

Hi, my name's Neil Selwyn, from the London Knowledge Lab, which is part of the Institute of Education, University of London, and I'm one of the guest editors along with Lyndsay Grant from Futurelab of the forthcoming special issue of *Learning, Media and Technology* which is due out in the Summer of 2009, Volume 34 number 2, and the theme of the special issue is learning and social software: researching the realities. We've been asked by the editors and the publishers of *Learning, Media and Technology* to produce this short podcast, to hopefully whet your appetite for the forthcoming special issue. Whether the world of Educational Technology needs another podcast is a debatable point but we'll press ahead anyway. We've got a couple of minutes and five questions to answer to hopefully give you a flavour of what the special issue holds.

Question one: Why focus on social software?

Focusing on social software was a bit of a no-brainer really in the state of educational technology in 2009. It's perhaps *the* hot topic. You can't fail to read about the potential of technology in education and not hear about Web 2.0 applications, the social web, social software and so on. It's on the tip of everybody's tongue, and we figured that it was high time that we gave it serious academic consideration and scrutiny. And to that end we hope that this special issue kick starts a serious debate and examination within the educational community over what exactly social software offers to learning and learners. In the twelve months or so since the initial call for papers for the special issue I've become acutely aware that many other journals are also planning special issues over the next two years on Web 2.0, on social software, on the social web etc. And I hope that there's going to be an ongoing debate within the educational technology community over the role of these social applications and these social tools in terms of learning and learners. And so from that respect I'm quite proud that we've managed to jump the gun a bit and we could be one of the first journals to actually take this seriously. I also think the theme of the issue is important because a lot of people tend to turn their noses up at the notion of Web 2.0 and social software and so on as just buzzwords, as hype, as not really representing that much different to the educational technology over the last ten years. And I think that although these criticisms have some validity, Web 2.0 and the social web do represent if not a break then certainly a step change in the nature of the internet and the nature of internet use, and so from that respect they do merit being taken seriously. And so we hope the special issue either opens peoples' eyes to what is exciting about social software but also provides more of a critical perspective.

Question two: Why researching the realities?

Well, the focus on researching the realities stems from a long-held concern of mine that too much of educational technology commentary is based on either presumption or assumption, or if not, anecdotal evidence that the potential of technology is there for everyone to see. And while there is ample room for this type of writing, more often than not, actually researching what is going on on the ground, and also what is not going on on the ground, tends to be overlooked. So in this special issue we wanted to privilege empirical, robust empirical accounts

of social software use and non-use by learners in learning environments. So we were very much hoping to move beyond the initial cycle of hype and hope that often surrounds educational technology, about how wonderful it can be and the potentials and everything else, and moving the debate on to what's actually happening, the more messy realities of social software use. And I'm very pleased that all of the papers that we've ended up with all provide a gritty empirical perspective on the realities of social software use. So from that perspective researching the realities was a perfect subtitle and in fact is a perfect description for the material within the special issue.

Question three: What topics are covered in the special issue?

We were very lucky that the call for papers attracted a wide range of authors and a wide range of topics, and we have six full articles and three shorter articles in the special issue which I think do justice to the wide range of social software applications that actually are in use at the moment. So we have a large scale survey of teenagers' use of Web 2.0 and social software tools both in school and at home, which sheds some quantitative light and is able to highlight the patterns of the often mediocre use that young people actually put tools like YouTube and Wikipedia and so on to use. We have some fine, qualitative studies of social software use, in classrooms and at home. We have a very in-depth case study of Wiki use, for example, and the extent of collaboration and sharing that that actually leads to, in school. We have a couple of papers that focus on the issue of identity formation and social networking, particularly in terms of applications such as MySpace and Facebook. And in fact three of the papers do focus on students' use of Facebook, both for learning – informal learning and formal learning – and for identity work. And in some ways that's not a surprise. Facebook was the killer application of 2007-2008 and had we done the special issue a year later no doubt it would have been another killer app. Twitter seems to be in vogue at the moment. And in some ways it doesn't matter what the focus, what the application is: a lot of the issues are the same. And so the Facebook papers highlight a range of issues in terms of identity work, presentation of self, the effects of teacher self-disclosure, and the extent to which social networking fosters communities of learners and communities of learning as opposed to communities of less formal interactions between students. So I think in total we've got a wide range of papers which address a bunch of very interesting theoretical issues and concerns which I hope will be taken further in future years, in the journal.

Question four: What types of research are represented in the papers?

Again, because the call for papers attracted such a wide range of contributions we're lucky to have a wide range of research topics and indeed a wide range of researchers. Indeed, we've got papers from educational technologists, from computer scientists, from geographers, from communication studies, from sociologists, and so in that respect I think the papers represent the wide range of disciplines and disciplinary approaches that can be applied to the use of social software. In terms of research methodologies as well I think the papers amply illustrate the wide range of research designs and approaches which can be taken,

and I would argue should be taken, to looking at social software in education. So we have as I said before the large scale survey of over two and a half thousand young people, in terms of how they use social software at home and in school; we have in-depth case study research of using Wikis for example for collaborative enquiry in one class; we have interview studies, focus group and individual interviews, talking to learners about their uses of applications such as MySpace and Facebook; we have content analyses, of social software applications and of people's use of say Facebook walls, for example; and we also have quasi-experiments as well – a very interesting paper looking at the use of Facebook by teachers and the effect that has on learners' perceptions of teacher credibility, which uses a quasi-experimental research design to actually test the correlation between online content and social software activity, and learner reaction. So in that respect we've got a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in terms of doing research, from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds.

Question five: What would you like to see happen next?

I think ideally, and perhaps rather naively, I would love to think that this special issue would kick start even just a few authors to approach these areas and carry on some of the topics and some of the arguments and the lines of thought developed in these initial papers. I think this is not going to go away. Social software is going to continue to be an important part of educational technology, and I think empirically researching and empirically testing a lot of the claims that surround it should be a major part of educational technology scholarship over the next five years. So if nothing else, I would like to think that these papers can act as an example and maybe a source of inspiration for work in the future. It would be nice to think that; whether anybody takes any notice I've got no idea, but that would be my intention at least.