

Collaboration Creation: Lessons Learned From Establishing an Online Professional Learning Community

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Abstract: This paper describes the design, implementation, evaluation and further refinement of an ELGG-based social networking site to support professional development activity, project group and special interest groups, and the discussion and sharing of educational experiences and resources across Edinburgh Napier University in the United Kingdom. Beginning with a short overview of what online institutional communities might offer in sustaining good learning, teaching and assessment practice in-house, this paper then describes the rationale for and development of Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange (ENEE). The subsequent evaluation undertaken employed a mixed method approach involving online questionnaires and individual interviews with users of ENEE, and took place between January and April 2011. The evaluation had a twin focus on use and perceptions of ENEE in general, and how ENEE was beginning to be used to provide additional support opportunities for a diverse group of educators studying on Edinburgh Napier's online distance learning MSc Blended and Online Education (MSc BOE). Overall the evaluation highlighted a range of ways in which ENEE was proving effective particularly in helping users to 'keep abreast' of educational practice across the institution, as well as in supporting small groups dedicated to specific purposes and activities. On the less positive side, the evaluation highlighted a number of issues and challenges around ease of use, engaging in 'multiple spaces', and achieving 'critical mass' in meaningful use. These findings pointed towards a number of enhancements that were implemented over summer and autumn 2011, and the nature of these recent post-evaluation changes to ENEE and the MSc BOE group space are detailed in this paper.

Keywords: social networks, staff development, collaboration, social presence, lessons learned

1. Introduction

Learning communities and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) are attributed with making learning more efficient and effective, not least through supporting the individual to move from a novice to increasingly expert position over time. Due to their distributed online nature and asynchronous communication features, online networking tools have become central to supporting the activity of formal and informal learning communities and can be very effective in allowing for what Lave and Wenger term the process of "legitimate peripheral participation" where by new members can observe and learn vicariously before becoming an increasingly active contributor as their knowledge and confidence grows.

Online social networking tools also offer clear advantages for the sharing of expertise and ideas amongst busy, time-limited professionals. This potential has attracted increasing interest within education as a means to support new teacher development, continued professional development including mentoring initiatives, and for the sharing and dissemination of good practice beyond departments and disciplines (Schlager and Fusco, 2003; Oradini and Saunders, 2008). Sherer et al (2003) discuss the role online communities in Universities can play in providing a "catalyst for faculty development," and explain how in a sector that is increasingly characterised by rapid change, increased accountability and economic strains, the academic community can be supported through online communications-based technologies to help redefine teaching, learning, research and professional development (p. 185-184).

In 2009, as part of wider initiatives in facilitating the sharing of good practice, the Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange (ENEE) was developed using the ELGG platform to establish a social networking site for professional development purposes. ENEE was operated on a beta testing basis throughout the first half of 2010 and was made fully operational later that year. Between January and May 2011 an evaluation was conducted to gauge the effectiveness of ENEE in facilitating effective cross-institutional collaboration and communication, both in general and in relation to a particular use group.

This paper discusses the development of ENEE and this evaluation, which concluded in April 2011, with a focus on three key areas. The first concerns the general use made of ENEE in terms of small group work and establishing and sustaining the work of Special Interest Groups in particular aspects

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of learning, teaching and assessment. The second aspect focuses on the use of ENEE on Edinburgh Napier's MSc Blended and Online Education (MSc BOE), a fully online programme for education professionals who are interested in learning more about technology-enhanced learning. Here the focus is on how the ENEE is enabling the MSc BOE community to 'open up' their collaborations across the programme and provide a greater sense of belonging to an online programme community. The third area of focus is on the post-evaluation changes implemented within ENEE in general and the MSc BOE group space it hosts.

The aim of this paper is to highlight what worked well during the initial fully-operational implementation of ENEE, the challenges identified during evaluation and how we sought to address these challenges in the refinements made to ENEE and the MSc BOE group space in the subsequent period to October 2011.

2. Original development rationale

Beyond the general rationale outlined, the need to develop ENEE arose through feedback from staff development workshops highlighting the requirement for post-workshop support and finding ways to take forward projects based on newly learned skills around specific aspects of learning, teaching and assessment. There was a clear need for one space where cross-faculty colleagues could communicate, share and manage projects, and there is good evidence to suggest that in terms of enabling meaningful collaboration amongst staff that have had a chance to forge some kind of learning 'connection' (e.g. through attending a staff event together or being colleagues) then institutional online communities can be a powerful enabler (Ardichvili et al, 2003).

