'If you build it, they will come'[1]: The challenges of developing a social networking site in a university context.

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Abstract

Social networking software offers a powerful tool for institutions wishing to engage students who are Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – literate. Online communities offer alternative ways to communicate with and engage students that are just beginning to be explored. As university administrators and leaders increasingly seek to combat falling lecture attendance and less time spent on campus, the online environment is being seen as a complement to the learning and engagement opportunities within the classroom.

The challenges of developing a social networking site that allows all students and staff at one Australian university to build online communities are addressed in this paper. The lessons learned over the first year of the project are distilled, with advice on what to try and what to avoid in undertaking such a challenge.

Introduction

The challenges in developing an online social networking site in a university context have parallels with the movie, Field of Dreams. Kevin Costner, in his role as a struggling farmer with a dream of building a baseball field on his farm, faces the same challenge as to whether his vision will find favour with the general public. There are the usual setbacks and nay-sayers but, as in every Hollywood dream, there's a happy ending as streams of baseball fans arrive by car at the newly completed venue for the first game.

Social networking software offers a powerful tool for institutions wishing to engage a demographic of 17-30 years of age who are Information and Communication Technology (ICT) – literate. This demographic clearly coincides with a substantial percentage of most Australian universities' student populations. Students report in ICT surveys that they are spending time on social networking sites (Australian Flexible Learning Network, 2007; JISC 2007a & b; Skene, Cluett & Hogan, 2007): at the same time, lecture attendance is falling and the challenge of engaging students is a constant preoccupation for university administrators and leaders. If social networking sites engage students in their lives beyond the university, it is reasonable to assume that they offer a way to communicate with students and encourage students to interact with each other (Anderson 2007).

The possibilities intrigued the authors, who are both professional staff employed in a central administrative unit in an Australian university, providing services to the entire student population (Cluett & Skene 2007). They set out to explore how ICT could enhance service provision, improve communication with students and foster engagement. As both authors have a strong focus on

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[1] Reference to the quote 'If you build it, he will come' from the 1989 movie, *Field of Dreams*, directed and adapted by Phil Alden Robinson and starring Kevin Costner.

transition, first year students were a key target group for the project. The lessons learnt in the initial stages of the project, which had as its main focus the development of a social networking site, are distilled here as a guide for others who may similarly be intrigued by the potential of Web 2.0 technologies.

Background of the NODE project
NODE (Networking Online to Diversify Engagement) was born from awareness that the undergraduate student population at the university in question was overwhelmingly of the generation born post-1982, named variously as the Net Generation, Gen Y or as Prensky (2001) dubbed them, the digital natives. Although literature on Gen Y attributes certain characteristics to this age demographic, there was little empirical evidence about the online behaviour, experience and expectations of our own students. A first step in the project was to survey first year students as they completed that year, to gain evidence about student preferences in relation to ICT and the university environment.

To this end, students who had completed 50 per cent or more of their first year units were surveyed at the end of their first year of study. The survey was emailed to students' university email address with a link to an online form. A response rate of 643 students (16.8 per cent) was received and of these students, 93.5 per cent were born in 1982 or later. The high response of Gen Y students is not unexpected because it mirrors this undergraduate student profile overall in age, where the annual intake of school leavers comprise approximately 82 per cent of all commencing undergraduates. Students were asked about their access to ICT, their use of, and their expectations of the IT environment in the university. A snapshot of the data as it relates to social networking is reported here: a more comprehensive report is available from the authors.

Many assumptions are made about the availability of new technologies and students' uptake generally. The survey revealed a clearer picture of this particular cohort's access to tools and their usage. Laptop ownership across all faculties was reported at 57%. International students are generally more likely to own a laptop with 75% indicating that they do compared with 54% of domestic students. Those aged 25 and over were more likely to own a laptop compared to those in the under-25 age group (62% compared to 56%). Mobile phone ownership was reported at 96%.

A significant proportion of students access the internet more than twice a day (60%), with a further 30% using the internet once a day (making 90% of respondents that use the internet at least once a day). Less than half of 1% of respondents access the internet less than once a week. International students are generally more likely to access the internet more frequently than domestic students (95% access the internet at least once a day compared to 59% of domestic students and compared to a 61% average). Students aged 25 and over are slightly more likely to use the internet at least once a day (96% compared to 90% of those under 25 years old).

