This inaugural edition of MJET is dedicated to Alex Moon (1970 - 2010), the founding editor of the journal.

Editors

Alex Moon, Middlesex University, UK

Agi Ryder, Middlesex University, UK, a.i.ryder@mdx.ac.uk

Maureen Spencer, Middlesex University, UK, m.spencer@mdx.ac.uk

David Westwood, Middlesex University, UK, d.westwood@mdx.ac.uk

Consultant Editor

Ifan Shepherd, Middlesex University, UK, I.Shepherd@mdx.ac.uk

Reviews

Social Media for Dissemination: Reflections on Using a Range of Tools to Disseminate Events at a Learning and Teaching Conference

Steve Chilton

Education Development Manager, Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Middlesex University, steve8@mdx.ac.uk

Kirsteen Macdonald

Senior Education Developer, Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Middlesex University, k.macdonald@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reports on the use of social media technologies to spread the message of Middlesex University's Annual Learning and Teaching Conference. Strategies for interaction and dissemination were aimed at reaching beyond those attending the event, and this paper considers the selection of the technologies used and, importantly, those not used. The resulting dissemination is explained in some detail. Finally, suggestions for future actions are outlined.

Introduction

The 10th Middlesex University Annual Learning and Teaching Conference 'Engaging the Digital Generation in Academic Literacy' took place on 29th June 2010. This successful event attracted speakers and delegates from within and outside the University. As educational development and technology focused members of the conference organisation team, the authors felt more could be achieved by engaging participants before during and after the event.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the conference website (http://elearn.mdx.ac.uk/engaging/index.htm)

In Advance of the Conference

The over-riding principle was to use only technologies that were deliverable in the current Middlesex University framework, which had been trialled at an earlier internal event. Because of the increasing familiarity with them it was decided to use both Twitter and SMS services. An SMS textwall account was setup to enable delegates to send SMS messages (texts), or comments about events at the conference, in parallel to the use of Twitter.

The next decision was to use an aggregating blog. Of the two free online blogging tools explored, Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) seemed to have the best functionality – particularly the ability to embed rich media, tweets posted to Twitter with the conference hash tag (#altcmu) and SMS messages posted to the textwall service. Blogger allowed some customisation – description of the site, display of tags related to posts, embedding of RSS feeds (twitter and textwall service), URLs to related websites (keynote speaker's blogs, conference topic-related websites). Tumblr (http://www.tumblr.com), while ticking most boxes, did not allow the pulling in of SMS messages from the textwall service. On reflection, it may have been preferable to use a more professional, more customisable service such as WordPress (http://wordpress.org). However, a ready-to-run option, with a limited learning curve was considered appropriate.

Initially it was hoped that contributors could upload/email their own posts and reports. However, it was decided that posts should be uploaded in as close to chronological order as possible. Initial posts on the blog should outline conference preparations, next would be the welcome and first keynote, then the morning parallel sessions, etc. To maintain order one person was nominated to collate and publish posts (which slightly goes against the intended purpose of the tool).

Solutions such as Ustream (http://www.ustream.tv/) make live conference streaming possible, but it was considered not deliverable within the infrastructure in place at the University at the time. However, a stream of live 'tweets' was setup using Twitterfall (http://twitterfall.com) on a large monitor in the social space.

In advance, tweets were sent advertising the conference, the conference website and the conference hash tag for delegates to use in their tweets on the day. Posts were made to the blog showing preparations, and a handout was prepared to be distributed as delegates registered on the day.

Engaging the Audience

Photographs were taken during the day. Video clips were recorded via two Flip cameras (http://www.theflip.com) set up in the social space to get feedback from delegates throughout the day. One glitch encountered early on was the lack of wifi and mobile phone signal/coverage in the main lecture theatre where the keynote speakers were presenting. This prevented many delegates from tweeting during the first event of the day. This seemed to be a recurring problem in the social space and parallel session rooms. Posts to the blog relied on the quickturn around from the report writers commenting on the sessions they attended to replicate the chronological order of the day. In retrospect putting entries on the blog in any order and letting the tag 'cloud' control navigation would have been fine. Those writing reports on the parallel sessions were also asked to take a photograph during their session. As much text/photographic content as possible was processed and uploaded during the day. The influence and appeal of Twitter is the immediacy of the service and it was acknowledged that this would not be possible to directly emulate.