The 2010 Managed Learning Environment survey at Edinburgh Napier also underlined the desire for a resource to allow student collaboration out with module and School boundaries and it was felt ENEE could serve as a testing ground for a similar student platform.

3. Overview of architecture

ENEE is built on the open-source system ELGG. The site template, customised by the ENEE project team and the home page layout are shown in Figure 1.

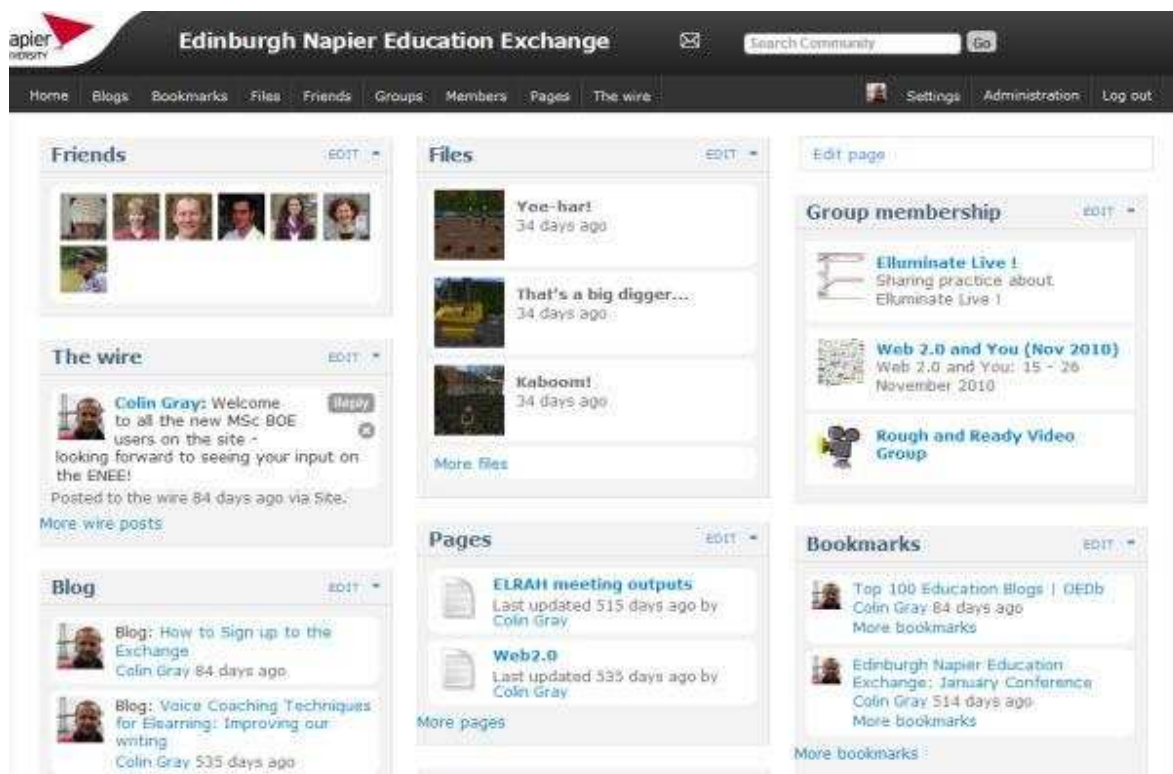


Figure 1: The ENEE home page

Five different collaborative systems were initially examined, with the functionality of each system (which included Joomla, Wordpress and Sharepoint) matched to the ideal requirements that were

identified. As a result of this iterative process, ELGG emerged as the best match to these requirements. One of the primary advantages of ELGG was the 'groups' tool which allows users to create and join self-contained group areas for specific collaborations (see Figure 2). User authentication was later added as a required feature due to the amount of spam users infiltrating the system. This led to the original ENEE installation requiring every member to be manually approved by one of the ENEE administrators.



