Chapter 2
Breaking the Hierarchy: Democratising the Institutional Web Space

Beth Granter
University of Sussex, UK

ABSTRACT
This chapter, inspired by direct experience from working on the development of the University of Sussex’s Student Personal Learning and Social Homepages (SPLASH) project, discusses how ‘Web 2.0’ technologies can be used to make institutional websites more democratic. The SPLASH mashup project was non-typical in that it intended to create an environment which would be fully customisable by the learner, so that no content was obligatory. Examples from working on this project are used to illustrate benefits which can be gained from, and barriers to the uptake of, more open publishing methods and an organically structured site architecture. Issues affecting learners, tutors, the institution as a whole, and how the power dynamic between all three may change, are discussed. Parallels are drawn between teaching methods online and those offline, both traditional and modern.

INTRODUCTION
Learning culture is but a slice of culture overall, and people are becoming more important than institutions in all facets of life. Command and control of organizational structures are giving way to democratizing networks. Learners, workers, all of us make decisions we previously would have taken to authorities for approval. (Cross, 2008)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-884-0.ch002
ment would damage institutional branding and fears of certain students’ viewpoints offending other students.

This chapter hopes to address these concerns and to deliver logical reasoning around how the benefits of incorporating social media into an institutional website outweigh the risks, and how in spite of any newly visible criticism, moving towards a more open publishing policy online will improve the reputation of the institution, as it will eventually be seen to be more honest and more trustworthy than those with closed publishing policies who operate under a hierarchy of strict editorial control. Allowing students a voice will add to the identity of the institution as one with confidence in its ability to provide a high standard of education and support and as an institution with a ‘nothing to hide’ attitude.

Personalisation of the learning environment addresses the power imbalance in education, improving the ability of students to learn from each other, thereby putting some power into the hands of the students. Giving students more choice over the content they receive from the institution in turn puts extra pressures on the institution to provide useful and interesting content; furthermore, the feedback available in the form of usage statistics will put major pressures on different institutional units to perform to a high level as they compete for attention and space. Thus, within the context of a history of corporate control of information, projects aiming to create democratic personalised learning environments are likely to find conflict within the institution itself.

Although the term ‘Web 2.0’ is already beginning to be regarded as a dated term, its use here is appropriate because Web 2.0 describes succinctly a number of theories and tools aligned with a more democratic use of the internet. In the scope of this chapter, Web 2.0 is used to describe blogging, wikis, forums, user generated content, online communities and social media. ‘Social media’ here refers to any online tool or space which allows communication and/or collaboration between a number of people, often in a networked environment (Wikipedia, 2008).

**Openness and Utopia**

*Openness is associated with values such as tolerance, individual freedom, lifelong learning, participation, empowerment and cooperation, as opposed to typical closed-world values of command and control, top-down management, centralized and bureaucratic governance, over-regulation.* (Straub, 2008)

Web 2.0 technologies are creating a more democratic web by allowing anyone to publish content, in comparison to the traditional unidirectional flow of information from corporation to user. University websites have previously consisted of institutional information being presented for the consumption of their students, potential students, businesses and all other audiences. A typical University website currently consists of reading lists and lecture notes posted by tutors, promotional information written by its press and communications division, and departmental web content written by authorised web editors. The offline version of this content would be traditional printed prospectus’, standard format lectures and the mainstream press.

While collaborative group work and student discussion has been increasingly encouraged in modern teaching, in the form of seminars etc. (Terenzini et al, 2001), it is only in the last few years that the tools have been available which could mirror this more democratic style of learning online. The mainstream press has been opening up its websites via user generated content in the form of blogs and forums (and more recently, rich media (Plesser, 2006)) since the very beginning of the twenty first century - allowing the public to have a voice (Jenny, 2003). University websites seem to have limited the use of Web 2.0 tools to the domain of eLearning, conveniently maintaining complete institutional control over public facing content. Initially conceived as a social networking mashup...