
CAMPUS
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Social Software >> Social Revolution

By Matt Villano

SOCIAL SOFTWARE IS HERE TO STAY, BUT WHAT IS IT REALLY, AND IS IT A GOOD THING?

MOVE OVER, MYSPACE. STEP ASIDE, FACEBOOK. These two technologies may have been pioneers in the world of social software, but nowadays, colleges and universities across the country are embracing better and more targeted forms of technology, to enable their campus users to interact. Today, the world of social software includes traditional venues and formats: blogs, wikis, and podcasts. It also features fresh spins on these old standards, as well as newer, more robust technologies designed to facilitate collaboration for students and administrators alike (see "For Gators Only," page 42 in our magazine).

Naturally, at schools such as **Saint Mary's College** (CA), the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**, and **Washington University** in St. Louis (MO), these collaboration tools enhance the learning environment. Still, the rise of social software on campus raises many questions: How can these tools be leveraged to improve communications and enhance instruction? What does the technology imply for the campus IT department? Finally, is social software a significant change in communications? The answers may be more obvious than you think.

Social Software 101

Different people have differing definitions of social software. Generally speaking, however, the technology allows individuals to interact around shared interests and so form niche communities, operate as collectives, and facilitate interpersonal exchange. The software used may be a single communication tool or a combination of tools. Either way, it includes an accessible, inclusive platform with protocols for use. All in all, this platform facilitates back-and-forth discourse; it is not a medium for one-way distribution of ideas.

In today's academic environment, social software exists in a wide range of forms and flavors. It can be as simple as a student exchanging instant messages (IM) or e-mails with a friend, or as complex as online deliberative democracy (a method of arriving at reality through group input). A one-to-many tool such as a wiki (a type of website that allows visitors to add, remove, and edit available content, sometimes without the need for registration) also could be part of the picture, as long as the overall structure leaves the option for return communication from those among the "many," possibly even via a secondary software tool.

Scott Granneman, adjunct professor of communications and journalism, and also of information management, teaches a class about social software at Washington University in St. Louis. In the class, Granneman has students read the work of Clay Shirky, a consultant and adjunct professor at **New York University**. Shirky defines social software as software that enables groups of more than two people to interact. But Granneman says he encourages his students to dig deeper for their own definitions.

"One of the things I always like to have my students think about is the difference between an interface where humans are interacting with computers and one where humans are interacting with other humans," he says. "Both are 'social' in the sense that they revolve around interactions, but only the latter is truly 'social' in the sense that there's a connection with other people."

Katie Livingston-Vale, manager of the curriculum integration support group in academic computing at MIT, has a much broader definition. She sees social software as "anything that allows people to be social and communicate and connect." Livingston-Vale notes that the challenge with social software lies in incorporating it seamlessly into the academic environment and utilizing it in an educational context to extend and amplify what students experience in the classroom.

FOR GATORS ONLY

A RAZOR-TOOTHED ALLIGATOR is the mascot of the **University of Florida**, so it stands to reason that alumni and others affiliated with the massive school in Gainesville consider themselves part of the "Gator Nation."Within this "nation," UF supporters have developed a variety of gator-oriented clubs and organizations that boost school spirit.With the rise of social software, the school recently has launched a community of an entirely different kind: an online environment known as the Gator Nation Network.

The network, launched in November 2005, is a private, secure web-based community where students, alumni, faculty, and staff members can come together to mingle, socialize, and find services. The site boasts web pages, blogs, message boards, and more. According to Katie Seay, director of membership and marketing for the school's alumni association, the network is open to anybody affiliated with the university in any way, and membership is free. "The network is great because it's only open to people with a connection to UF," she says. It runs on technology from Affinity Circles, and "helps Gators, who might not live in the confines of Gainesville, to communicate and find each other."

Once UF affiliates register, the network works like other social networking phenomena such as Friendster, Facebook, and the nowdefunct SixDegrees. Each individual user has a page. Users can search the database of other users, and can "link" to friends or contacts. There's also a broadcast feature, via which the school can send out to everyone in the community up-to-the-minute messages and news alerts about everything from football victories to road closures.

Unlike popular social networking sites, content on the network is entirely professional. Seay says that the alumni association branded the site that way because they recognized that potential employers would be looking at it. There are protocols on the network that prevent spam and are designed to filter profanity. Still, the network doesn't have a designated police force; instead, much like a standard wiki, users tend to police themselves. "

The best communities are those that police themselves," says Seay. "That's what we're striving for, and it's why the network has worked so well thus far."