Figure 2: An example of an ENEE Group

4. ENEE usage analysis to March 2011

4.1 Users

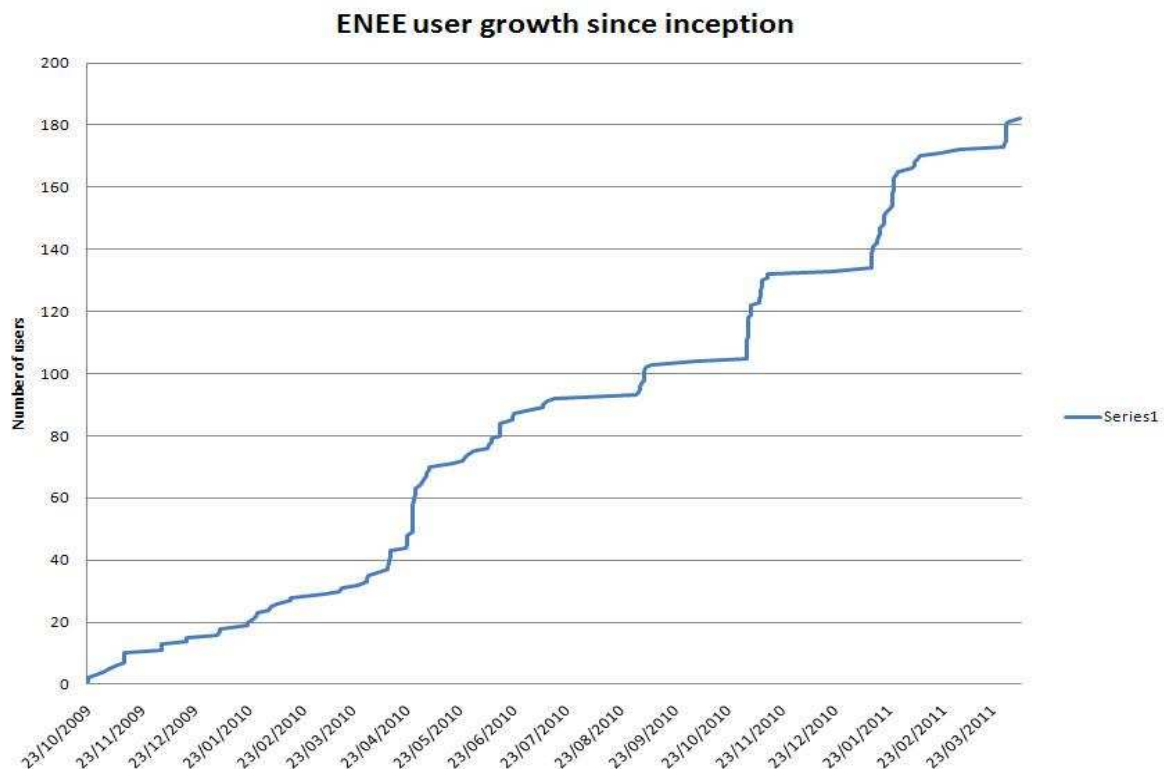


Figure 3: The growth of users since the ENEE's inception

At the time of the evaluation, concluding in Spring 2011, ENEE had 182 registered users. Most are Edinburgh Napier staff, alongside a small number of invited participants from other institutions. Registrations, as shown in Figure 3, have grown steadily throughout the past year.

4.2 Types of activity

Figure 4 shows the growth in activity on ENEE and displays total blog posts, bookmarks, pages, discussion posts and uploaded files present on the site over time until around Spring 2011.

