

Provisioning participatory learning: Creating opportunities for student-centred online cooperative academic support

Keith Kirkwood

Student Learning Unit, Victoria University, Melbourne Victoria 8001, Australia

Email: keith.kirkwood@vu.edu.au

(Received 30 June, 2011; Published online 30 April, 2012)

The idea that learners can and do significantly contribute to each other's learning is not a new one; indeed, constructivist theorists Piaget and Vygotsky both promoted peer learning (Falchikov, 2001). In recent years, peer learning has been gaining momentum and renewed interest. Locally, Van der Meer and Scott (2008) have suggested that a "paradigm shift" in learning support from teacher-centred delivery to "peer-learning primacy" could be an important one for transitioning first-year students. Many educators are also enthusiastic about 21st century social media technologies that facilitate peer-to-peer exchange and the development of co-constructed knowledge (Bostrom, Gupta, & Hill, 2008; Dabbagh & Reo, 2010; Huijser, Kimmins, & Evans, 2008; Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008). But how might it be possible to develop an online learning skills website that departs from the usual teacher-centred approach, accommodates peer learning and harnesses the potential for students to cooperatively engage in mutual academic skills development? SNAPVU is a Web 2.0-based social learning environment that has been developed by the Student Learning Unit of Victoria University to provide a platform for students to engage in peer learning support. As with most academic skills support sites, use of the site is voluntary. This paper looks at the design of the site, its pedagogical underpinnings, evaluation of its use during the pilot semester, and its redesign in light of student and staff evaluation and feedback. It raises some questions about the readiness of tertiary students and staff to embrace voluntary participatory learning and teaching, and asks what conditions may be necessary for the development of active and cooperative learning communities in tertiary institutions.

Key Words: participatory learning, peer learning, social constructivism, Web 2.0, social learning environment.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Introduction

Student engagement surveys such as the US and Australian National Survey of Student Engagement (the NSSE and AUSSE, respectively) point to peer learning as a major strategy for keeping students engaged (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2011; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010). The NSSE observes that "[s]tudents who engaged in learning activities with their peers were more likely to participate in other effective educational practices and had more positive views of the campus learning environment" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010, p. 9). Several Australian and New Zealand universities have run face-to-face peer learning programs for almost two decades now (Chin, 2006). In recent years, local and global consideration has also been given to the benefits and

implications of developing *online* peer learning approaches (Huijser et al., 2008; Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008; Van der Meer & Scott, 2008). This marks the beginning of a paradigm shift away from online learning platforms, such as learning management systems (Blackboard, Moodle, etc.) that focus primarily on institutional and instructional needs rather than on learner needs and agency.

The SNAPVU platform, developed in 2010 by Victoria University in Melbourne, is an online academic support platform that goes beyond the usual resource repository style of academic skills websites to facilitate peer learning support and the development of academic learning communities. The intention of the site is not only to provide traditional online access to academic skills resources, but also to encourage students to develop the awareness of and capacity for modes of active and participatory engagement with those resources and with each other. There are several pedagogical and practical reasons for taking this approach. This paper will discuss:

1. theories of online peer learning with respect to the affordances provided by Web 2.0 tools and social media;
2. the development of peer learning at Victoria University as a major strategy for academic support;
3. the development of SNAPVU as an institutional teaching and learning project; and
4. the implications of participatory modes of learning for the tertiary environment, in terms of getting students and staff engaged and enthused in developing and taking active ownership of the site.

1.2. Peer learning support and online social learning environments

The development of the “read/write web”, or Web 2.0, has facilitated social and peer learning by allowing users to share information in a cooperative and participatory manner (Chatti, Jarke, & Frosch-Wilke, 2007; Dabbagh & Reo, 2010; Huijser et al., 2008; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008b). Wesch (2009) observes that this development “is a social revolution, not a technological one, and its most revolutionary aspect may be the ways in which it empowers us to rethink education and the teacher-student relationship in an almost limitless variety of ways” (Knowledge-able section, para. 3). In an online Social Learning Environment (SLE) the instructor takes on new and fluid roles, as “knowledge broker, knowledge co-creator, mentor, coordinator and facilitator of the learning experience” (Chatti et al., 2007, p. 412), sharing many of the traditional “teaching” roles with students. In addition, there is evidence that students would often rather consult their fellow students than their tutors or lecturers for assistance with their study (Laghos, 2010; Lockley, Pritchard, & Foster, 2004).

Online SLEs can become places for peer knowledge construction and negotiation through the enabling of user-generated content and collaboration (Dabbagh & Reo, 2010; Maor & Hendriks, 2001). The resources and interactions within the SNAPVU SLE support both formal and informal learning and cater to different learning preferences: there are text-based resources (static webpages), videocasts created by both staff and other students, and opportunities to work together in study groups or to post questions and answers to a forum. That the platform depends on the interactions and multiple skillsets of students, peer mentors and teaching staff gives it the constitution of a learning community of practice (CoP), whereby people come together informally and voluntarily to share information and ideas about that practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Peer mentors act as both the stewards of the site and play a mediating role by which their more novice peers participate, in Lave and Wenger’s terminology, in “legitimate peripheral participation” or, in Vygotsky’s social constructivist vocabulary, in a “zone of proximal development” (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001, p. 86) – that zone within which new knowledge is graspable to the learner because it can be related to what is already known. Thus the SLE encourages the development of important meta-skills around learning, including the abilities:

- to negotiate knowledge and meaning;
- to critically assess resources for personal and overall value;

- to develop a meaningful taxonomy of terms around academic skills;
- to participate in the development of a collective practice; and
- to work cooperatively and develop personal and social confidence and competence.