Blogs and Wikis

At MIT, blogs have been the response to this challenge. From the moment prospective freshmen log on to MIT's admissions page, blogs greet them and provide a more interactive experience. A blog written by school admissions officers outlines some of the vagaries and specifics of the admissions process, and gives applicants an idea of what life at MIT is like. Applicants also can submit comments or questions which admissions officers answer in turn.

The blog immersion continues once students enroll. Students have the option of building a personal blog on the MIT server. Many freshman and sophomore courses also revolve around blogs: Some classes require students to contribute to a class blog, while others require them to keep their own blogs about class. Livingston-Vale teaches a freshman seminar on blogging, and says she is especially careful to make sure students understand the cons as well as the pros of the medium.

"A lot of our incoming students tend to think that the only people who read their blogs are those they've told about it," she says, pointing out that they're mistaken: "Blogging is wonderful, but it's not the place for pictures or feelings that students wish to keep private."

Another form of social software in action at MIT is the wiki. Wiki sites serve as living encyclopedias, with an ease of interaction and operation that makes them effective tools for collaborative authoring. At MIT, many computer science and engineering programs have launched wikis as an attempt to build communities online.

The service is powered by Confluence technology from Atlassian.http://www.atlassian.com/ So far, the school has about 120 wikis, all of which are part of a pilot service started last year. Livingston-Vale says that in one class, a professor and his teaching assistants are using a wiki to collect input from students, which the educators will use to design a class for the coming year. She notes that this kind of collaboration never would have occurred without social software technology.

"They're asking the students for feedback," she says. "When was the last time you heard of a professor doing that?"

Power of Pods

At Saint Mary's College in Moraga, CA, social software efforts revolve around a different medium: that of podcasting. Here, offerings break down into two flavors—push and pull. Podcasts of the push variety are those which professors send out to students as part of the regular learning process. Those that pull are required of students, in lieu of or in addition to traditional homework assignments.

CLASSIFICATION GOES TO THE FOLKS

SPEND TIME AROUND social software tools and you're bound to hear the phrase "folksonomy." But what is it? (Clue: Think taxonomy, circa 2006.) Folksonomy is an internet-based informationretrieval methodology consisting of collaboratively generated, open-ended labels that categorize content such as web pages, photographs, and web links. Because folksonomies develop in internetmediated social environments, users can discover (generally) who created a given folksonomy tag, and see the other tags created by that same person. The result often is an immediate and rewarding gain in the user's capacity to find related content. It's like next-generation metadata. Go figure.

Linda Herkenhoff, associate professor of quantitative analysis and organizational behavior in the college's Graduate School of Business, uses both kinds of podcasts. After every lecture, Herkenhoff creates three that fall into the "push" category. The first one is a "CliffsNotes" version of the lecture—a slowed-down audio file that hits on all of the most important topics. The second podcast is a word-for-word recording of the lecture. The third version is an in-depth look at one of the more sophisticated topics she covered.

"People who show up in my class have a wide range of backgrounds," she explains. "This way, I can offer the lecture and follow it up with various forms of information, to keep them all interested."

Recently, Herkenhoff has begun to embrace podcasts that fall into the "pull" category as well. In her executive-level MBA classes, for instance, Herkenhoff asks students to solve problems in groups and prepare podcasts or vodcasts (video podcasts) about how their companies view some of the techniques covered in class. One group brought in an executive and interviewed the individual within a panel discussion that was set up as a podcast. Members of another group interviewed each other and created a video.

While these approaches certainly are trailblazing, they are not without challenges. First, Herkenhoff says she has witnessed a generational divide: Younger students are much more likely to embrace podcast technology than older students, some of whom don't even own iPods. Another challenge has been the issue of file size: Recording files isn't necessarily a problem, but when students try to download the files from computers at home, older machines on dial-up connections may experience serious trouble.

"We're still grappling with an adoption curve," she says, noting that the curve extends to professors as well, many of whom still don't know what podcasts are. "Until this kind of technology becomes widespread and commonplace all over campus," says Herkenhoff, "there will always be students and faculty alike who don't embrace it or can't get it to work."

Fuel for the Fire

Whatever form social software takes, one of the most important technologies that ties it together is RSS, or Really Simple Syndication. In a nutshell, this application establishes what is termed a "web feed," which notifies subscribing readers when content on a site changes. Under this setup, programs known as feed readers or aggregators check a list of feeds on behalf of a user, and then display any updated articles that they find. Most of these programs then bring users the newest content, automatically.

