Fairy tales and Elggs:
social networking with
student Rovers in Learning Commons

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The Learning (or Information) Commons concept has transformed and extended library services in universities worldwide, and most university libraries have adopted aspects of the concept. At Victoria University (VU), the Commons has co-located related student services. Student Rovers are a key feature of the service offered. To build an online community of practice for the Rovers, VU experimented with open-source social networking software. A central lesson is that, while web-based social networking is essential, the usability and reliability of any particular software is less important than the way in which such tools are used by participants. This paper will outline preliminary results of VU's evaluation of the pilot and dispel some of the myths and fairy tales around using social networking software in an educational context.

Introduction

Without risk, innovation and change would not occur. However, implicit in taking risks is the willingness to fail. This paper focuses on a small project with grand ideas, where the collaborators were willing to take risks to build a robust online community of practice for student peer mentors (Rovers), who work in Victoria University's Learning Commons.

The result, powered by RoverSpace, a community initially developed using Elgg, the open source social networking software favoured by many educationalists, was kicked off by a bunch of enthusiastic librarians, a teaching and learning facilitator and a group of equally enthusiastic student peer mentors. The aim of RoverSpace was to develop a knowledge base of shared experience that supports current and future Rovers who work in the Commons. RoverSpace, though initiated through a pilot project, is "owned" by the Rovers themselves, as a place that fosters a sense of connectedness.

The community was full of promise and potential, but limitations of the Elgg learner landscape reduced the functionality of RoverSpace, and the community abandoned the Elgg to mash together other Web 2.0 applications (its function essentially migrating to the more mainstream GoogleGroups application) to continue building their community of practice.

This paper will look at the potential and robustness of RoverSpace by exploring the context in which the community developed the value of student peer mentoring programmes, the community and its members and early observations from the ongoing evaluation.

Background

The Learning Commons is a new paradigm in library service delivery for Victoria University. The Learning Commons, and its pedagogical cousin the Information Commons, changed the way universities deliver information and study and research services (Beagle 2004; Church 2005; Willis 2004). It reflects a global shift in library services. Other successful local libraries using similar models include those of the Universities of Newcastle, Queensland and Auckland and the University of Technology Sydney.

The guiding principle is around "place". The emphasis is on providing a place that is learner-centred, and encourages and supports learning whilst enabling collaborative, active learning. Commons are most prevalent in academic environments. Through the integration of library, teaching and learning and technology support, students now have access to all these services in one place without having to shop around.

The process of repositioning ourselves as a Learning Commons required that the library rethink and design spaces that add the following dimensions to services and facilities:

- Creating a physical and social environment that is welcoming for students and accommodates their complex, multi-tasked, digitalised social, study, and work lives

- Redesigning spaces so they are more conducive to student learning and facilitate collaborative learning

- Creating a 'one-stop' locus and agency that can enable students, especially first generation and international students to develop the academic skills, approaches to academic learning, and the competence in a range of literacies including reading, writing and ICT (information and communication technologies) that they need to succeed in their studies, and ultimately in life and work

- Closer relationships between the Library service and other university service units responsible for student support services such as Careers Advice and Student Language Learning Support, and establishment of less formal, less intimidating points-of-contact with these support services

- Creation of student spaces that encourage and draw students into learning conversations and facilitate the development of shared reflections around strategies of learning at VU

- Acknowledging that learning to learn is a collection of skills, demeanours, habits, understandings and motivations that are learnt primarily from *others,* not from *reading information or following procedural 'how-to texts' or tutorial manuals*

- A location in which students have ready access to high quality technology and software for producing and communicating digital work.

The real shift for the library has come from moving the service from one that is primarily focussed on providing access to resources, to one that acknowledges that the most value we can add to the student experience is to provide spaces where students can build learning relationships and make connections with librarians, academic support staff and each other.

VU now has three Commons, the first (City Flinders) opened in late 2006, and the next two (St Albans and Werribee) in mid 2007. Entry statistics show that since becoming a Learning Commons in 2006, the City Flinders Campus Library experienced a 47.7 increase in visits to the space (on the one hand reflecting a small increase in students on campus, on the other of the capacity of the Commons to embrace and indeed extract increased demand). In July 2006, before becoming a Commons there were 6,979 visits, while in July 2007 the number of visits increased to 11,288, an increase of 62 per cent.