These are potentially transformative skills and emphasise graduate attributes that students will need in their professional lives.

1.3. Peer learning at Victoria University

Victoria University's School of Language and Learning has been developing its peer learning strategies since 2002, with the delivery of its first PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) program. In 2007, Student Rovers were first introduced to the university's city campus Learning Commons to provide peer support in the libraries. In 2009, a multi-pronged *Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL)* strategy (McCormack, Best, & Kirkwood, 2009) was formally adopted by the faculty (VU College), in recognition of how the existing student-led learning support programs have been a powerful mechanism for providing academic support to students. They provide a fundamentally different form of learning support to the more traditional methods of teaching that are also a part of the suite of academic skills development strategies at Victoria University (which include one-to-one consultations, academic skills workshops, and staff support through the embedding of learning skills in programs and curricula) (see Figure 1).

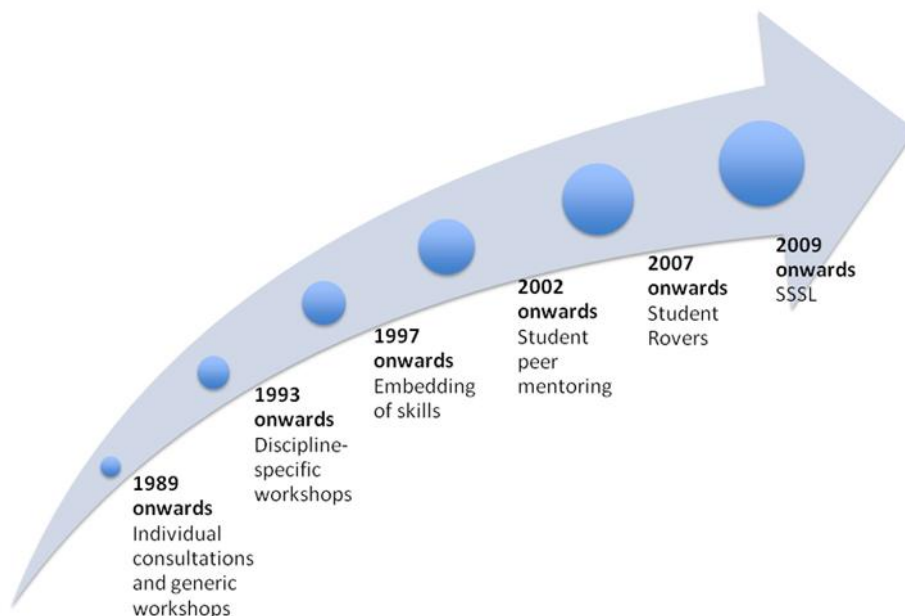


Figure 1. Variety of learning support strategies at Victoria University.

The online addition to the SSSL strategy, SNAPVU, has been designed to maximise the opportunities for all Victoria University students to engage in learning support by providing a platform that encourages student–student and student–staff interaction and collaboration through Web 2.0 mechanisms. The provision of resources draws upon the direct participation of Peer Mentors, Student Rovers, the student body and teaching staff by providing a participatory online platform on which they can share information, support each other in their learning, and engage in the development of an active learning community. SNAPVU can be seen as a response to the strategic direction of Victoria University – *Strategies for student success* – that aims:

To provide students with the ability to customise their learning experience around course choice and learning support, to best meet their current needs and future demands. (Victoria University, 2010)

SNAPVU provides a personalised social learning platform that allows for: 1) a customisable learning environment; 2) opportunities for student engagement and peer mentoring; 3) opportunities for student collaborative learning communities of practice; and 4) accommodation of a diversity of learning preferences through the provision of multimodal resources (text-based, video, formal/informal, Web-based, etc.). It provides an online platform through which students can collaborate authentically with other students to support each other's learning by:

1. seeking mediated learning support through both VU-produced and Web-based learning support material;
2. engaging in online just-in-time support through learning-support-focused discussion forums;
3. seeking face-to-face learning support by booking individual consultations, learning support workshops, and email support;
4. engaging in groups and communities of practice around specific aspects of learning support or subject-related work; and
5. learning how to use online tools and resources that will facilitate their study, their group work, and their lifelong learning.

2. The development of SNAPVU as an institutional e-learning platform

SNAPVU began its institutional life as an internal 2010 Victoria University Teaching and Learning Grant project. The purpose of this project proposal was to redevelop and update the existing academic support website for VU, the Learning Hub. The Learning Hub was a collection of webpages spanning several iterations of online learning support and institutional restructures; consequently, the learning resources on the site were a hodgepodge of webpages hosted on an unsupported and unaudited server with a never-ending story approach to internal navigation. The pages themselves bristled with unbranded downloadable portable document files (pdfs) written by previous staff. Besides the currency issue, however, was the fact that the Learning Hub was simply devoid of any clear evidence of being *peopled* by staff and students. For example, there was no staff page or photos to identify who was a part of the unit, or indeed any attempt to bring the peer learning strategy to life with student voices. These were some of the issues SNAPVU set out to address.

The following section of the paper will discuss the development of SNAPVU as an institutional e-learning platform. It will highlight some of the issues of developing an enterprise-wide ICT and social media platform, including design phases, project management considerations, and the challenges of keeping multiple stakeholders engaged and informed. Hopefully this exposition will help others who aim to help bring online teaching and learning support into the 21st century.

