Chapter 13

Using Web 2.0 Tools to Enhance the Student Experience in Non-Teaching Areas of the University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the nexus between student learning and student engagement outside the classroom, and to highlight the importance of non-teaching units in contributing to student satisfaction. It discusses the role of non-teaching units (such as libraries, guilds, student services departments, and other bodies) in creating online communities using Web 2.0 tools. The chapter uses the NODE project hosted by the University of Western Australia as a case study to demonstrate how some of these principles can be put into action. The significance of non-teaching units is confirmed, in addition to providing recommendations for fostering greater collaboration between staff and advice on setting up a Web 2.0-based online community in a university.

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely recognized that tertiary students learn both inside the classroom and outside of it (Krause, 2005b, 2007; Light, 2001), examples of the latter being when students engage together in discussion, peer study groups, and other co-curricular activities. While disciplinary content teaching conducted by academic faculties and schools may typically be seen to constitute the bulk of a university’s “core business,” the contribution made by areas such as libraries, student guilds and societies, transition programs, and academic skills advisors is integral to the way students engage with and connect to their institution. These functions, collectively identified here as non-teaching units, complement academic content and instructional delivery, enhancing and enriching the student learning experience through provision of a wide range of services and programs. Web 2.0 tools offer options to improve communication between students and staff in non-teaching units, supple-
ment teaching and learning-support activities, and facilitate social networking between groups of students in ways that aid their engagement with institutional and campus culture.

Challenges exist for non-teaching units in that they often do not have a defined student cohort in the same way the lecturer of a subject or unit might. The staff of such units also do not always have access to online learning management systems (LMSs) such as Blackboard or Moodle, and they may have fewer opportunities to develop ongoing relationships with students. Yet the prospects for non-teaching units to engage with students are also considerable. For example, units such as those providing academic skills development have contact with significant numbers of students, often from across the range of teaching disciplines, via face-to-face service delivery in workshops, presentations, consultations, and drop-in sessions. Other services may engage with the students in a more casual, less formal relationship, away from the pressures of assessment, and they are able to supply students with key skills and information, often at the point of need, thus providing a key component of the learning experience. These programs have the scope to use information and communication technologies (ICTs), and particularly, social networking tools, to enhance their service delivery.

The use of technologies in enhancing the student learning experience is, in some ways, neither new nor revolutionary. Students have long used email, mobile phones, and online learning environments to communicate with their instructors and peers, to administer various aspects of their university lives, and to manage their course-related information and study content. However, the growing use of Web 2.0 tools in learning environments that allow users to create and contribute content has generated much discussion about how students learn and interact, the skills they need in order to engage with the tools effectively, and the extent to which this engagement contributes to learning and the quality of the student experience.

This chapter therefore aims to:

- provide an overview of the nexus between student learning and student engagement outside the classroom;
- highlight the importance of non-teaching units in developing the student learning—engagement nexus and its contribution to student satisfaction;
- discuss the role of non-teaching units in creating online communities using Web 2.0 tools;
- use the NODE project at the University of Western Australia (UWA) as a case study to demonstrate how some of these principles can be put into action.

BACKGROUND

Student Engagement

We begin by considering the notion of, and issues surrounding, student engagement. Universities worldwide recognize the importance of students being satisfied with their student experience. Student satisfaction with the quality of their learning outcomes, their graduate opportunities, and their overall experience is reflected in the results of international ranking exercises, and therefore these are important measures that can be used as benchmarks and marketing tools for universities operating in a competitive global environment (Marginson, 2007). University leaders and administrators are keenly aware of the elements of the student experience: quality teaching and relevant curricula are central, but so too are state-of-the-art information technology (IT) infrastructure, comprehensive support services, library resources and a welcoming campus climate (Krause, 2005a). Most university leaders place a high emphasis on the overall richness of the student experience, encouraging students to use every opportunity to expand their personal networks and challenge
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