use is explained and a few resources are highlighted, where tools can be obtained for findings and reading blogs, as well as making them. This video provides a short yet relatively thorough overview of the paradigm within which blogs exist but does not address how they may be used in distance education. However, blogs are the simplest of the Web 2.0 technologies and it is fairly obvious that blogs could be used for a teacher to provide information to a group of learners, for learners to keep a journal of how their learning is progressing and reflect upon that learning, or to publish useful information for others in a similar field of study.

Lefever's (2007) video on wikis explains that email was the old and inefficient way of coordinating and organizing a group's input, replaced in the Web 2.0 world by using a wiki. A few web site sources that may be used to build wikis are suggested, and a primer for getting started is provided that focuses on three buttons on a wiki site: edit, save, and link. When each user is adding content, revising content, adding links, or otherwise editing material that user is in edit mode and may use the link function as well. When finished, a user saves, opening the wiki for others in the group to read and add content and the cycle continues until the product is finished (2007). It is not specifically explained how a wiki may be used in educational settings. Clearly, there are multiple uses for wiki in DE environment. It almost appears as though the whole concept of a wiki was made for DE settings. Wiki could be used by a group of learners to prepare an outline for a large assignment, find appropriate resources and link to them, assign specific portions to each learner, proof-read each portion when completed and provide comments, revise material, assemble the pieces and prepare for submission all within the wiki

environment. This could be a timesaver and organizational tool for distance learners. Not only will it make the process efficient, but may enhance the democratic and constructivist approach to distance learning.

The next video on social bookmarking explains that the old way of saving links by bookmarking them on one's PC is disadvantageous since the links can become messy and unorganized as more links are saved, and one can't efficiently share favorite links with others (Lefever, 2007). The video describes social bookmarking by reviewing how to get started, how to organize links by using keyword tags which allow for better organization and searching of links, and how to share links with others thereby making them social and more useful across a group (2007). The processes for signing up for a del.icio.us account, adding links, tagging links, and making links social so that a network of useful links may be shared between like-minded individuals are described (2007). The example used is of a teacher sharing links with others, which is relevant to DE, but it is not explained that students too could utilize this service for group assignments. Social bookmarking could be used by students to share links to articles found, tag them, and allow for team members to comment upon them.

Background information on Web 2.0 technologies and a critique of learning modules on common Web 2.0 technologies have been provided. Next, the supplemental PowerPoint presentation provides additional information on the theoretical underpinnings of Web 2.0 technologies for DE, practical applications and benefits of Web 2.0 technologies for DE, and possible areas for caution in the use of Web 2.0 technologies in DE.

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