

Possible Futures for Innovation and Technology in Higher Education

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Frances Bell's blog](#) on June 14, 2016.



The actual gap between European/ N American tectonic plates or a photo opportunity at Pingvellir Visitor Centre?

Kate Bowles wrote an [interesting post](#) about how she responded to students' enthusiasm to use Slack and how it worked out well for her and a group of students in thinking about critical narrative professionalism. I've never used Slack but I have heard many good reports of it. Her lovely story of "the everyday nature of artisanal change in universities" reminded me of my earlier educational experiments with Web 2.0 services such as [flickr.com](#) (now much changed), <http://del.icio.us/> (apparently in transition), [elgg.net](#) (an old favourite and still available as Open Source Software) and of course [Twitter](#), a favourite of many academics but whose use of algorithms is now starting to put off

some people. I loved those experiments but a more cynical view from the distance of retirement is of a graveyard of dead or moribund services where some of the undertakers have made off with pockets full of cash or services have morphed into something quite different.

Ben Werdmuller, co-founder of elgg and [known.com](#) and not one of those greedy undertakers, has written a [powerful essay](#) on how to build an Open Source business. It raised hope for me that there might be possibility for inventive developers and service providers to make a living without ~~fleeing~~ relying on investors and exploiting users via their personal and activity data.

In particular, I wonder about how software and services that might really help education realise benefits of the Internet in future can come into being as supported services for students and staff. How can the benefits available in artisanal pedagogic change be scaled with technical support across universities? I already wrote about how building technology is [more than a heroic tale of invention](#) and is a messy process of appropriation and working around. Higher Education's investments in technology have been in infrastructure like networks, computer labs, email services, digital libraries, administrative systems, etc. and of course the ubiquitous Learning Management System / Virtual Learning Environment. When I was working in HE, it was my dissatisfaction with aspects of Blackboard that drove me to try out alternatives such as student blogging, offering Twitter updates as alternative to Blackboard announcements, sharing bookmarks on Delicious, linked within a Blackboard course. A module team I was leading managed to get a [Buddypress](#) installation going to provide an Open Source Social Networking Service (SNS) for use in supporting first year students on our module. After IT support was completely centralised that year, this became possible no longer but we still managed to draw on student personal experiences of proprietary SNS to help them critique their use in business. Each year, students became more aware that there were 'costs' of the free service and they applied workarounds but hadn't thought too much about the broader implications and alternatives until we raised questions with them.

I was interested to see what the business model was for Slack, since it benefited from a [huge new funding round](#) in 2015. In March 2016 Slack proclaimed their goal "One day, Slack hopes to replace email as the main form of electronic communication for businesses." Slack's [pricing model](#) is currently 'freemium' with 1 free and 2 levels charged per user, with an enterprise version in the pipeline. [Less than 1/3 of 2.3 million users pay for service](#) and I would guess that currently most of those are on the Standard or Plus pricing plans.

Something that Web 2.0 services can be good at (certainly in their golden funded early stages) is user experience, and Ben Werdmuller [identified](#) that as a weakness of Open Source systems.

It's difficult for software companies to break into the enterprise market but that's [Slack's aim](#). Even ventures like Microsoft Sharepoint who have had some success at the Enterprise level have found it difficult to engage with the complex organisational structures of HE institutions, to move from projects, based in IT Services, to enterprise-wide staff and student applications.

The business models for some SNS like Facebook make member data the product that generates advertising revenue that [can have consequences for members](#). Stewart Butterfield speaks warmly of Etsy's business model, [having been an early investor](#), after selling on Flickr to Yahoo. The reference to Etsy interested me since Gordon Fletcher and I did some research on Etsy in 2012, [presented at AoIR](#) in October 2012. We found that there were listings that didn't comply with 'handmade' and that some members were selling goods where their labour was valued little or not at all. Sure enough, the following year, Etsy redefined 'handmade' to be not necessarily handmade. Etsy's [handmade policy](#) is what my dear late mother would have called mealy-mouthed. On a bit of a [puff piece](#), Etsy sellers make some interesting comments there about flagrant reselling that they apparently couldn't make at Etsy itself, suggestive of Etsy's approach to diluting dissent. For me the concept of Etsy (though I am attracted to buying there) seems a bit of a sham. The community and handmade feelgood factor that has helped them to acquire investment and sell shares is more apparent than real – in effect community became a part of the product to be sold as the company was launched.

So are there alternatives to monolithic LMS like Blackboard, 'member is the product' SNS like Facebook and chimera like Etsy?

I can think of two examples that are different but that have two things in common: they are grounded in educational practice, based on clear educational philosophies; and they make use of the Open Source blogging software WordPress.

Student as Producer

Joss Winn and Mike Neary have developed the concept of [Student as Producer](#) as part of the project questioning What is a University?

The point of this re-arrangement would be to reconstruct the student as producer: undergraduate students working in collaboration with academics to create work of social importance that is full of academic content and value, while at the same time reinvigorating the university beyond the logic of market economics.

Lincoln's [Buddypress site](#) is active and open and Student as Producer is integral to the University of Lincoln's [plans and operation](#).

Student as Producer is central to the learning and teaching philosophy at the University of Lincoln, and is embedded within the Teaching and Learning Plan and in all module planning. It is fundamental to everything we do at the University of Lincoln, and is one of the key selling points to potential students.

Domain of One's Own

Jim Groom outlined the history of DoOO at OER16, that [I blogged](#), and Mark Sample gave [his perspective as an educator](#) working with Reclaim Hosting. Jim has moved from within HE to a business setting where [Reclaim Hosting](#) offer a fairly-priced service for individuals and universities.

Possible Futures

I can't lay out a neat plan of how Higher Education can offer technology support for innovation in the future but I do think that the ideas and practices put forward by Ben Werdmuller, Joss Winn, Jim Groom, Tim Owens and Lauren Blumfield can inform a richer possible future than one that relies on Silicon Valley to provide outsourced services or neat packaged solutions.

Where will HE institutions turn for technology services in future?

Of course, I haven't mentioned MOOCs and their providers but that's another story.



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