2.1. Early conceptualisations of SNAPVU

SNAPVU started out in 2006 as a “twinkle in the eye” of an academic skills advisor who felt that his one-to-one consultations missed an opportunity for students to engage with each other in discussing their topics of research. It seemed that the potential for peer learning, the sharing of resources and the development of academic community could be explored by giving students the opportunity to network with each other rather than being isolated from each other with no means of contact or of discovering who else might be pursuing similar academic interests. At the time, Web 2.0 had begun to storm into mainstream media, with Time Magazine calling “You” the Person of the Year because suddenly “you” were able to publish to the Web without programming expertise. Social networking sites MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, Orkut and others were suddenly going viral, as were YouTube, Flickr, Delicious, Wikipedia and other social media sites. If social networking sites afforded people the opportunity to find each other and create community based on common interests, then *social networking for academic purposes* might give students the opportunity to create community based on academic interests. *Snap!*

In order to create a successful online community, however, one needs to ensure that the members of that community develop a sense of ownership of and agency with it. Wenger

(1998) emphasises that communities of practice are self-forming and that members join, leave, and participate in them according to their own motivations and needs. He maintains that a CoP is “defined by knowledge rather than by task, and exists because participation has value to its members” (Communities of Practice in Organizations section, para. 2). Palloff and Pratt (2007, 2010) have emphasised the importance of considering the emotional as well as the cognitive dimensions of online learning communities, and maintain that online instructors need to facilitate the development of these learning communities and empower their students to become active participants in them. They call for a new form of learner-centric pedagogy in which students are more in control of the learning process.

It is with such a pedagogical orientation that the “SNAP Platform” was originally conceived – as an “e-learning community of practice”, or ELCoP (Kirkwood, 2006). To ensure that learners felt empowered by and engaged with the platform, the idea was to – as far as was practical in the institutional context – get students themselves to design and build it. The operational theory was: *if they build it, they will come*. Institutional contexts being what they are, however, and tertiary educational institutions in particular, it was not, in the end, practical or, to many stakeholders, appropriate to give students licence to run rampant over part of the university website, so while the site was designed by web developers and staff, it was not without the close consultation and feedback of students in the design process. Nor was it designed without the full intention of allowing students (and staff) several opportunities to create and share content on the site, to develop personal profiles and to create a learning community.

It must be recognised, however, that creating a website that provides the basis for a peer learning community to be established does not mean that students will, in fact, establish one. Academic skills websites at universities are generally adjunct, institutional websites that are not an integral part of the suite of e-learning tools students use in conjunction with their units of study (the learning management system, e-portfolio platform, and the like). SNAPVU is no exception. Warschauer (2007, pp. 45-46) concludes, from a set of studies, that, despite the opportunities the Web provides for autonomous learning, students still need “strong mentorship” from a teacher to learn best in an online environment. Apart from the potential for teaching staff to suggest or create a unit-based study group on SNAPVU, the site would not generally be a part of the requirements of study. This is certainly a disadvantage of institutional academic skills websites, including SNAPVU. It seems reasonable, however, that one way of attracting students to such a site was to design it with the potential for participatory peer learning, and the possibility of strong mentorship from other students.

2.2. SNAPVU: the VU Learning Community project

The Victoria University Teaching and Learning Grant “VU Learning Community pilot website” project was approved in Semester 2, 2009. The project team consisted of key lecturers from the School of Language and Learning (SLL), the Coordinators of SSSL and Student Rovers, Online Learning Resources, and Transition; the Transition and First-Year Coordinator of the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development (FAEHD), and an e-learning designer from the Centre of Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT). The advisory group had key representatives from all faculties, including Associate Deans, Teaching and Learning (Higher Education) Senior Educators, Teaching and Learning (TAFE), Web and IT Services (ITS), the Learning Commons manager, and managers from key LSS areas. It was essential that the project team and advisory group were multidisciplinary and represented a broad engagement with both teaching and learning concerns and the hosting of ITS and e-learning platforms across the university.

As the project was an enterprise-wide initiative, potential stakeholders included all VU students and teaching staff, VU Web development teams (Web Futures Group, ITS, and the Intranet Redevelopment Team), and SLL staff and student peer mentors and rovers as primary content creators.

2.3. Platform decisions and design methodologies

Early consultation with the Web Futures Group – the university body responsible for the phased redevelopment of the Victoria University business website which began in 2008 – was important in order to clarify the platform and design constraints and considerations. The Web Futures Group had decided to redesign the VU site using the content management system (CMS) Drupal, a robust and highly extensible open-source CMS. Consisting of a core build with the possibility of adding on third-party developer modules for extending the functionality of the platform, and with proven scalable performance (President Obama's 2008 campaign team, among other famous enterprise users, had used the Drupal CMS as their web platform), Drupal seemed a reasonable choice among the other popular content management systems such as Joomla and Wordpress. The Web Futures Group employed two aspects of design methodology, *agile development* and *user-centred design* (UCD), in their development of the VU website. According to the WFG (2010),

The user-centred design approach is a method whereby both users and the business are consulted at the beginning and throughout the lifecycle of a project ... The [web design] prototypes are tested with users to determine their effectiveness, refined, and tested again. This testing and refining can continue throughout the project, and indeed indefinitely as new features are added or new tasks and goals are defined. Changed features are explained to and confirmed with the business. (pp. 41-42)

This approach to web design resembles the principles of Web 2.0, as summarised by Mazurek (in O'Reilly, 2006, Comments section): “continual beta, engaging users as co-developers and principles of harnessing collective intelligence”. “Continual beta” implies that the site is in a constant cycle of development and improvement; an agile development approach facilitates relatively quick improvements. “Engaging users as co-developers” is at the heart of user-centred design – at least at the user engagement level of frequent consultation and feedback. UCD is not quite *handing over* the building of the site to users, but they are, importantly, consulted during the process. If they have input into the building of it, they *might* come.