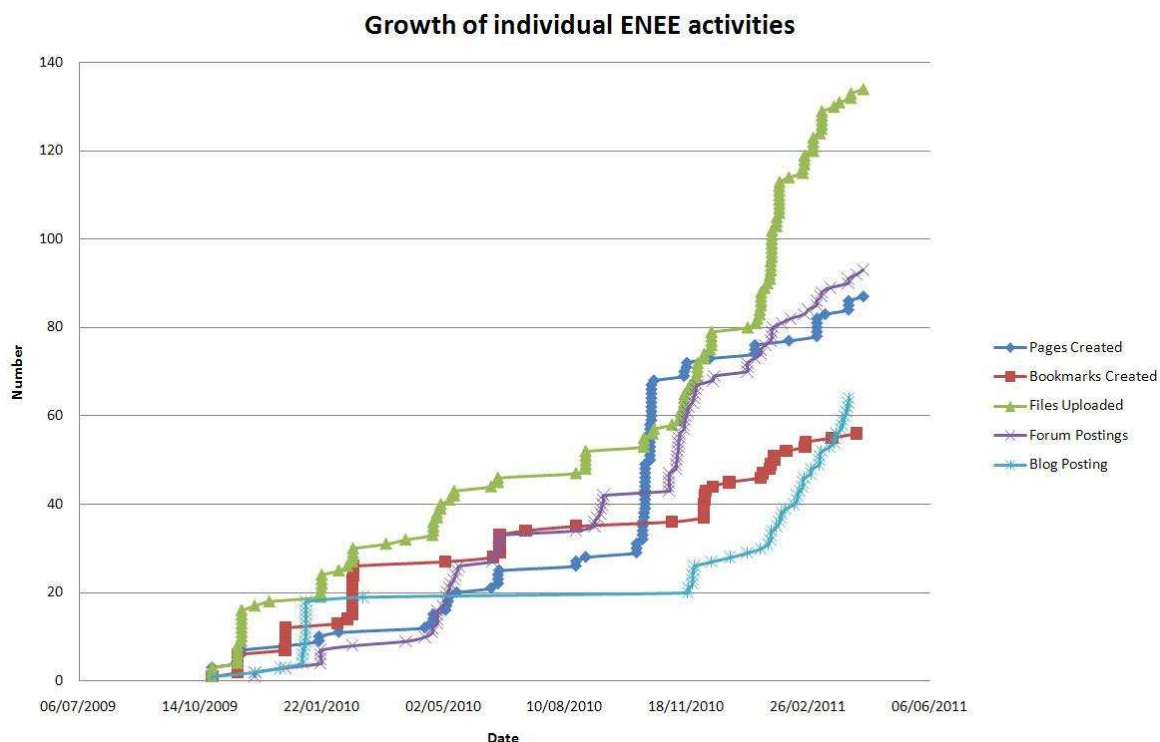


Figure 4: Growth of ENEE resources and activity over time

This graph shows gradual growth interspersed with spikes in activity related to short-term projects or workshops. It shows a different trend to the user growth graph in that it demonstrates acceleration in use since around November 2010. This may suggest a critical mass having been achieved which, as will be illustrated further on, is now sustaining increased use of ENEE up to the current point in time.

5. General evaluation

5.1 Survey summary

The aim of the general survey that was administered during the evaluation was to gather information on how people were using ENEE during the initial period of implementation, the features that they found most valuable, how they planned to use ENEE in the future, and to gather data on ease-of-use.

The general survey for the evaluation remains available online at:

<http://www2.napier.ac.uk/UltimateSurvey/Surveys/TakeSurvey.aspx?surveyid=1671>

The survey garnered a reasonable response for an online questionnaire. A total of 46 responses were received from a population of 159 'active users' (determined as being those users who have gone beyond simply registering as a member of ENEE), therefore giving a response rate of 29%.

5.2 How ENEE was being used

The first part of the general survey concentrated on how people were using the site. This began with a question asking, "How often do you use the ENEE?" Those who used ENEE often (at least twice per week on average) made up over a fifth of the sample, but those who used ENEE less than once per

month comprised half. This suggested a core of engage users, but that the majority weren't engaging regularly.