This technology isn't only convenient; it also facilitates syndication and the sharing of ideas. While the medium isn't synchronous (meaning interaction happens in real time), it is definitely social. Granneman at Washington University says that because social software can be anything that facilitates some form of interaction and sharing of ideas, RSS is in many ways the most "social" of all flavors of social software on the market today.

"To me, RSS isn't any less social than a face-to-face conversation or voice conversation," says the adjunct professor, who also serves as chief executive of WebSanity, http://www.websanity.com/ a website development and hosting company in St. Louis. "You're communicating; being social; interacting with someone else. This is all that matters."

BLOG IMMERSION: MIT's admissions blogs provide prospective freshmen with an interactive experience. Once students enroll, the blogging continues; each student can build a personal blog on the MIT server—often a requirement for first- and second-year courses.

Yet critics maintain that RSS isn't legitimately "social" because the heart of the technology doesn't involve users at all. Sure, one user must create content and another must select his or her RSS feeds, but while other forms of social software such as blogs, wikis, and e-mail or IM require two active participants, most of the work with RSS happens entirely behind the scenes. Still, it's hard to challenge the notion that users can choose which feeds they want, and that the feeds all link back to original content that is shared.

Where do you find RSS? In many cases, the technology is built right into a user's web browser. The newest edition of Microsoft's Internet Explorer, for instance, known commercially as IE 7.0, has RSS built in. Some educational institutions use a program called Bloglines, http://www.bloglines.com/ which is administered by IAC Search & Media, better known for such sites as Ask.com and Evite.com. Still others work with Google Reader . http://www.google.com/reader There are more programs available, as well, most of which are free.

"I think we'll see more of RSS in the months ahead," Granneman says. "It's really the future of content syndication."

REVOLUTIONIZING THE PODCAST

IF THE NAME Denon Professional sounds familiar, that's because it is. The audio/visual hardware company has been making equipment for music studios for more than 70 years. Now, in a unique arrangement with A/V vendor Marantz Professional, the company is bringing its expertise to the higher education field. The new venture is D&M Professional.

In one corner, D&M specializes in a variety of solid-state digital recorders designed to capture lectures and other presentations for conversion into podcasts. These devices have built-in condenser microphones, and are compatible with both Apple computers and PCs.

In the other corner, the company offers a network media player, which educators can use to organize and manage a variety of audio and video digital files. The device also offers browserbased access to DVD and other image program material, empowering administrators to operate a campus' network of digital signs from one central location. With podcasting on the rise, these new entries may be something to think about. (Prices vary; for more information, click here.)

Down the Road

Despite these types of predictions, not everyone in academia is sold on the notion of social software just yet. Take Jim Phelps, senior IT architect at the **University of Wisconsin**. On his blog, http://arch.doit.wisc.edu/jim Phelps is outspoken on the subject of technology in the classroom. This summer, he posted his thoughts about the role of social software in higher education, and drew attention to a number of implications, possibilities, and difficulties in dealing with social software in an academic setting.

First, Phelps questioned the privacy of academic networks open to the world at large, and assailed the solution of a "trusted network" inside the campus firewall. He noted that while protecting a network on a campus intranet creates a secure environment, in order for the communities to work, virtual communities and a critical mass of people with overlapping interests are also needed. "Would you reach critical mass if the population was limited to the enterprise, or do you need to be sharing in the wide world for the magic to occur?" he asked rhetorically.

Phelps also questioned the perception of control. Many social software systems appear to be under the control of the schools that use them, but actually are hosted by third-party vendors. Ultimately, he said, this scenario leads to institutional business being conducted at a site that is completely out of the control and governance of an institution. It also leads to institutional information (such as course content and possibly student performance data) being outsourced to an external partner.

Down the road, Phelps implied, the best social software solutions will meet both privacy and control challenges, enabling students to participate in the wide world of collaborative learning in a safe and educational way. For now, however, many social software tools struggle to achieve that balance. In the meantime, experts such as Saint Mary's Herkenhoff say that any tools that facilitate collaboration and encourage students and faculty members to extend interactions beyond the classroom, are worthwhile.

"It's all about a matrix of communication," she says. "Whether students are connecting with each other or they're connecting with me, this kind of technology can only enhance the learning experience."

WEBEXTRA :: Social software can stand in for the traditional campus-based student center: Click here http://www.campustechnology.com/article.asp?id=18005.

Matt Villano is senior contributing editor of this publication.

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