SNAPVU was in a unique position with respect to user-centred design during its design and development phase. As much of the project team, and the project leader, were lecturers in a student-focused academic skills support unit with active peer mentoring programs and one-to-one collegial activities and consultations with students, it was relatively easy to engage students in design considerations and feedback. Moreover, it was possible to engage students as co-developers of the site's content. One of the project's deliverables, beyond the construction of the site itself, was the development of student-created videocasts to be streamed into the site via a YouTube hosted channel. This was one of the ways collective intelligence was leveraged by SNAPVU: by creating the means for authenticated users to contribute to the site's content.

2.4. Students as content-creators on SNAPVU

As an openly accessible website on the World Wide Web, SNAPVU is a read-only platform. Authenticated users – Victoria University staff and students who log in through the VU Central Authentication Services (CAS) – are given further permissions to write to the site as well. Thus it becomes a read/write platform that harnesses Drupal's in-built Web 2.0 capabilities and develops the site's potential to engage students (and staff) in social constructivist learning activities, in developing virtual community, collective intelligence, and co-constructed knowledge. Maor and Hendricks (2001) articulated the pedagogical implications of the read/write educational platform some years before the term Web 2.0 was coined:

Social constructivism describes an epistemology, or a way of knowing, in which learners collaborate reflectively to co-construct new understanding, especially in the context of mutual inquiry grounded in their personal experience (Maor & Taylor, 1995; O'Connor, 1998). Central to this collaboration is the development of communicative competence that enables students to engage in open and critical discourse with both the teachers and their peers (Taylor & Maor, 2000). This perspective positions the learner as

an active constructor of knowledge within a socially interactive environment in which negotiation of meaning and co-creation of knowledge occur (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Knowledge can be constructed both socially and personally as a dialectical relationship existing between the individual's contribution and the social contribution to knowledge (Tobin, 1993). (Conceptual Framework section, para. 1)

Brill and Park (2008, p. 75) suggest that frameworks for engaged learning can be instrumental in developing pedagogically sound e-learning innovations, and that one evidence of this is “student responsibility for and ownership of learning” through the co-construction of knowledge. Authenticated users can develop SNAPVU’s potential as a social learning network and constructivist knowledge-negotiating platform with the following features and tools:

- the development of a personal profile – a feature common to social networking sites (SNSs) but with a focus on academic interests and activities. Such profiles, with their accompanying avatar thumbnail images, help make visible the social activity on the site and increase the sense of personal social capital for making contributions (Augar, Raitman, Lanham, & Zhou, 2006);
- a site-wide discussion forum, on which all users can post questions and answers in various academic skills and discipline-specific categories;
- commentary upon and the rating of resources, by which co-construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning are supported, as well as collective and immediate feedback on the value of a given resource;
- the tagging of resources, to encourage community-based categorisation, or folksonomy, alongside the controlled vocabulary set by the site’s administrators (Limpens, Gandon, & Buffa, 2008; Lux & Dosinger, 2007); and
- online study group formation, by which group members can post running blog posts, upload and share documents, or organise their group projects.

In addition to these features available to all authenticated users, other features built into the site include:

- a personal learning environment, whereby users can manipulate the presentation of the homepage to suit their learning needs and interests. This is done by closing or minimising blocks of information or by pulling in other available blocks (such as a list of “Latest Resources”), and by rearranging the blocks on the page to suit one’s display preferences. This is a common feature of *personal learning environments* (PLEs) such as iGoogle, Netvibes, or PageFlakes and encourages the development of critical media literacies (Hegarty et al., 2010); and
- themed blogs written by both academic skills staff and selected students. This element of relatively informal writing to the site helps reveal the community of practice aspect of SNAPVU, in which staff, student mentors, and VU students engage in reflective practice, and staff and mentors can model the knowledge making process and the act of engagement and participation on the site (Ackerman, Pipek, & Wulf, 2003; Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008).

In addition to these features, SNAPVU also contains more traditional, formal learning support resources created by VU’s academic skills team; a calendar of workshops and events; different methods of searching resources, including tagclouds, taglists, a targeted search tool, and full-text search capabilities; searchable recommended Web links; and a section dedicated to the Students Supporting Student Learning peer mentoring programs. There is, as well, an area devoted to assisting VU teaching staff in their awareness and embedding of academic skills into their teaching, and in their use of SNAPVU as a means of augmenting their online engagement with students.