The keynote sessions were videoed with two HD cameras (one at the back of the lecture theatre and one at the front) to allow for changes of angle in editing them. Aside from the technical glitches and the delay in getting content onto the blog, an excellent end to the day was the ability to show delegates, in the closing address, some Flip video feedback, blog posts and tweets received.
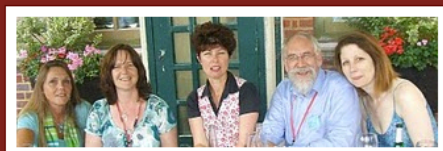
After the Conference

It took about a week to compile all the content for the blog including editing/ production of the keynote videos. Interest was kept up by regular tweeting, especially as keynote and parallel session's content was posted. Photos were collated and turned into embeddable slideshows using Google's Picasa photo editing/hosting service (http://picasaweb.google.co.uk), all PowerPoint presentations were uploaded to Slideshare (http://www.slideshare.net) and embedded in blog posts. Some Flip videos were posted straight onto the blog, others had to be compressed to comply with the Blogger file limit restrictions, and a report on the conference produced by a colleague from Learning Resources was converted into a Google Doc and embedded as a blog post. Colleagues in all Schools and Services of the University were emailed with the URL of the blog and invited to comment on the reports of parallel sessions they attended.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the conference blog (http://altcmu.blogspot.com/)

Analysis

Shortly after the conference analysing the effectiveness of the efforts was started by examining the twitterfeed. Unfortunately, the twitterfeed embedded in the blog (a Twitter app) showed only the last seven days of activity, and even twitter.com only showed the same amount (the number of days varies according to the volume of traffic).

Tweetreach (http://tweetreach.com/) was used to give some measure of impact of the tweets. The freely available web version only allows analysis of the last 50 tweets. This showed that they had 'reached' 7,365 people. The most influential tweeter (with 3,965 out of the 8,525 'impressions' 46%) was one of the three keynote speakers. Interestingly, the next two most influential tweeters were NOT at the conference – being influential by the amount of reads and re-tweets they generated.

A separate archive of the tweets was made (by copying and pasting the entries from twitter.com into a document, whilst seven days' worth was still active). This showed that 42 people tweeted on the hashtag during and shortly after the conference, producing a total of 144 tweets. Unfortunately, because of the use of 'avatars' on twitter it is not possible to know which of these forty-two were at the conference and which weren't. Of the 144 tweets which were well spread amongst the contributors, 33 were re-tweets (22.9%). The fact that these 33 re-tweets came from 20 different people suggests quite a few of them were not present and were re-tweeting interesting posts. The top five individuals contributed 23, 21, 13, 10 and 10 each. There were another 13 tweeting from 2 to 9 times, and 24 who contributed only one. The engagement levels on Twitter may well have been influenced by the problems experienced with wifi on the day. Effectively, only communications by mobile/PDA was possible, rather than by laptop/ netbook. Breaking down the 144 tweets according to their content shows that 22% were directly related to the 3 keynote speakers, with one of them accounting for 2/3 of those tweets. The next largest amount (7%) contained links to blogs, abstracts and other resources; and then 6% to

one particular workshop (on podcasting). This is of course not taking into account the large amount that were re-tweets of those mentioned, or ones generally commenting on the event location, wifi and hospitality. Finally there was a small number of 'thank you' tweets towards the end, a couple publicising the impromptu 'plenary' session held in the local hostelry.

Google Analytics (http://www.google.com/analytics/) was used to analyse the conference blog. In summary this showed a total of 848 visits, and 607 unique visitors, and 1499 page views, with an average time on site of 2 minutes 8 seconds. The site was released to the public 4 days after the event, and even as this is written (exactly one month on) has had 21 visits so far today. The peaks were 128 and 188 daily visits, nearer the event. 36% of traffic (by page views) was to view one of the keynotes, which was heavily plugged in tweets at the time. 50.4% came from direct links (the site URL), whilst 11.1% were Twitter referrals, 7.3% from one blog and 3.8% via Facebook referrals. Visitors came from 35 countries, with the 848 visits being topped by UK (649), USA (74), Germany (15), Canada (14), Australia (13), and Ireland (11).

So, what has been learned from this experience? Firstly, that using advanced technologies in public arenas can be tricky. Secondly, that interactions of this sort are something that at present not everyone is engaging in. However, it is evident that the technologies outlined here are able to significantly increase the dissemination of information at similar conferences, and are very much appreciated by many – whether actively or passively.

> *'A great conference, an impressive range of speakers and workshops and especially well done on presenting all of the information, slides, videos, and photos from the day in this blog.'*
> Quote from a conference delegate

Conclusions

This analysis is really a case study, an account of a learning and teaching experience surrounding the use of social media technology in a conference and sharing the learning from that process. Given that, there does seem to be an overwhelming case for using similar techniques to those outlined to significantly increase the dissemination of information at similar conferences. The really positive feedback to the authors (via email about the blog) and directly on the blog (via the comments option) further emphasises this point.

> *'A really positive day, which embraced the styles and beliefs of many varying speakers and presenters on the positive and negative aspects of the digital world on academic literacy.'*
> Quote from a conference session reporter

Two further actions will be taken to increase the chances of the information from the conference being spread. Firstly, all presenters within the University have been asked to make their presentation materials available via the University's research repository. Secondly, presenters will be asked to consider publishing their work through either internal or external publications.

For the future, it is clear that three aspects in particular should be addressed. At the time of the event recording/archiving of the electronic communications should be

achieved (via RSS feeds or archive tools), more rigorous analytical work should be attempted, and the wifi access should be improved.

For the moment it is to be hoped that the foregoing has given some insight into the possibilities of increasing engagement in this way. It was also noted that it was a great shared learning experience for all the organising team.