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Jon Dron

professional learner

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### The last post?

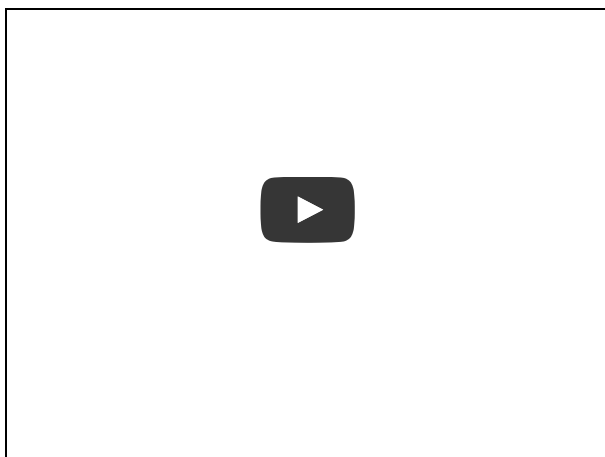
July 18, 2014 by Jon Dron Comments (2)  
cheerio, adieu, goodbye, farewell, community@brighton, social media

I'm writing my (probably) final blog post on community@brighton as it enters its final days after something like 8 or 9 years of operation. It saddens me greatly to see it die but, having watched its slow demise over the past few years, I can't say it surprises me and, I guess, it's a sensible decision that had to be made. These things cost money to maintain and, if left unmaintained, open up security holes that can be scary.

I think that many things were right with community@brighton. At the time it was introduced it was almost certainly the largest social networking system in an HE institution in the world, and it may well still hold that title, though I notice that I am currently the only one of 112067 users logged in, so that is a bit of an empty accolade. In its heyday it was a thriving, bustling, active site full of diverse activities, used in some very innovative learning and teaching, supportive of a strong community. At least a few students remained at Brighton because of the support it gave, and it drew a spotlight on Brighton from some of the world's foremost researchers in online learning and social media. It was a large part of the inspiration behind the site I have helped to build at Athabasca University, the Landing, that continues to thrive and carry the flame, and that continues to influence a lot of social learning systems around the world.

There are many reasons for community@brighton's slow demise, including obvious candidates like the fact that it was introduced at a time of social media explosion, notably in the form of Facebook, that made the need for a binding social site a little less obvious than it was during planning stages. It was not helped by the fact that people like me made a big thing of its value as a teaching tool, which meant it was not perceived as something students owned so much as a rather quirky extension of the learning management system (studentcentral). This also led to a fall in diversity of primary uses, which is central to a strong, safe community of this nature. There were always more than a few issues with the interface, not helped by the fact that its wealth of tools (and tool-oriented design) and lack of clear primary focus, both of which were also among its greatest strengths, meant it was way too easy to get confused and lost while browsing around it. I suspect the biggest disaster to befall the site was the upgrade from its pre 1.0 version to the site we see today, during which some content and a lot of functionality were lost, some of which never returned. The new version looked much more beautiful and some things were definitely better, but there are few things that are more certain to reduce trust in a system than the loss of your carefully built content. It detracts from a sense of ownership too, and ownership is all-important on a system like this. Finally, rather than put a lot of time and money into growing this site, other systems like Mahara, Wordpress and Sharepoint were introduced that replicated at least some of the functionality and, with their clearer foci, began to be used instead. This was at least in part because the close partnership between the university and Curverider, the company behind Elgg (on which the site runs) was dissolved when Curverider was taken over by another company. Elgg itself continues to thrive with its own foundation, and it grows smarter all the time, but that close working relationship with the Elgg developers was lost. Moreover, the alternatives were (at least for their specific functions) better. Wordpress is a better blogging system, Mahara is (arguably) better for e-portfolios, Sharepoint is pretty awful but integrates far better with staff workflows and offers a more segregated space for staff sharing. Even Blackboard made some mild improvements to its vaguely social-media-like tools, making the case for a separate site for blogs and wikis etc less compelling. But there was something wonderful about this site that straddled boundaries, let people see what other people were doing in isolated spaces, allowed people to assemble new and interesting communities and teaching practices, that none of the alternatives begins to replace.

So, farewell community@brighton. It has been good knowing you.



Edit Delete

Thanks for writing this Jon. It's a good summary of where we've been and where we are going. Things move on!

Katie

Katie Piatt 4 days ago

Delete

Thanks for this Jon, as someone who has been at the university for less than two years I did not know about the history of community@. Really informative post!

Fiona

Fiona Macneill 4 days ago

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## Spotlight

### Welcome to Community@Brighton

Community@Brighton is a social networking system for both social and academic use. It can be used to general social activity, student societies, special events or ad hoc groups. It can also be used either in conjunction with or, instead of studentcentral as an elearning platforms that allows far greater participation by students compared to Blackboard (the software that powers studentcentral).

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