2.5. Institutional challenges

Despite the development of SNAPVU under the auspices of a Teaching and Learning Grant, the project encountered some institutional challenges that have had to be overcome. While the

pedagogical affordances of using social networking and social media technologies are widely articulated (Chatti et al., 2007; Cormier, 2008; Ladyshevsky & Gardner, 2008; Minocha, 2009; Moore, Fowler, & Watson, 2007), institutions have responded to these new technologies with some apprehension, and even trepidation (Minocha, 2009). While best-practice solutions are slowly being found for the integration of social media into the teaching and learning tools in higher education, the use of social media has been treated with suspicion or fear, fuelled by frequent news stories in the mainstream media concerning the potential dangers of social media use, such as privacy invasion, cyber-bullying and other issues. Yet at a 2011 Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT) meeting, IT Directors and CIOs indicated the pressing need for universities to engage with Cloud computing issues – of which access to social networking sites and Software-As-A-Service (SAAS) sites would be examples (Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT), 2011). Governance was another important item on the CAUDIT top 10 list. At Victoria University, the Web Futures Group and the Web Redevelopment Advisory Group (WRAG) that governs the outward-facing website have held back on integrating the Web 2.0 capabilities of the site, despite it being a Drupal-based content management system. By the time of SNAPVU's development, there had not been a clearly articulated policy around the use of social media at the university, and the nervousness around this issue was in some circles palpable.

Some staff members have also expressed concern over the accuracy and appropriateness of hosting student-created academic skills content. They want to know how SNAPVU intends to moderate inappropriate or inaccurate content written by students. Inappropriate content can be flagged by any user and subsequently removed by administrators. Inaccurate content is part of the knowledge-negotiating process. Any staff or student can write into the platform and address such issues: the feedback mechanisms in place encourage these acts of collaborative knowledge making, and in the end encourage all users to be savvy and critical with respect to online information.

The issue of website governance has been raised, as well, with respect to Drupal's capacity for distributed publishing of content. The Web Futures Group has a tightly controlled Web Publishers Network governing who can contribute content to the main business site. SNAPVU's administrators also govern the extended publishing permissions on the site. However, since some of that publishing involves informal learning processes in the form of commentary, blog posts, and study group tools, the structure is intentionally less rigid and prescriptive.

Another challenge for SNAPVU is the intention by Victoria University ITS to limit all institutional e-learning platforms to intranet-only access in a monolithic post-authentication portal environment called MYVU. Around the world, academic skills support sites are openly accessible at most tertiary institutions; such sites serve as positive examples of institutional support for their students. SNAPVU was designed to be available to the World Wide Web as a free resource for non-authenticated users. It was also designed to be able to be logged into from the platform itself or, alternatively, available on the intranet portal as a post-authenticated platform. Accommodating these two modes simultaneously has been for some reason problematic. If SNAPVU didn't aspire to be a Social Learning Environment (SLE) by which students learn with and from other students, the site could sit comfortably both in and out of the portal. Problematic is the proposition that the system remain open to the world while still being a functional e-learning platform in a post-authenticated environment.

This tug between open and closed access, between information which is openly available and that which sits behind fire- or pay-walls, is illustrative of a larger struggle that exists with information access more generally. Increasingly, intellectual property regimes are forcing information behind gates. Authors and lawyers have been highlighting this issue for years, citing it as a looming cause of decreased innovation, creativity and culture (Lessig, 2001; Vaidhyanathan, 2004), and calls for renewed public and academic commons have been heard (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Libraries are struggling to pay ever-increasing fees for online access to journal subscriptions. Out of such concern, open access journals and organisations such as the Public Library of Science (PLOS) have been created. As Hilton (2006, p. 68) maintains, "in the world of ideas, the battle lines are drawn between the technology that is

predisposed to liberate information and the business models that seek to lock it down.” It is also true, however, that university administrators increasingly recognise the importance of accommodating social media at their institutions, and enlightened ones are taking steps to find workable solutions. The increased presence of enterprise social media policies and guidelines are one solution. IT enterprise architecture and design that accommodate Cloud applications are another (Farmer, 2009). That the IT Directors and CIOs of CAUDIT (CAUDIT, 2011) are taking these matters to heart augurs well for the future of constructivist online SLEs like SNAPVU.

3. Participation and passivity in tertiary education

SNAPVU was soft-released live to Victoria University during Semester 1, 2010, and actively marketed at the beginning of Semester 2, which served as a pilot phase for the platform.

3.1. Web analytics

In the first month, the site had a steady upward climb of visitors to the site: in the first month almost 600 unique visitors came to the site with more than twice the number of visits. They were arriving directly, by typing in the URL of the website: www.snap.vu.edu.au – most likely having learned of the site through our active marketing with posters, postcards and orientation activities. Despite this activity, there was little sign that users were ready to engage with the discussion forum, group formation, commentary, rating, or any of the other participatory aspects of the site.

By the end of the semester nearly 2000 unique visitors had come to the site and spent an average of five minutes there. The number of students who had created accounts during this period (logged into the site) numbered approximately 140.

In contrast, in the first weeks of Semester One, 2011, between 100–200 students created accounts, slowing to 40–50 students per week throughout the rest of the semester. At the end of this period, approximately 1400 students and 50 staff had accounts on SNAPVU and there had been nearly 8500 visits from all over the world during this time, including 7557 from Australia, 100 from the US, 61 from the UK, and 38 from China – even 1 from Mongolia. Almost half the visitors during this period arrived at SNAPVU from the main VU website, and only 27% from the direct URL. One percent arrived from Facebook.