Student Peer Mentors or Rovers

The peer mentors provide an extra dimension of support for students. They help students to make connections and provide basic level support, which includes:

- Logging on to PCs

- Email

- IT troubleshooting - passwords, printing

- Simple catalogue searches

- Navigating the library website

- Directions within the library/campus

- Use of other VU services

- Assistance with study strategies.

As students, Rovers can easily empathise with other students. They have a connection that most library staff cannot emulate. As peers, they are also actively engaged in the learning process, and all of them have recent experience of trying to negotiate the complex myriad of detail that one must know in order to find and effectively utilise student support services and library facilities.

The use of Rovers serves two primary functions:

1. Customer Service - they are the first point of contact for students requiring support with library, IT or learning services.

2. Student mentors - they constitute a community of student mentors centred on the development, articulation and dissemination of best practice in student learning strategies.

Customer Service

A feature common in many Learning Commons is the deployment of 'student advisers' to assist students with basic technological, information, library and learning issues. As mentioned above, the Rovers are trained to assist with basic student queries and to refer more complex issues to the relevant staff within the participating units: Library, IT, Student Careers, and Student Learning Services.

The assumption is that a student confronting a 'learning block' will be more likely to seek assistance from another student actively eliciting queries, identified as both experienced and trained, than from a staff-member sitting behind an desk: Students approaching an information desk often preface their queries with a statement such as, "I know this is a stupid question but... " (Lee et al. 2004). Thus, as initial point of contact and first tier for the service delivery model, Rovers solve straightforward basic and technical problems on-the-spot, whilst referring to higher tiers of the service delivery model queries demanding more specialist, expert or professional consideration.

Rovers as Learning Mentors

Rovers also represent the emergence of a more self-conscious, more reflective, more consciously designed 'community of practice' within the VU student body itself, a community committed to the development, validation and dissemination of 'best practice' in student learning.

Over a number of years, VU has instituted a number of Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) student mentor programmes in which successful experienced students conduct weekly tutorials to assist new students engaging with units of study known

for their difficulty and/or high failure rates. Peer mentoring, which is the systematic use of experienced students to support the learning of other students, began to be implemented in a systematic way at VU in 2003, based on both Supplementary Instruction (SI) in the US, and PASSes in Australia and the United Kingdom. At VU, it was initially developed in the context of specific subjects; for example, pairs of student mentors conducting fortnightly revision sessions for a first year subject, *Accounting for Decision Making*, with 1200 students and known for its difficulty. However, the practice of using students to assist the learning of other students fits well with the concept of a Learning Commons as a place where students gather to learn collaboratively. So, the development of Student Rovers has drawn on the ideas and tradition of peer mentoring.

Framed from this point of view, Rovers constitute a community of practice, centred on the articulation of a body of knowledge concerning best practice in learning to learn at VU, touching on information literacy and academic literacy. Thus Rovers, as well as participating in a flow of top-down professional information/advice (eg from teaching and learning services academics), will also *as students* participate in a horizontal flow of knowledge, understandings and know-how within the VU student body.

In the words of Bartholomae (1985) "*every student has to 'invent the university', construct their own understanding of the university and its expectations*". Each student is compelled to cobble together a workable collection of strategies, motivations, habits, skills, relationships, vocabularies, ways of reading, processes of writing, strategies for balancing different social obligations, social activities, pleasures, and so on, which together constitute their particular construction of the university and how to study at it. This unending process of invention, or rather dialogue with oneself, around issues of 'how to learn' is stitched together from fragments of past experience, scraps of advice from lecturers or previous teachers, casual conversations and observations of other students, rapidly skimmed online resources, and so on.

The hope is that a Learning Commons with Student Rovers can invest these often inchoate, sometimes misinformed, internal and interpersonal conversations about successful learning strategies, with a new visibility and sense of direction.

Furthermore, in 2007 VU introduced *Making VU,* an action plan for the University's sustainable future. The foundation of *Making VU* is a set of five commitments, including a commitment to learning in the workplace and the community (Victoria University 2007). The Rovers are doing just that. They are working across three different campuses and have developed their own workplace community of practice. Their work as peer mentors is rich, rewarding, authentic (and quite well paid) part-time employment.