Only 7% of total respondents had never heard of blogs, and 18% had their own blog while a further 6% were confident enough to train others. International students are more likely to have a blog than domestic students (31% compared to 15%) and their awareness of blogs was also generally higher (only 3% had never heard of them compared to 8% of domestic students). A slightly higher proportion of females write their own blogs (19% compared to 16% of males) although 42% of males read others' blogs compared to 35% of females. Students aged 25 or older are slightly more likely not to have heard of blogs (10% compared to 7% for those under 25) and are less likely to write their own blog (14% compared to 19%) and less able to train others (3% compared to 6%).

The survey findings, both from our own student cohort and from others across the Western world, show that there is a growing interest in social networking (JISC 2007a &b; Oliver & Goerke 2007; Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray & Krause 2008). The pattern is also changing rapidly: when this

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survey was undertaken late in 2006, Facebook had not made an impact. One year later, the impact of Facebook is clear to anyone engaging younger students in discussion about their online activities. At the same time, university administrators and leaders are interested in the emerging technologies and how they are developing in parallel with more personalised approaches in education – as in the ability to tailor course materials and information to students directly through portals and platforms like Web CT (Owen, Grant, Sayers & Facer, 2006) and seeking ways to respond to the changing ICT environment.

Online communities also have the potential to improve their students' experience. The pressures of modern student life make this generation time poor as they juggle multiple roles. The online environment enables communication 24/7, which is strength for those who value flexibility although administrators and academics have to resolve how to meet expectations of fast responses (Hartman, Moskal & Dziuban, 2005; Wager, 2005). Online communities allow groups to form across the artificial boundaries of course enrolment, year of study and the student/staff divide, thereby offering possibilities for information-exchange, peer mentoring and other learning opportunities. This is particularly valuable for first year students, seeking informal advice.

Developing a social networking site that would allow students to post their ideas, questions and suggestions and interact with each other and staff was an attractive proposition. The institutional location, within central administration and with responsibility for providing services to the entire student population gave many options to recruit particular cohorts within the student body, who could use the site to blog and run forums on topics of interest to themselves. In theory the site seemed like a good proposition but the question was whether in practice, such a site could attract attention and compete with the attractions of Facebook or other smaller, subject-specific communities already thriving in cbyerspace.

First steps: building the site node.live
Node.live developed as part of a broader pilot project that had a focus on trialling ICT within individual Student Services programs. The project steering group included staff from IT Services who were keen to collaborate in trialling a purpose-built online environment using open-source software. Input from the steering group broadened the focus from students to include all staff and students. The benefits of enabling those types of interaction were immediately obvious to the project team, who then adapted their original objectives to include the expanded brief. There was no additional cost in terms of website development in offering access to both staff and students, although there was an added incentive to promote the site more widely to staff to gain their input.

The node.live website was built with Drupal, an open-source software offering read/write capabilities. Drupal is a modular system so users can design functionality by choosing modules such as blogs, wikis ('books' in Drupal vocabulary), groups, forum, email, chat, and so forth. Initially node.live was developed with four modules: blogs, books, forums and groups. In acknowledging one of the lessons learnt to 'keep it simple', the number of module adopted initially has been limited so that attention could be focused on these modules.

The exploratory nature of the project, use of open-source software, and support from IT staff has enabled the website to be built without major resources being required. The first stage of Node has been funded with a budget of less than $20,000, most of which has gone on project officer salary. The hidden cost has been the time committed by the two coordinators, who although at times daunted by the scope to the project they have undertaken, have been energised by the varied potential applications node.live offered in being responsive to students' changing modes of communication and learning. As Tracy Mitrano of Cornell University noted, 'From the very beginning of the early applications, something was different. People had the opportunity to burst out of their parochial communities and make connections around the world' (cited in Berg, Berquam

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& Christoph, 2007: 34). Social networking tools offered the chance to connect with students in new ways within our university community, and we were willing to experiment and learn as we went.

Lesson 1: Attract funds for a pilot project and be prepared to innovate and seize opportunities as they present themselves.