The jump in user accounts on SNAPVU at the beginning of Semester One, 2011, perhaps indicated that incoming students saw the platform as an already-established part of the institutional suite of e-learning tools. It became part of the process of academic acculturation – not a new or pilot program introduced mid-year. As academic skills professionals would be aware, students are also normally more proactive during the early part of the academic year in seeking out strategies that will assist their needs; by Semester Two, some of this energy has been lost. The increased activity may also have been due to more expanded and targeted marketing strategies: the use of the Victoria University Facebook group, the visits to lectures and tutorials, and, again, engagement in pre-semester orientation activities. It would be worthwhile further investigating effective and innovative marketing strategies for making students at large multi-campus universities aware of the academic services available to them. There is little doubt that broader institutional backing of the platform would have served the purpose of delivering a stronger and more unified message to students that SNAPVU was available for their use.

3.2. Student and staff activity on SNAPVU

Interestingly, there was little active student participation on the site during the Semester Two, 2010 pilot. Despite the creation of approximately 140 user accounts, there was very little user-generated content produced. There was almost no use of the rating or commentary functions relating to the resources on the site – though there were a few comments made on the informal learning resources (blog posts, for example). Students took little advantage of the opportunity to post questions to the academic skills discussion forum, though we were aware of active subject-

specific discussion forums in the institutional learning management system (WebCT). Study group formation was also low, though the good modelling of a senior peer mentor in establishing study groups helped encourage other students to experiment with this feature of the site.

During Semester One, 2011 there was increased activity on the site – as would be expected with nearly ten times the number of created accounts during this period. Popular components of the site included the online study groups function (which received a heartening degree of activity), the student blogs (particularly the new First-year Experiences blog, in which first year students blogged about their experiences of being new to the university), and the Student Peer Career Advisor blog. Many students (21%) also used the Personal Learning Environment (PLE) features of the site, personalising their homepage to suit their interests and needs. The discussion forum still received low activity, despite a redesign towards simplification of categories and topics. Nor was there much rating or commentary from students on resources – though there were some comments made on the student-created videocasts. However, these were done directly on YouTube (rather than on SNAPVU); these comments were mostly of the “great help, thanks heaps” variety.

This low student activity during the first year of SNAPVU’s institutional life raises the question as to why: why were students not participating on a platform designed to encourage active learning and student agency? Was it because, unlike WebCT, the site was voluntary, unrelated to their coursework and their assessment marks? Was it because the social capital on the site was low or not visible enough? Was it because students simply didn’t care to participate?

At the end of Semester One, 2011, we held both a student focus group session and a student survey (for which a prize for participation was to be randomly awarded) to attempt to answer some of these questions and to help guide the iterative development of the site. These revealed some interesting figures. According to the survey, the desire to participate on SNAPVU amongst users was split: one third appreciated the opportunity to engage, one third thought it was a good idea and they might use it; one third didn’t care to participate (see Figure 2). And while many students commented that the site was easy to use, half of them claimed to be unaware that the types of participation listed in Figure 2 were possible on the site.

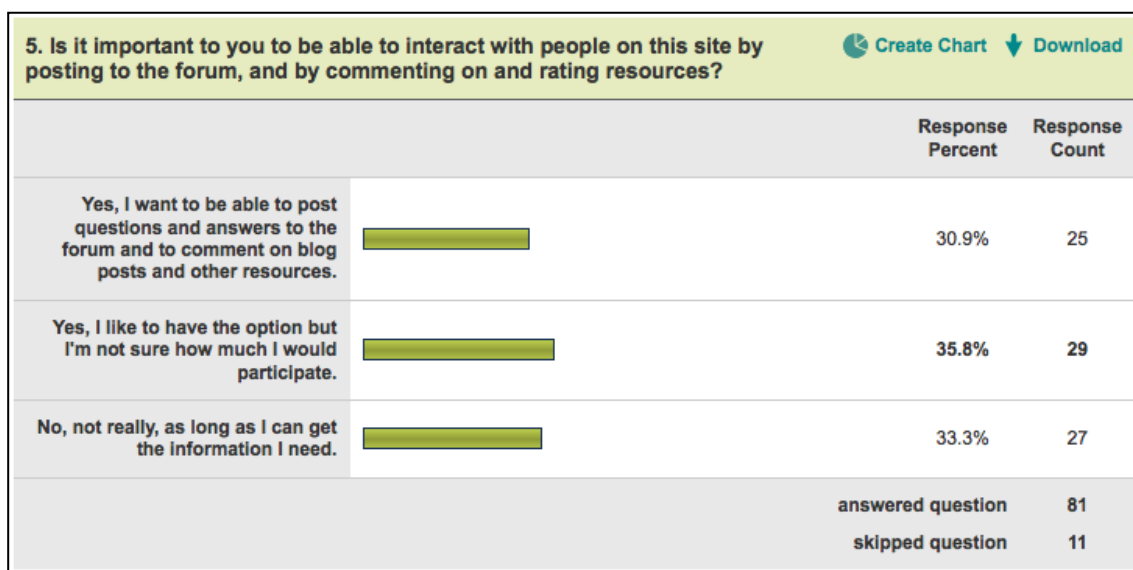


Figure 2. Importance of agency on SNAPVU to students (November 2010)

If students participated minimally on the site, the case was possibly worse with regard to staff. Despite a distributed publishing system and a relatively straightforward word-processing interface for content creation, only a small handful of staff generated content themselves, relying

instead upon the site administrator to create content for them. As the platform moves out of a pilot phase into full production, efforts will be made to increase staff participation on the site through a media campaign as well as targeted training of staff in how the site can augment their teaching resources and their students' learning.