RoverSpace Caters for Digital Natives

There is a huge amount written about Generation Y and their general characteristics, but less about their social networking habits and usage. As YouTube, Facebook and MySpace grow exponentially in popularity, everyone is jumping on the bandwagon. Politicians, including US presidential hopefuls and Australian politicians have recognised the need to have a Web 2.0 presence, and are exploiting the

technologies to get access to Gen Y voters (and, in Rudd's choice of Facebook over Howard's dated MySpace vehicle, to demonstrate how with-it their preferences are). However, Gen Y and Gen X remain the most prolific users of social networking technologies.

Generally, members of Gen Y are characterised as being born between the late 1970s to the early 1990s. They are perceived as being good at multitasking and are comfortable with Internet and computer technologies. As Patterson (2007) states "*Gen Ys are not shy about flaunting personal details about their lives on YouTube and MySpace…and are cynical of packaged messages.*"

Furthermore, research shows that "*Generation Y balances privacy and convenience concerns by taking personal responsibility for safe behaviour and self-censoring the type of personal information made available online*" (Blackman 2006).

Characteristics	Baby Boomers (1946-early 60s)	Gen X (early 60s-1980)	Gen Y (1980-late 1990s)
Learning approaches	Formal & structured approaches	Relaxed, interactive & technologically varied	Spontaneous
Learning environment	Teacher as expert, classroom, chalk & talk	Roundtable, peer-to-peer, web-based	Multimodal

Table 1: Characteristics of Generations (Boomers to Gen Y)

This group is now the predominant cohort of students in postsecondary education, and, as Table 1 above shows, their approach to learning is different to that of Boomers and Xs. This has led to a rethink regarding the delivery of information to students.

Many libraries are using Web 2.0 technologies like weblogs, folksonomies, wikis, podcasts and RSS feeds to deliver information to students, and allowing them to create content and participate in a dialogue with library staff and other library users. Many of this age group are true "digital natives"; that is they have grown up with digital technologies and are comfortable with using them, to the extent that they often seem to dominate their lives (Prensky 2004).

According to Bahr and Pendergast (2007):

> Other benefits of developing technological capability and engaging in games, such as those delivered by GameBoy and Xbox, are beginning to emerge. Enhanced communication skills, the capacity to associate actions with consequences, and other capabilities such as enhanced business skills are being identified as benefits.

The general uptake of the Internet in Australia is high. Internet access in Australia has nearly doubled since 2001, according to an analysis of census information recently released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In 2001, just over a third (35 percent) of homes across Australia had internet access; in 2006, that had grown to nearly two-thirds (63 percent). The generations following Gen Y will also be digital natives. However we have to be careful not to make too many generalisations about the capabilities of Gen Y students.

Notwithstanding the higher level of computer literacy amongst younger people, VU's diverse student community could be described as receptive to technological applications rather than being readymade "digital natives". Many students come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and hence may not necessarily have access to the Internet at home (although recent research by VU's Postcompulsory Education Centre suggests this socioeconomic digital divide is less broad than older "digital migrants" may intuit). In the first group of ten Rovers, several were not familiar with social networking software and needed to be supported by other Rovers until their competency and confidence improved.

Community of Practice

In his *35 Perspectives of Online Social Networking* (2007), Leeb-du Toit outlines many different social networking contexts. The category that RoverSpace best fits is the professional or learning perspective, which includes a community of practice perspective and is concerned with the learning possibilities of social networking sites. According to Leeb-du Toit, social networking sites can be described in many different ways, depending on context or use. A community of practice perspective allows for the possibility of developing closely connected interest groups and, in the case of the Rovers, student peer mentors working in the Commons.

In its simplest form, a community of practice is a group of people joined by a common interest about which they regularly communicate (Mitchell et al. 2006). What we tried to achieve with RoverSpace is for the Rovers to develop a community of practice to share their concerns, knowledge and solutions and connect with one another.

Although the Rovers are given a two-day training programme before they officially began work, this training cannot possibly cover all the circumstances and contingencies encountered on the job. As a result, most of the training/learning that occurs is situated in the Commons and informal; that is, the Rovers learn in the workplace by practice in authentic situations. Through working in the Commons and sharing their knowledge with each other, in the online community and face-to-face, they become more effective Rovers and are transformed into practitioners and members of a community of practice (Wenger and Snyder 2002).