Tips	Guidelines
Argue the case for an exploratory project	Understandably, most university IT infrastructure plans are long term in their focus and do not always respond quickly to new developments. Get backing for your project by concentrating on the potential contribution to learning.
Set it up and get your 'testers' on to it (and then fix it)	There are bound to be teething problems so it is good to have some users discover bugs before the site is publicised to the entire community. There may be particular user groups in the university whom you can encourage onto the site in the developmental stage.
Don't wait until you think your site is finished before opening it up wider	The temptation to keep your site 'closed' until it is perfect will be strong. But only by opening up the community will the project thrive. Users will forgive you some teething troubles if you let them know you are fixing things.
Keep the concept simple (at least in your own minds)	It can be easy to get distracted by numerous possibilities for your project (like adding on extra tools to your online community) but greater progress can typically be made if you focus on doing a few things well before expanding.
Work out what you can get for free.	Think broadly about who could contribute in-kind costs that don't necessarily appear in your budget. For example, the NODE project paid to have a survey analysed in first year of project but when the university's Institutional Research Unit saw the impact of what was achieved, they volunteered to administer the survey and do the analysis and report in the second year (saving the project $5000).

Lesson 2: Establish the ground rules for your site early in the development

Tips	Guidelines
Write some protocols for members.	Your university will probably already have various policies and a code of conduct which can provide the context for your protocols. Make sure new users are provided with a link to your rules as it will help them as well as protecting you from criticism should someone take exception to any post on the site.
Use your project sponsor to keep in touch with the perspectives of the university leaders	It is important to have a high-level sponsor for the project who can alert you to issues happening at the highest levels and can keep your project in the minds of those at the top.
Use your Steering Group to discuss key issues of content	Issues of online communities should be discussed openly and agreement made on how to handle them. Questions such as: 'how will staff react if students post criticism of particular units on the site' or 'do students need to be educated about protecting their own privacy online' were dealt with in the early stages.
Have a plan for monitoring content.	Content still needs to be monitored even if it's not going to be censored. node.live has a 'report bad behaviour' button, administrators receive RSS feeds of new posts and users tend to regulate each other. Unacceptable behaviour has not been a problem to date on node.live.

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Next steps: developing the environment

Development of the website has been a major part of the first year of the project but this is in the context of part time involvement, with other aspect of the project such as conducting the student survey, analysis, report writing and dissemination and staff training consuming much of the available time for the project. Node.live grew incrementally, as the project team learnt through trial and error and users uncovered bugs in the system that needed attention. This incremental process of building content on the site before widespread promotion has been valuable, allowing the team to gain expertise and 'seed' content through recruiting a few keen user groups so that the site is active when promoted to students. Transition for first year students has been a key topic of 'seeded' content in the early stages.

Lesson 3: Don't be put off by your own ignorance - see it as a challenge to learn new skills

Tips	Guidelines
Learn by doing: reinvent the wheel if you want/need to	Sometimes you will have to work through issues yourself, even though you have tried to gain the benefit of others' experience and have read research about how to go about things. Your context will dictate which specific issues you are going to come up against and how best to deal with them.
Don't make too many assumptions about students' IT skills	Remember that there is huge variety in the student population no matter what institution you work at. node.live has quite detailed instructions on aspects of getting started for those for whom this is a first experience of blogging or posting comments. The team has also put time into training staff and students in a computer lab situation so that participants can learn in a hands-on manner.
Let it grow organically	Users will find uses for the site that you have not predicted. Be open to suggestions by users and do all that you can to encourage those groups who express an interest.
Focus on 'quick wins' with similar minds	Find groups and individuals who support your concept and encourage them to build content. Having some quick wins encourages the team, helps to justify the project to the doubters, the steering committee and the funding source.
Cherish support people	This may be technical support, data analysis expertise, or your personal cheer squad. You will need them to encourage you when things are going slowly.
Write content about things that are difficult	Content about failure can elicit more comments and build a community quicker. Users often like to read about what others are struggling with and offer advice so don't worry too much if students are writing about some of the things they are finding difficult.
Have a vision and be flexible getting there	Building a community won't happen overnight. As the site develops you will start to see possible uses that add value to current programs and services. It might be starting forums to align with academic skills workshops or a transition blog to welcome commencing students. Students will also blog about their own interests: node.live posts have included observations of birds (feathered) on campus; reviews of upcoming movies; and favourite ways to procrastinate.