3.3. Participation and academic engagement in higher education

In order to establish a culture of participation and active learning in our students, we need to engage them in opportunities encouraging this. Teaching staff should also model active participation and engagement. Ideally, students, peer mentors and teaching staff can all play a role in establishing an active and visible learning community in which students will want to be involved. Universities are making a concerted effort to understand patterns of student academic engagement (ACER, 2011; Brown et al., 2010; Kossuth, 2011; NSSE, 2011), recognising its importance for academic performance. Yet, if institutions hesitate to implement activities, tools and platforms that encourage them to actively engage in cooperative knowledge-making exercises, students could well continue to be minimally engaged and to take an increasingly commoditised approach to their education. We need to be developing opportunities that centrally position active learning strategies and pedagogies in the academic landscape. The notion of participatory learning is being fuelled in part by the cultural and technological phenomenon of social networking and social media; certainly, the affordances of Web 2.0 enable us to rethink traditional pedagogies in favour of the development of more student-centred and student-led approaches (Bass & Schlafly, 2009; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008a; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008b). Jenkins et al. (2009) recognise that this broader cultural shift towards participatory culture and civic engagement involves a recognition of new media literacies, social skills that will need to be embedded into curricula the way we currently aim to embed traditional literacies, and that "every school discipline needs to take responsibility for helping students to master the skills and knowledge they need to function in a hypermediated environment" (p. 57). Indeed, desired graduate capabilities include soft skills such as capability for proactive involvement and attributes of effective agency, cooperation and collaboration. The participatory online learning environment has the potential to develop these capabilities in our graduates.

4. Conclusion

Online participatory culture, facilitated by Web 2.0 and social media tools and platforms, has transformed the Web since the advent of the 21st century. Many educational institutions have been slow to respond to this paradigmatic shift, and cautious with respect to institutional security, personal privacy and governance issues. Yet the ease by which non-technical users can now publish to Web 2.0-based platforms enables a kind of e-learning that is more student-centred and social constructivist in nature. Platforms encouraging the development of peer learning communities of practice are now possible to develop with the aid of free, open source content management systems.

SNAPVU is an attempt to develop such a social learning environment, a student-centred platform for active engagement in mutual academic skills development. It has been designed to encourage the development of co-constructed knowledge around the culture and expectations of tertiary study through the cultivation of an academic community of practice of students, peer mentors and teaching staff. Still in the early stages of iterative development, proposed future directions of SNAPVU include the integration of the platform into Victoria University's suite of e-learning tools and student portal, use of the platform by early adopter teaching staff and students, and the further development of student-created content and student-generated dynamic activity such as comments on and ratings of resources. It is hoped that SNAPVU will be a place where conversations around academic culture and academic skills development will flourish, as students help each other transition through the stages of their academic careers.

The shift from relative disengagement and teacher-directedness as the normative academic culture, to one of active student participation and cooperative peer learning, will take nurturing to achieve. Educators have a responsibility to help ensure that their students are given

opportunities to develop these new participatory literacies in considered, equitable and ethical ways. The potential exists for new forms of collaborative learning and cooperative knowledge exchange, as well as civic engagement on campus and with the broader community. We could be at the cusp of a potentially powerful, meaningful, and exciting reinvention of education – an education that serves the needs of our students and collective future. This reinvention can start by making visible the learning community and by making audible the learner’s voice.

Acknowledgement

A condensed version of this paper was first presented at the *Tenth Biennial Conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning*, University of South Australia, 24-25 November, 2011.

References

- ACER. (2011). *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)*. Retrieved 8 June, 2011, from <http://www.acer.edu.au/research/ausse>
- Ackerman, M., Pipek, V., & Wulf, V. (Eds.). (2003). *Sharing expertise: Beyond knowledge management*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Augar, N., Raitman, R., Lanham, E., & Zhou, W. (2006). Building Virtual Learning Communities. In Z. Ma (Ed.). *Web-Based Intelligent E-Learning Systems: Technologies and Applications* (pp. 72-100). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.
- Bass, R., & Schlafly, T. (2009). Participatory learning and the new humanities: An interview with Cathy Davidson Retrieved 08/01/2010, from <http://www.academiccommons.org/commons/essay/participatory-learning-and-new-humanities-interview-cathy-davidson>
- Bostrom, R. P., Gupta, S., & Hill, J. R. (2008). Peer-to-peer technology in collaborative learning networks: Applications and research issues. *International Journal of Knowledge and Learning*, 4(1), 36-57.
- Boud, D. J., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2001). Peer learning in higher education: learning from and with each other. London: Kogan Page.
- Brill, J., & Park, Y. (2008). Facilitating engaged learning in the interaction age: Taking a pedagogically informed approach to innovation with emergent technologies. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(1), 70-78.
- Brown, M., Auslander, M., Gredone, K., Green, D., Hull, B., & Jacobs, W. (2010). A dialogue for engagement. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 45(5), 39-56.
- Chatti, M. A., Jarke, M., & Frosch-Wilke, D. (2007). The future of e-learning: A shift to knowledge networking and social software. *International Journal of Knowledge and Learning*, 3 (4/5), 404-420
- Chin, M. (2006). *Australian related literature on Supplemental Instruction or Peer Assisted Study Sessions [PASS]*. University of Technology Sydney. Sydney. Retrieved from <http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/pass/publications/UOW021342.html>
- Cormier, D. (2008). Rhizomatic education: Community as curriculum. *Innovate*, 4(5). Retrieved from <http://www.innovateonline.info/>
- Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT). (2011). CAUDIT Top 10 Issues for 2011. Retrieved 7 June, 2011, from <http://www.caudit.edu.au/index.php/news/?id=98>
- Dabbagh, N., & Reo, R. (2010). Back to the future: Tracing the roots and learning affordances of social software. In M. J. W. Lee & C. McLoughlin (Eds.), *Web 2.0-based e-learning: Applying social informatics for tertiary teaching*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Falchikov, N. (2001). *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