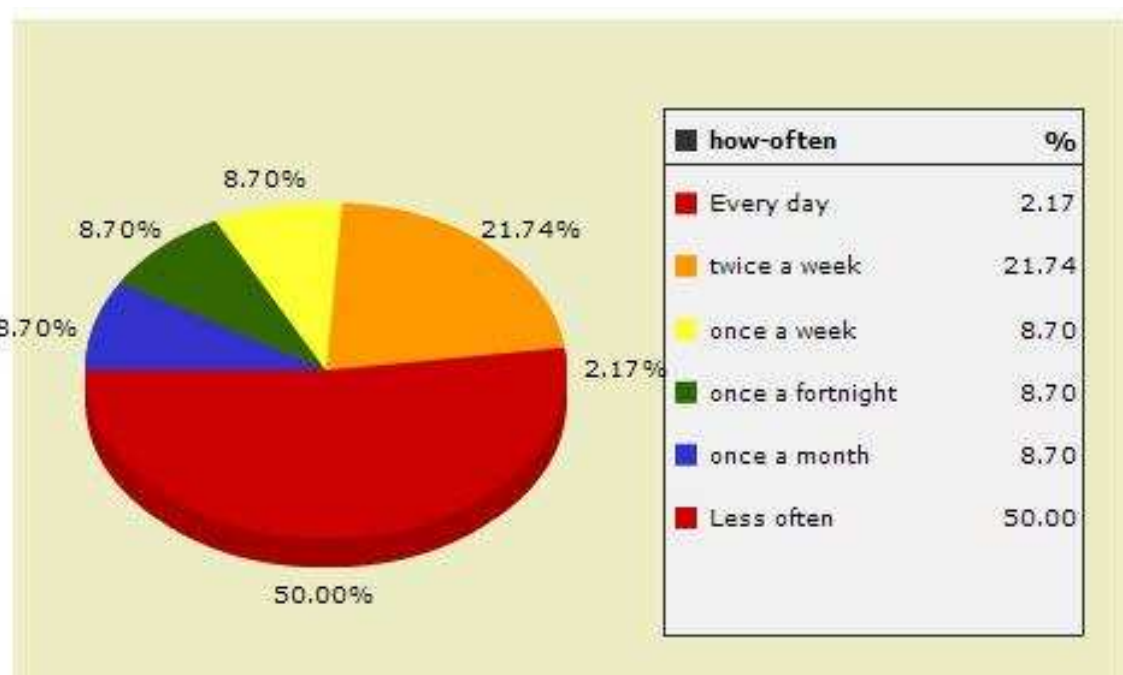


Figure 5: Pie chart showing how often users log on to the ENEE

Participants were also asked how many groups they were involved with as member or creator. Most of the interaction on ENEE occurs within group areas, which are the only place that offer discussion forums. Therefore, use of groups was felt to be a good indication of general engagement. Also, creating a group demonstrates a higher level of engagement; the desire to form an area to engage others.

85% of users stated that they had joined at least 1 group, with only 15% not having joined a group as of yet. This suggested that groups were being viewed and experienced as an important tool, and that most users desire an area to collaborate with others on areas of common interest.

However, a small number of the more active users seemed to be responsible for the creation of groups, with only 22% of the sample indicating having created any groups. This is common in many online communities, where a small number of users often contribute a large amount of the total content.

How the ENEE was being used in terms of tools and benefits is shown in Figure 6. This data confirmed group discussion as one of the most useful tools, chosen by 43% of respondents. The second most popular activity was 'keeping up with current university activity' around learning, teaching and assessment. This was a little unexpected at that early stage in the life of ENEE, as, at the time, ENEE did not represent a particularly comprehensive cross-section of University activity. However, this shows how important this function was, and will continue to be, and echoes previous work indicating that simply 'keeping up to date' with others' good practice is one of the most valuable aspects of belonging to online communities of educators (Sherer et al, 2003; Schlager and Fusco, 2003).

The groups tool features third in this part of the survey. Given that this is, as has been mentioned, a key indicator of engagement, this is encouraging to see.

An interesting outcome from Figure 4 is the limited use of content sharing tools, such as file storage, pages or blogs, and the minimal use of messaging tools. This suggested that academics simply want their own online space for communication and collaboration, while file or content sharing are relatively unimportant for now. This may change in the future as staff become more alert to the range of activity ENEE can support.

How ENEE is being used (tools, features and general benefits)	Count	% of respondents
To read or contribute to discussion forums within groups	19	43%
Keeping up to date with teaching and learning activities currently happening within Edinburgh Napier	17	39%
Providing a shared collaborative space for groups that involve internal and external members	13	30%
For the sharing of education resources	12	27%
Use of the group tool as an online presence for projects or initiatives (excluding Teaching Fellow Special Interest Groups)	10	23%
Administrative file sharing (e.g. project documents and policies)	6	14%
Maintaining a personal or project related blog	5	11%
Use of the group tool to provide an online presence for Teaching Fellows Special Interest Groups	5	11%
Media sharing (e.g. images, audio)	3	7%
Creation of web pages	2	5%
Instant communication (e.g. The Wire instant messenger)	2	5%

Figure 6: Which tools are being used on the ENEE

5.3 Usability

While the rationale for using ELGG to host ENEE was driven mainly by a pedagogic and staff development perspective, part of the reason for choosing ELGG was the simplicity of the platform. However, a large number (40%) found ENEE less than easy to use, suggesting only adequate general usability.