The learning of the Rovers is "*engaged, situated and an identify-forming process*" (Cox 2005). In the beginning, RoverSpace (the community of practice) was facilitated by Dr McCormack, now intervention is seldom necessary. The community is self-supporting. The main communication channel for the Rovers is RoverSpace. Through sharing their knowledge at work and online, they can improve their practice and effect real change in their workplace. The learning that occurs is by observation and participation, is task-orientated and flows from other learners and Commons staff. "Learning is as much about understanding how to behave as what to do, and is an identity change." (Cox 2005).

There are many examples of Rovers having effectively made changes to their work practices. When they first began working in the Commons at City Flinders, there was no designated desk for them to sit at with the students. The intention was for Rovers to rove for the duration of their shift, so that they were highly visible. The Rovers

themselves believed that they needed a desk to provide a focal point and to keep their work-related documents readily accessible.

This issue was raised in RoverSpace and discussed before being escalated to the Campus Librarian, who made a mobile desk available. One of the Rovers commented that the desk gave them more credibility and visibility with the students who were coming to them for help. The importance of a desk for visibility was later over-emphasised at the new St Albans Commons, where a much larger desk obscures the Rovers and has significantly inhibited their ability to see and be seen by Commons users.

Jones and Esnault (2004) state that the community of practice metaphor alludes to the "idea of strong ties and a cohesive view of community". The Rovers are bound together by their shared work, responsibility to one other and as peer mentors, which lends robustness to the community of practice. Although RoverSpace has since moved off Elgg to a different platform, the community of practice is still thriving, sharing and connecting in the new environment.

From Elgg to GoogleGroups

The community of practice set out using Elgg as their social networking platform but has since migrated to GoogleGroups. VU has its own Elgg server, and with advice from information technology services, it was initially thought that Elgg would be the most efficacious platform by virtue of its being designed for environments such as education Unfortunately, sufficient technological support is not available for those using Elgg in the University community. Some technical issues arose with the product and a timely response forced a migration to an alternative product.

In early 2007, when the community of practice was established, there was an in-principle commitment from the University to support Elgg, but this did not eventuate. RoverSpace continued using Elgg until July 2007, then after continuing difficulties and research into alternatives the migration occurred. It is important to note that the community of practice was not committed to a particular product, but were just looking for a social networking environment that allowed them to blog, share files and develop a wiki. Although GoogleGroups does not allow the group to develop a wiki, the group is prepared to search for open source software that can be used alongside GoogleGroups.

Building a Community

Rovers at each Commons compile and post End-of-Shift reports. This is done twice daily after morning and afternoon shifts. These reports allow Rovers to share information and build a knowledge base that can be referred to for problem-solving in the workplace. They also alert supervisors to issues that need resolution. Examples of recent End-of-Shift postings onto GoogleGroups by Rovers (note: undoctored postings):

Example 1:

Hi all,

Today the Learning Commons was filled with people throughout our shift. There were a few queries today with some international students learning how to place holds on audio visual material and needing help locating items on the shelves. We found that students are not able to place holds on videos as they do with books but will need to go to the service desk and put their name down on the booking system. They are told when the videos will be available for pick up and would need to go to the service desk to collect them.

There was a mature age student doing certificate 4 in english who needed assistance with accessing and sending emails. She was 63 and had said that her teachers had shown her in class but it was too fast so she couldn't remember. We let her know that we are always here to help even if she needs to be shown a couple of times because it takes practice to get used to the system. She was very grateful and appreciated our services.

Another student who was doing her Masters in Food Science also seemed a bit unsure when she came into the library. Firstly we helped her with some photocopying and then there was a printing problem where the print job was not sent. This error was logged with ITS who had to reset all the settings for it to work again but meanwhile she hopped onto another computer. From there we assisted her with renewing books and how to access e-books online. She wanted us to show her how to do it first and then she was comfortable enough to give it a go herself.

She seemed to be very excited by this! Her last query was with regards to referencing and essay writing. We gave her general tips saying that it is good to read widely but any information or idea that is taken from any source must be referenced in order to avoid plagiarism.

We took this opportunity to promote the services provided by SLS and showed her where she would be able to get more concrete assistance.