Lesson 4: Have confidence in what you are trying to achieve

Tips	Guidelines
Build a good team with complementary skills.	Unless you have the luxury of sufficient funding to build a team from scratch who will only work on your project, you will have to attract dedicated team members who are passionate about the goals you share. The NODE project has a team of three, all of whom have part-time input into

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	the project. More time and resources would be ideal but the team has learnt to maximise what it can achieve by dividing up roles but all having input into the project direction. The individual strengths of the team and their ability to find a common purpose has been pivotal to the progress of the NODE project to date.
Get the 'right' project officer.	This person is critical to the project's success and probably needs to be Gen Y who is in tune with what is current, because you will need to be responsive to changing trends. For example, in the year that node.live has been underway, Facebook has had an increased profile and we have had to take that into account when re-administering the survey questions which had previously asked only about MySpace.
Be prepared to defend your site as well as your pedagogical perspective	Some staff express the view that Gen Y are too indulged, wanting flexibility to avoid attending lectures at times inconvenient to them. Others question the pedagogical value in Web 2.0 technologies and argue that universities should not use alternate modes of delivery just to appear innovative 'for the sake of using the technology'. The view that social networking belongs outside the university is one that is advanced by both students and staff. Many students will say that they don't want their university administrators on Facebook: others will see the value in belonging to select online communities that reflect their interests and value most what is useful to them personally (Berg, Berquam & Christoph 2007).
Don't take anything personally	You are likely to come up against some 'doubters' (some of them may even understand what you are trying to achieve!). Have faith in your goal that if you build it, in a way to welcome content, they will come.

Ongoing steps: maintaining the community

It is one challenge to build a social networking site and yet another to maintain a community (Haughey 2007). The work of building and promoting the site runs parallel in the developmental stages. Our goal is that node.live will gain a momentum that will sustain it, so that word-of-mouth promotion of the site amongst students will lead to a lively community, albeit one that may consist of many smaller communities and groups. That stage is still distant: at present the administrators are actively seeding content and recruiting students to do the same. Getting those who have signed up to get involved in the creation of content is difficult, as most users are still 'readers' and not 'writers' in the process. This phenomenon is not unusual, as there is a generally accepted 'rule of thumb' that of every 100 web users, one will create content, ten will comment on content and the remaining 89 will be lurkers, the term commonly given to those who view content (Guardian online July 20, 2006 cited in White 2007) It seems that there is not enough incentive for a lot of students to post their thoughts/opinions on node.live. As administrators, we question whether we will always have to seed content on a site like this, or will we reach a critical mass of users that will spontaneously create their own content?

Having raised this concern, it is worth heeding the advice of those who have been maintaining communities online for some years. Matt Haughey, creator of the site MetaFilter,[2] (http://www.metafilter.com/) offers some tips that include 'Be the best member of your site. Lead by example by participating as much as you can in your own community'. His post hit a note of accord with other site moderators, with one commenting:

> The ones that really thrive have a lot of "pump-priming" on my part, and it's thrilling to see new members come onboard and adding to the conversation. Communities are a lot like gardens in that they need thoughtful and thorough preparation, then feeding and weeding to keep them healthy. (Sunfell, comment in Haughey, 2007)

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[2] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Haughey

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Realistically, then, a project such as node.live is a long term commitment if the site is to be a viable community.

Lesson 5: Have an ongoing commitment on a daily basis to contribute to the vitality of your online community

Tips	Guidelines
Check in every day	It is vital to stay in close contact with the site (having an RSS feed for new postings makes it easy to keep an eye on activity). If as in node.live, the website is only one small part of your daily tasks, try and find ways of ensuring that the site doesn't get neglected. The NODE team has scheduled days when each team member will check content and seed content if they think it is necessary.
Use every method possible to promote your community.	Identify target groups of users, and strategies to engage them. For example, NODE team members also provide transition support to commencing undergraduate students so this cohort has become a prime target group. Commencing undergraduates were handed flyers at enrolment and during orientation and encourage to post about their first experiences on campus.
Don't be afraid to build content by design	NODE has recruited a small group of keen students to create content for node.live. The NODE production team, as this student group is named, have produced some short videos on aspects of transition that they struggled with or on topics where they thought that information was not generally available. They are very enthusiastic about this project and have many ideas about what video content could be created.
Make your website appealing to students	If it is not, they won't use it. However, you may always only be appealing to niche markets within your student population.
Find new ways to get students involved	Variety of content which attracts different students is one of the keys to a thriving community. You could try creating forums on timely topics (exams, parking, study breaks etc), encouraging content using a weekly competition for the best post, writing some content that purposefully encourages comment, paying a few students to promote the site at key events like Orientation and using student feedback to shape the direction of the website.