- Farmer, M. (2009, 7 April). LMS architecture proposal, parts 1-4. Retrieved from <http://michaelfarmer.info/blog/?tag=lms-proposal>
- Hegarty, B., Penman, M., Kelly, O., Jeffrey, L., Coburn, D., & McDonald, J. (2010). Digital information literacy: Supported development of capability in tertiary environments. Auckland: Ministry of Education.
- Hilton, J. (2006). The Future for Higher Education: Sunrise or Perfect Storm? *EDUCAUSE Review*, 41(58-71).
- Huber, M. T., & Hutchings, P. (2005). *The Advancement of learning : Building the teaching commons*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Huijser, H., Kimmins, L., & Evans, P. (2008). Peer assisted learning in fleximode: Developing an online learning community. *Australasian Journal of Peer Learning*, 1, 51-60.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robison, A. J. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Kirkwood, K. (2006, 28-30 November). *If they build it, they will come: Creating opportunities for e-learning communities of practice*. Paper presented at the The Future of E-learning Has Arrived! Universitas 21 Conference on E-learning and Pedagogy, Guadalajara, Mexico.
- Kossuth, J. (2011). Student engagement: Challenges from a CIO perspective. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 46(3), 62-63.
- Ladyshevsky, R. K., & Gardner, P. (2008). Peer assisted learning and blogging: A strategy to promote reflective practice during clinical fieldwork. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 24(3), 241-257.
- Laghos, A. (2010). E-learning communities. In P. Zaphiris & C. S. Ang (Eds.), *Social computing and virtual communities* (pp. 69-89). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lessig, L. (2001). *The Future of Ideas*. New York: Random House.
- Limpens, F., Gandon, F., & Buffa, M. (2008). *Bridging ontologies and folksonomies to leverage knowledge sharing on the social Web: A brief survey*. Paper presented at the First International Workshop on Social Software Engineering and Applications, L'Aquila, Italy. <http://www.cs.tut.fi/sosea08/papers/paper2.pdf>
- Lockley, E., Pritchard, C., & Foster, E. (2004). Professional evaluation: Students supporting students – lessons learnt from an environmental health peer support scheme. *Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 3(2), 74-81.
- Lux, M., & Dosinger, G. (2007). From folksonomies to ontologies: Employing wisdom of the crowds to serve learning purposes. *International Journal of Knowledge and Learning*, 3(4/5), 515-528.
- Maor, D., & Hendriks, V. (2001). *Peer-learning and reflective thinking in an on-line community of learners*. Paper presented at the 2001 Association for Active Educational Researchers Conference, Fremantle, Western Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/mao01549.htm>
- McCormack, R., Best, G., & Kirkwood, K. (2009). *Students supporting student learning*. Victoria University. Melbourne, Victoria.
- McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. (2008a). The three P's of pedagogy for the networked society: Personalization, participation, and productivity. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(1), 10-27.
- McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. (2008b). Future learning landscapes: Transforming pedagogy through social software. *Innovate*, 4(5). Retrieved from <http://www.innovateonline.info/>

- Minocha, S. (2009). Role of social software tools in education: a literature review. *Education + Training*, 51(5/6), 353-369.
- Moore, A. H., Fowler, S. B., & Watson, C. E. (2007). Active learning and technology: Designing change for faculty, students, and institutions. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 42(5), 42-61.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2010). Major differences: Examining student engagement by field of study – annual results 2010. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2011). *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)*. Retrieved June 8, 2011, from <http://nsse.iub.edu/>
- O'Reilly, T. (2006, 07 June). *Web 2.0 Principles and Best Practices*. Retrieved from <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/11/web-20-principi-1.html>
- Palloff, R., & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palloff, R., & Pratt, K. (2010). Beyond the looking glass: What faculty and students need to be successful online. In K. E. Rudestam & J. Schoenholtz-Read (Eds.), *Handbook of online learning* (2nd ed., pp. 370-386). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Vaidhyathan, S. (2004). *The anarchist in the library: How the clash between freedom and control is hacking the real world and crashing the system*. New York: Basic Books.
- Van der Meer, J., & Scott, C. (2008). Shifting the balance in first-year learning support: From staff instruction to peer-learning primacy. *Australasian Journal of Peer Learning*, 1, 70-79.
- Victoria University. (2010). *Making VU*. Retrieved August 19, 2010, from <http://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/vus-vision/making-vu>
- Warschauer, M. (2007). The paradoxical future of digital learning. *Learning Inquiry*, 1(1), 41-49. doi: 10.1007/s11519-007-0001-5
- Web Futures Group. (2010). *Web Business Rules and Guidelines*. Victoria University, Melbourne.
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, (June). Retrieved from <http://www.co-i-1.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>
- Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J. D. (2009). *Digital habitats: Stewarding technology for communities*. Portland: CPSquare.
- Wesch, M. (2009). From knowledgable to knowledge-able: Learning in new media environments. *Academic Commons*. Retrieved February 24, 2009, from <http://www.academiccommons.org/commons/essay/knowledgable-knowledge-able>