Example 2:

Hey guys!

today went well. Lorrianne helped an international student learn how to use the computer system and library services. She also went to have a look at some books which the student could use to help with using microsoft office.

We also learnt how to photocopy double sided! there was a paper jam in the printer which Sue fixed. Another Rover has seen a student

taking paper from inside the printer we believe that this could be the reason why it got jammed.

We had a few students ask us about getting a job as a Rover and the process involved. They think its a really good job/idea. We also told them that they could look for part time jobs through the careers wizard.

Aimee talked to the techs because a few student have come with complaints saying that their USB doesn't work in the silent area computers. There is another USB port at the back of the computer which they could use (and that works).

The bird is still stuck in the Commons!!

Example 3:

Today (Wednesday-05.9.2007)'s morning shift started quite slow but it started getting very busy after 12:00 noon. We came across as usual queries, but it was more frequent. We had queries for photocopying, printing, adding money to cards, buying cards etc. There were queries for article search, copying and burning onto CD, and we sorted that out. There were repeated requests from a single help seeker in connection to formatting her document and CV.

The printers and copy machines were fed with last stock of paper, and that was reported to xxx for quick supply of paper. One printer (PM 2) showed low toner sign, the toner box was pulled out and shaken for instant workability. However, it was brought to Peter Ring's notice.

Have a nice weekend!

These reports can be mined for useful information, and also serve as handover reports to the following shifts. They are invaluable to the Rovers.

Evaluation

An important element of the Student Rovers programme is an evaluation project carried out by the University's Postcompulsory Education Centre. This evaluation commenced at the beginning of second semester, when the Flinders Street Rovers had been operating for one semester and Rovers were being recruited for the expansion programmes at St Albans and Werribee. The evaluation explicitly involved an action research methodology; that is, part of the Rovers' job was to participate consciously in assessing the successes and shortcomings of the service.

At the commencement of the evaluation project, RoverSpace had been operating with mixed success as the social networking platform, but had crashed (seemingly temporarily) and did not allow the new Rovers to be added to the system. GoogleGroups was adopted as a stopgap measure. Using GoogleGroups, communication across the three campuses flourished. The Rover programme manager's role shifted considerably, from one of providing ongoing administration support largely concerned with IT as well as encouragement for Rovers to engage in

the social networking software, to one of monitoring interaction between Rovers on three separate campuses and periodically initiating increasingly involved reflective tasks. It is clear from the evolution of Rovers' "voices" in shift reports and reflections on Google that regular participation in online discourse invariably leads to improved written expression and analytical skills.

The evaluation leads to something of an endorsement for commercial, familiar social networking software over the open-source software that is often, ironically, sometimes favoured as inherently accessible. The distinction between managers of the Student Rovers and Learning Commons as information, rather than information *technology*, professionals is important when considering the appropriateness of Elgg.net or GoogleGroups. The Elgg-based RoverSpace was an administratively demanding and unstable technology. With GoogleGroups, the managers can operate as laity, who are neither bogged down with the esoteric demands of the software nor unable to help with occasional IT-related questions. For their part, under the GoogleGroups regime, Rovers were invited to undertake such tasks as developing a spreadsheet for keeping the statistical records maintained by the Rovers. In effect, the transition to GoogleGroups has elevated communication with and amongst the Rovers beyond administrative matters.

In conclusion

The experience of supporting VU's Learning Commons network with Student Rovers, and of supporting the Rovers programme with online social networking, has been valuable in demonstrating both the possibilities and limitations of web-based technology. In short, social networking software is an important medium, but should be judged by its ease of usability, rather than more abstract concepts of intrinsic capacity. In developing a community of learning, it is important not to focus overly on, let alone lionise, any particular social networking software. The most accessible and familiar versions of such media will evolve through cycles of innovation and commercial standardisation, but will always remain a mere facility for communication. Having embarked on the Rover programme with certain preconceptions about how the online community would function and the assumption that Elgg would be robust enough to support RoverSpace, we became not so much disappointed by Elgg as aware that such a platform is only a tool. It is important to remember that *social networking* is the substance that a social networking platform can only support, and that in this case GoogleGroups proved itself more truly and generic than the open-source Elgg system.

Note: This paper was co-authored using a social networking platform.

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