

# Web 2.0 and social software

## An introduction

Briefing Paper

September 2007

The terms Web 2.0 and social software are now used widely in the education sector. While often difficult to determine an exact definition, with many new tools and applications released on a regular basis, most commentators agree that these terms apply to a set of characteristics in the context of the internet and applications served over it. Some of these characteristics, a definition and an example are shown in the table below.

### Web 2.0 and social software in education

As broadband becomes more affordable and widely available, and the relative price of hardware falls, many more people are finding it easier to access rich content and interaction on the internet. Whilst there is currently limited research into the level of use by students and potential students, anecdotal evidence suggests that not only is it being used widely, but the perception of it is also shifting. Many students seem to see the use of the tools in their workflow not as an additional overhead, but as an integral part of 'their world'.

Case studies have indicated that whilst content is accessed on virtual learning environments (VLEs), courses and modules are also discussed in a variety of other media, such as instant messaging

tools (eg MSN and Skype) and social networks (eg Facebook). In addition there is also a growth in the use of these tools to support distributed research groups, including online research groups in biomedicine, physics and many other disciplines.

Many of these tools can bring benefits in a range of ways:

- Using instant messaging to conduct tutorials at a distance with a distributed group
- Providing easier opportunities for students to collaborate, and make word of mouth recommendations about sites including, or related to, course content
- Allowing students to create their own interest groups allied to their studies
- Allowing students to interact with students from different universities and countries
- Providing researchers with ways to share results faster and with opportunities for instant feedback
- Allowing the formation of ad hoc research groups
- Providing a way of having material peer reviewed by a broad audience before publication

Characteristic	Definition	Example
<b>The web as a platform</b>	Allowing applications to be delivered and used through a web browser	Online word processing such as <b>Google Docs</b> <a href="http://docs.google.com">http://docs.google.com</a>
<b>An architecture of participation</b>	Systems that have been designed to encourage and support users in contributing to them	Photo sharing such as <b>Flickr</b> <a href="http://www.flickr.com">www.flickr.com</a>
<b>Data consumption and remixing</b>	Often these are referred to as mash-ups, where content is often sourced from third parties via an API (Application Programming Interface)	<b>Regional Traffic</b> is a mash-up that uses data from the BBC and Google's mapping service to give up to date real time traffic reports <a href="http://regionaltraffic.co.uk">http://regionaltraffic.co.uk</a>
<b>A rich, interactive, user-friendly interface</b>	Many of the tools, websites and applications are developed with user consultation, leading to developments based on user needs and wants	Personalisation is key in the use of online media. Google's <b>iGoogle</b> homepage allows users to create their own look and feel, and access material from a wide range of sources <a href="http://www.google.co.uk/ig">http://www.google.co.uk/ig</a>
<b>Elements of social networking</b>	Whilst not necessarily a requisite, the social elements of these technologies are important in generating the engagement and user data	<b>Facebook</b> <a href="http://www.facebook.com">www.facebook.com</a>

Table 1.1: Web 2.0 characteristics and examples

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## There's always a but...

However, when using these types of tools for their practice, staff should be aware and beware of some of the key issues.

### Intellectual property rights and copyright

Intellectual property rights (IPR) are core to many of the issues around content.

- Material that is placed on most sites will be accessible to a wide audience: are you happy that everyone can see it, access it and potentially use it without your permission?
- Make sure you are entitled to place the material on the site: for example do you own the copyright? Do you have a licence to use the content and place it on a public website?
- Check the terms and conditions. One popular application states:  
*'All content on the Site and available through the Service, including but not limited to designs, text, graphics, pictures, video, information, applications, software, music, sound and other files, and their selection and arrangement (the 'Site Content'), are the proprietary property of the Company, its users or its licensors with all rights reserved.'*

### System stability

With literally hundreds of sites and applications being released it is difficult to know which to use and what will persist. Consider:

- How reliable is the service?
- How often has the site been unavailable?
- What happens to your material if the site ceases to exist?
- Can all students gain access, or does the site require high specification machines or have a cost associated with it?

### Branding

Consider the dilution to corporate branding of some Web 2.0 activity, and the need to monitor contributions which may potentially be of an inappropriate nature.

### Interoperability

What if you have content in YouTube, Slideshare and Facebook? Can you cross-search it, use it in various ways coherently to support whatever task you're engaged in, or build it into managed activities?

### Preservation

If you want to keep this material, Web 2.0 services may not be the best option. Data backup is important, but it needs to go deeper than this: if this content is to be managed and retained over time, then serious planning needs to go into the environment in which that happens.

## You, Web 2.0 and students

We are most often alerted to the tools and sites associated with Web 2.0 by students themselves. However, that doesn't mean they are ubiquitous in student circles. Before using such tools consider:

- Can the tools you are using be accessed by all students, for example can a blind, deaf or dyslexic student access content appropriately?
- Is it appropriate for a member of staff to have access to the site, or is it a site that is aimed at 'students only'?
- Do the students want you there? Would you follow them to the students' union and listen to their conversations?

## You and Web 2.0: next steps

Before applying a Web 2.0 or social software solution to your practice you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my institution already have a solution for what I want to do? It's worth not only talking to IT support or staff and educational development units, but also asking your colleagues whether they have needed the same facility. A supported, resourced internal solution will probably serve you better than an unresourced, unsupported, beta version of something in the Web 2.0 community.
- Are there solutions at other institutions? JISC have funded many innovative technologies and approaches that have been deployed across the education sector - would one of these technologies fit your need?
- What are the risks? Do these risks put you, your work or your students in difficult situations? Take each of the situations and write down a risk assessment. Think about privacy, data protection and copyright conditions, and provide students with advice also.

Finally, if you decide to use a Web 2.0 technology make sure that you back up all of your data in a safe place.

## Further Information and Resources

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### JISC Users and Innovation programme

[www.jisc.ac.uk/usersinnovation](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/usersinnovation)

Looking at a range of new and emerging technologies and the issues that surround them, including IPR, accessibility and good practice models.

### TechWatch Social Software briefing paper

[www.jisc.ac.uk/techwatchreports](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/techwatchreports)

### Web 2.0 for Content for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education report summary webpage

[www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme\\_digital\\_repositories/project\\_web2\\_and\\_policy](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_digital_repositories/project_web2_and_policy)

### Secure personal institutional and inter-institutional repository environment (SPIRE)

[www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme\\_digital\\_repositories/project\\_spire](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_digital_repositories/project_spire)

SPIRE results blogged as 'Some real data on Web 2.0 use'  
<http://tallblog.conted.ox.ac.uk/index.php/2007/03/16/some-real-data-on-web-20-use/>

### Personal Repositories Online: WIKI Environment (PROWE)

[www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme\\_digital\\_repositories/project\\_prowe](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_digital_repositories/project_prowe)

PROWE: Putting theory into practice

[www.prowe.ac.uk/finalPROWE-howto.doc](http://www.prowe.ac.uk/finalPROWE-howto.doc)