“If Many Were Involved”: University Student Self-Interest and Engagement in a Social Bookmarking Activity

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ABSTRACT

There is interest amongst educators in engaging university students in learning communities through social web technologies. Asking students to create and share content through social bookmarking is often suggested. However there are few evidence-based evaluations of actual implementations of social bookmarking. This paper reports on one implementation, comparing the rationale for the learning activity from a teaching perspective with an interpretation of project outcomes from students’ perspectives. The authors found that despite students understanding the potential value of participation in this activity, it didn’t translate into actual participation. The authors explain this outcome by recognising students as rationally self-interested actors who find themselves in a ‘prisoner’s dilemma,’ using a concept from game theory. This analysis supports the authors’ conclusion that efforts to engage students must be directed to encouraging their belief that all students will participate.

Keywords: Educational Design, Educational Implementation, Information Literacy, Prisoner’s Dilemma, Social Bookmarking, Student Engagement, Web 2.0

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL SOFTWARE

Student engagement in first-year university is an important precursor to academic achievement in later years (Krause & Coates, 2008) and can be understood broadly as a student’s employment of a set of practices known to produce good learning outcomes. Student engagement can occur through challenging oneself in learning activities, using active and collaborative learning methods, interacting with teaching staff, participating in enrichment activities and making the most of available learning environments (Kuh, 2001).

Educators have become hopeful of fostering student engagement by supporting learning communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and by doing this with the aid of web-based social software – also known as ‘web 2.0’ technologies. The major types of web 2.0 technologies are considered to be audio and video podcasting, blogging and microblogging, social bookmarking, social
networking, virtual world activities and wiki writing (see, e.g., Berlanga et al., 2007, Kamel Boulos & Wheeler, 2007). Broadly, these technologies offer tools to facilitate connectivity and social rapport, collaborative information discovery and sharing, content creation, knowledge and information aggregation and content modification (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

Certain educational designs are considered particularly appropriate when using these technologies to engage students in learning communities (Brill & Park, 2008). For instance, these technologies should be used to enable students to take ownership of their learning; or their use should support students to do flexible group work; or they should be designed to encourage students to access, remix and share varied learning resources.

However, research in this area often tends to focus on whether students are engaging with the technology itself, rather than how their use of it is improving their engagement in learning (e.g., Stepanyan, Mather, & Payne, 2007). Moreover, actual implementations of certain web 2.0 tools for such purposes have been reported infrequently (Sener, 2007).

Social bookmarking is a case in point. At its most basic, social bookmarking allows you to keep a list of links to web pages of interest (i.e., bookmarks) on a website, rather than in the web-browsing software installed on a specific computer. This means that you can access your bookmarks from any Internet-connected computer where you work and you can share them with other web users if you wish. Different social bookmarking services support a variety of value-adding features such as tagging, annotating, ranking and sorting bookmarks; RSS feeds; private groups; and integration with blogging or desktop-based document management software. A number of social bookmarking websites are available, either as free or fee-paying services to web users; Hammond et al. (2005) offer an in-depth comparative review of nine of these. Many news and academic publishing websites now encourage bookmarking of their content by providing icons linked to social bookmarking services.

Social web technologies are widely assumed to be in use by Net Generation students – e.g., Oliver and Goerke (2007, p. 185) found “undergraduates ... have a very high level of ownership of ... devices [that] can be used ... for interactivity through instant messaging, blogging and podcasting as well as a host of other Web 2.0 applications”). However, it cannot be assumed that students have any prior knowledge or experience of social bookmarking (Farwell & Waters, 2010). This lack of familiarity adds an extra dimension of challenge to the educational interest in encouraging students to create and share content in the form of bookmarks within a learning community (e.g., Everhart, Kunnen, & Shelton, 2007; Ford, Bowden, & Beard, 2011; Hirst, 2005; Liu & Chang, 2008; Lomas, 2005).

Some implementations of social bookmarking in units of study that aim to teach the use of social media per se have been evaluated (e.g., Edwards & Mosley, 2011). However there are few evidence-based studies of other pedagogical uses of social bookmarking, particularly where the emphasis is on student-contributed content to a shared site (Coutinho & Bottentuit, Jr., 2008a). Coutinho and Bottentuit, Jr. (2008b), Hsu, Ching, and Grabowski (2008), and Saeed, Yang, and Sinnappan (2009) are exceptions: The first study, using an evaluation protocol that heavily favoured positive responses, still elicited four negative observations from a group of twenty-one students. In the second study a few students chose to share their bookmarks with their peers and some students found using the bookmarking tool to be a complicated task. In the third study only one quarter of students created and shared bookmarks; being compelled to identify themselves rather than staying anonymous was reportedly a contributing factor to their reluctance.

The aim of this paper is to examine the rationale for a social bookmarking learning activity from the teaching perspective, and interpret outcomes from students’ perspectives, with a view to informing those who wish to use similar activities to improve participants’ engagement in a learning community.
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