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Re-thinking Learning Communities: Using Google+ to invigorate the curriculum and engage learners.

William. M. Roberts & Natasha Taylor

This paper details an explorative and experimental project based in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes University. It is an example of how a virtual space can be used to support and develop a strong and dynamic learning community in which staff and students work alongside to co-produce learning resources to enhance campus-based learning activities. It is likely to be of interest to colleagues who have experienced difficulties with student engagement in virtual learning environments, and those who are interested in developing more dynamic lecture programmes.

The aim of the initiative was to explore how the connective, democratic, interactive and constant accessible qualities of Web 2.0 can be better utilised to engage students in their learning and contribute to their development as digital citizens. Drawing on the well-established theories of communities of practice and situated learning (Wenger 1998, Wenger et al 2002, Lave 1991), a new teaching model was introduced for students on the Global and Cultural Studies module on the Sport, Coaching and Physical Education degree. The module is a 12 week module using face to face and online learning to engage students in the critical and discursive debates located in Sport and Physical Culture in a globalised, neoliberal society. Google+ was used as the main teaching and learning environment, requiring students to engage as active participants and co-producers of the learning resources, rather than passive consumers of content. They were encouraged to find and share relevant resources and use them to debate and explore key questions with their peers; face to face sessions were then designed to respond to and exploit the student-generated content. Much of the online activity took place outside of formal timetabled hours.

The initiative was evaluated via discourse analysis of the Google+ environment and in-depth interviews with students. We will present the themes which emerged from the analysis and share the barriers, enablers and impact stories with delegates. Ultimately, we conclude that the Web 2.0 tools can be used to manage and facilitate a vibrant and dynamic flow of people and information in a way that linear discussion boards and chatrooms cannot; we suggest that this reorients pedagogic practice around the emergent idea of 'chaordic' communities of practice that serve to develop digital citizens.