

## **Learning Bytes: Session 2: Tues 20 April, 13:15-14:15**

### **How can I connect better with students and communicate more efficiently with them?**

Sue opened by thanking people for attending and explaining the purpose and format of the session. The following were covered:

- Pre-induction social networking: Ruth Brooks
- Facebook: Cheryl Reynolds
- 'Ning': Liz Bennett
- Twitter: Cath Ellis

#### **Ruth Brooks: Pre-induction social networking**

##### **Project to date T&L funds – transition students' recruitment aid**

This is a pilot project funded by the University's Teaching and Learning small project fund. The purpose is to set up a pre-induction social network, which students can sign onto around 3 to 4 weeks prior to enrolment but on acceptance of a place at Huddersfield and having completed the official University admissions paperwork.

Research to date has covered:

- Investigating what other staff at the University are currently doing
- Visits to the Universities of Bradford and York who both have pre-induction social networking projects.

At Bradford they have been using a 'Ning' site for all students, approx 2000 students registered of which 1000 are active users. They are currently looking at splitting this one network into smaller units at course level.

At York they have been using the 'blog' tool in Blackboard as the social networking site and focussing on practical aspects of settling into university life e.g. how to enrol in the Library etc. They are finding that students start interacting by using the 'blog' tool but once friendships are established they are moving on to use Facebook.

A decision has been made to use a Ning site (which can be set up for a short period of time, 6-8 weeks) embedded into the Blackboard interface. In this way students can benefit from the social aspect of the Ning alongside being able to access some early academic materials via Blackboard, whilst they are keen to get started. It also has the advantage of starting to familiarise the students with the Blackboard VLE before they use it more formally with their studies.

The actual project team comprises a mixture of academic and technical staff. Pilot sites are planned for a small number of courses in the Business School, Art, Design & Architecture, Music, Humanities & Media and Computing & Engineering. Standard models and frameworks will be designed which can then be customised at course level. The site will be branded and made as friendly and interactive as possible. It is planned to film some video diaries of current students talking about their University experiences and act as ambassadors.

#### **Facebook: Cheryl Reynolds**

Cheryl described how a Facebook page is being used on her "Subject Specialist" Module with trainee teachers (approx 1000) who are studying at Huddersfield but from disparate

locations. Due to this it is often hard for the students to link with colleagues who teach their specialism. For this reason an online network is ideal, coupled with the fact that some of the students are already Facebook users. It is optional to sign up, and they currently have approx 220 students that have become 'fans' of the page with a large percentage of these being active. Because the students subscribe to both Facebook and the 'Subject Specialist' Facebook page, Cheryl can post messages which the students are able to view on their personal Facebook site. Facebook enables the students to make links with and send messages to colleagues. A Facebook 'Fan' box has been added to the Blackboard module – this provides a snapshot of recent posts on the subject specialist Facebook page with an invite to join. There is the hope that the network of specialists will spread and grow, surviving the length of the course and beyond. However the only way to find out if this is the case is to undertake research. Using a Facebook page in this way takes the information and messages to where students are already logging into. There has been a great deal of discussion between students on the page, and Cheryl is quickly able to answer any questions or misunderstandings that arise.

Consideration needs to be given to the relative power relations between tutor and students. On Facebook this relationship is less formal, students can be more outspoken and there is a different dynamic. If people provide a really robust critique of the resources you are providing it can be difficult to respond without quashing. The advice is to enter into the spirit of the medium being used, although there may be some degree of negativity, a lot of students are supporting each other, advising, sharing anxieties etc. The benefit of adding a separate page to Facebook gets round any issues to do with tutors and students becoming 'friends'. The student can subscribe to the page without their information being shown in the tutor's Facebook stream.

#### **Ning: Liz Bennett**

Liz showed a 'Ning' site that had been set up for the MSc Multimedia and Elearning course; it covers some aspects of pre-course student engagement. Students were asked to upload and embed their favourite video as an icebreaker activity. The layout of the home page is customisable providing a choice of what features are visible on screen. Having a 'Ning' site allows for a more student-centred and social approach, students are able to set up their own discussion boards etc and have a bit more control over the environment. It also allows the students a place to collaborate away from the formal learning environment; this is particularly useful with blended or totally online courses where the students don't get many (or any) opportunities to spend face to face time discussing and socialising.

#### **Twitter: Cath Ellis**

Twitter is a social networking tool that allows you to communicate with and 'follow' people who you share an interest with. It is a very powerful tool for connecting with people in a similar role to you. This can lead to mutual support and the building of a personal learning network (PLN). However it takes a while to build up the network and there has to be give and take and trust established for the most benefit.

In Twitter, you can add a specific #tag to code messages for a specific purpose, like at a Conference or event. For example if people are tweeting about a JISC conference they may tag their tweets about the conference with #jisc10. This way all people at the conference can follow the twitter stream whether or not they follow each other on twitter. In a teaching and learning context, Cath has used a specific hash tag to tweet anything relevant to her courses,

and then, using a bit of code, this can be embedded and displayed in Blackboard. This can provide a quick and easy way of accessing information in Blackboard with having to login separately to Twitter. It also gives those students who are not on Twitter a chance to see what is being tweeted about that topic area.

Cheryl has been using Twitter with her Masters students – putting information on a blog and then tweeting it with a specific tag that the students can then follow. The tweet links back to the blog, so that subjects can be explored in greater depth than the 140 character limit in Twitter.

### **General discussion**

There has been evidence of students setting up their own networks e.g. student representatives using social networks to communicate with their peers prior to a student rep meeting.

Christine Cattermole who is based at University Campus Oldham and Chris Ireland from the Business School set up a pilot pre-induction social network last year. Students' positively evaluated the experience and found it offered a valuable way of familiarising themselves with the University and peers prior to the start of their course.

Sue Daley-Yates has used social networking linked to the Library within her academic study skills work for the last 3 years and is looking into using an online version with Christine Cattermole. It will be worth seeing what lessons can be learnt from Ruth's project prior to starting.

Up until recently Ning was free of charge, this has changed and it is currently charged for with a differing scale of charges depending on the use. In the case of Ruth's project as Blackboard will be the main interface the Ning could always be replaced with an alternative without having to dramatically alter the look or feel.

When using social networking tool for communicating with students consider the principles behind their use. Today's students now often have experience of using VLEs and many enjoy using social networks and are comfortable with this form of communication. Some thought may need to be given to how to manage these tools and to teaching students to manage them responsibly, to maintain a professional digital identity. However it is a myth to think these networks are controllable, academics need to be vigilant in monitoring their use to avoid or curtail inappropriate practices (often externally generated).

We can't expect or require every single student to be a member of every social network. Need to ensure that those who aren't comfortable with networks are still supported. From a professional development perspective need to encourage students to build personal learning environments, using the resources they are comfortable and enable them to develop personal learning networks.