Lesson 6: Promote your website as widely as possible

Tips	Guidelines
Think about how Gen Y access information and promote your project in ways that will attract them	Promote your site through other sites that students use, both within and external to the university. Encourage your keen bloggers to link from any external blogs or forums and direct other students to your site.
Find ways to promote the site to staff	Staff who promote student engagement are always interested in finding ways of connecting with the student 'voice'. NODE has promoted the project and node.live through a feature article in the staff newsletter, and through a presentation and workshop at the state-wide Teaching and Learning Forum. In-house events like Teaching Month, an annual event within the university, provided an opportunity to offer introductory sessions in the computer lab to staff interested in learning more about node.live.
Talk about the project outside your institution	If external parties are interested in what you are attempting to achieve, your colleagues may be more easily convinced of value of

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	the project in the early stages when the link between the website and pedagogical value can seem debatable. If you are doing something quite innovative for your institution, it is very helpful to be able to show that colleagues in other universities are considering or already involved in similar projects. Often it is only through presenting and having a visible presence in forums that you are able to gain the contacts and exchange information with those engaged in similar projects.
Find champions	It is absolutely vital that you are strategic in promoting your project to colleagues who will be interested and supportive. Find champions at all levels and especially as high in the organisation as possible. Let them know about your successes through project updates and reports, papers that you present and any evaluation or student feedback that you receive. Acknowledge their support wherever possible.
Collaborate 'upwards'	This tip is closely aligned with the preceding point. Having a high level colleague refer to your project in a document or talk is a great boost for you.
Whilst you are keen to collaborate, beware of 'frenemies[3]'	Your steering committee can be useful in this situation, as you can refer issues back to them and seek their advice and support.

Future directions and outcomes
The website has progressed to a stage where it can be actively promoted and energy is focused on growing and maintaining the online community. Although as moderators, you are busy promoting your website, seeding content, seeking feedback and resolving technical problems, there are other issues that you need to consider. If you have started your project as a pilot, do you have access to funding to maintain the website? How will you evaluate your website? What are the unexpected outcomes, both positive and negative that might impact on future stages of your project?

Lesson 7: Justify your project outcomes as broadly as possible

Tips	Guidelines
Make use of webstats to monitor traffic on your site.	You can differentiate between external viewers and local viewers. It is difficult to evaluate the benefit to lurkers, but if you can demonstrate that a lot of local viewers are at least visiting the site, there must be some benefit.
Bring staff with you	As your project moves along it can be easy to forget that training staff around you will give you many benefits later on. Staff at the coalface of service delivery need to have enough understanding of ICT to be able to see connections, make recommendations, be involved in infrastructure debate from an informed view point.
Writing and research gain credibility when seeking additional funding	The NODE team has charted the progress of the project through exploratory and reflective papers during the course of the project. When supplemented with comprehensive survey data of students from our own institution, research output has helped to gain credibility recognition of the intent of the project.

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[3] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frenemies

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The short-term future direction of node.live will be to continue to grow the community of users so that the site develops an authentic student voice and becomes a lively forum for debate on a wide range of topics. Student-created content in formats other than the written word, like the videos that are starting to appear, offer alternative ways to communicate information. Current programs such as Learning Skills workshops can link their content to forums on node.live which can extend the learning not just within the class group but to a broader audience and complement other learning resources -as in podcasts and online resources. The site's potential as an avenue for engagement with prospective students, both in Australia and overseas has been noted, with an e-link project planned to build community between current first year students and prospective international or rural students. These are but a few of the possible directions that could develop in the next stage of expansion.

Conclusion

Any space where students meet to converse, discuss, debate and engage is an opportunity to encourage valuable learning (Light, 2001; Markwell, 2007). The online environment is no less important than the coffee-shop, garden courtyard or study room in providing space that facilitates peer engagement. It offers opportunities for those who do not have the time to linger on campus or are reserved in personality, to still engage. As survey data confirms, commencing undergraduates have well developed skills in emerging and personalised technologies and many expect these tools to inform their formal and informal learning at university.

Online communities supplement the physical environment and can add variety and richness through their potential to grow across boundaries that institutions impose through their structures of classes, disciplines and years of study. They are, to date, an under-utilised resource awaiting further exploration and experimentation. As demonstrated in this account, the obstacles to beginning exploration are not great and the potential seemingly unlimited.

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