This was a valuable insight and was taken to suggest that more user documentation was required, at least as part of a solution to improving usability. The lack of engagement suggested by earlier data could feasibly be due to low usability and lack of guidance, therefore an easy way to increase engagement may be to increase the ease of use of ENEE through good 'point of access' guidance.

In response to the question, "Are there any features of the ENEE that you find particularly difficult to use?", illustrative comments received included "involving external members seemed [difficult] - I think you needed to give them access, then I had to respond to a different email"; "finding the group page that you are enrolled on and where the resources are", and "a quick guide to 'getting the most from ENEE' might help [including] audio, Camtasia, and screenshots". These comments highlight certain areas of the platform which cause difficulty, but also indicate general use is problematic. Logging on is a basic process, but that it was considered difficult for some is an important area to address through better documentation or system adjustments. There was also some confusion around how the platform functions, as enrolling internal and external members is in fact the same basic process.

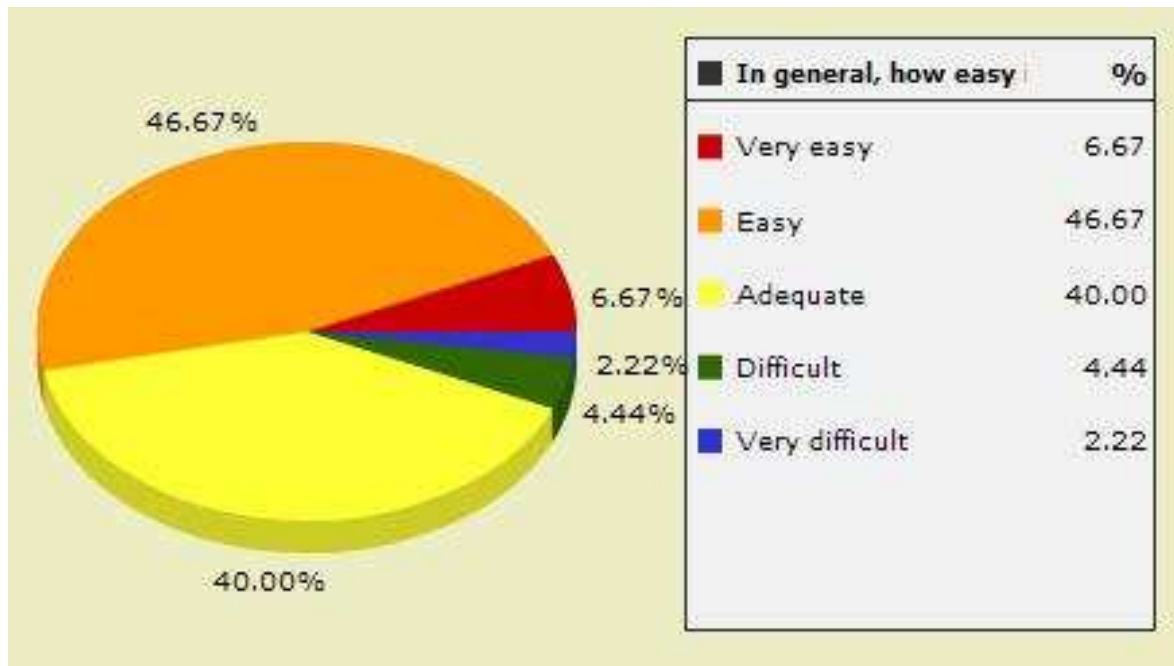


Figure 7: Usability results

5.4 Future use of ENEE

The final section of the general survey addressed future plans of those users who participated in the evaluation. As Figure 8 shows, a large number planned to increase their use of ENEE in future, with 48% of users definitely planning to build on their use ENEE. 35% of users indicated that they *may* do so.

When those in question were asked how they may make further use of ENEE in the future, typical comments put forward included: “to keep up with learning and teaching developments at Edinburgh Napier”; “make more use of the communication tools”; “developing more group spaces to support academic staff development”; and, perhaps tellingly, “I think we’re only just tapping in to the potential of ENEE to create groups and support projects that are cross-institutional in nature”.

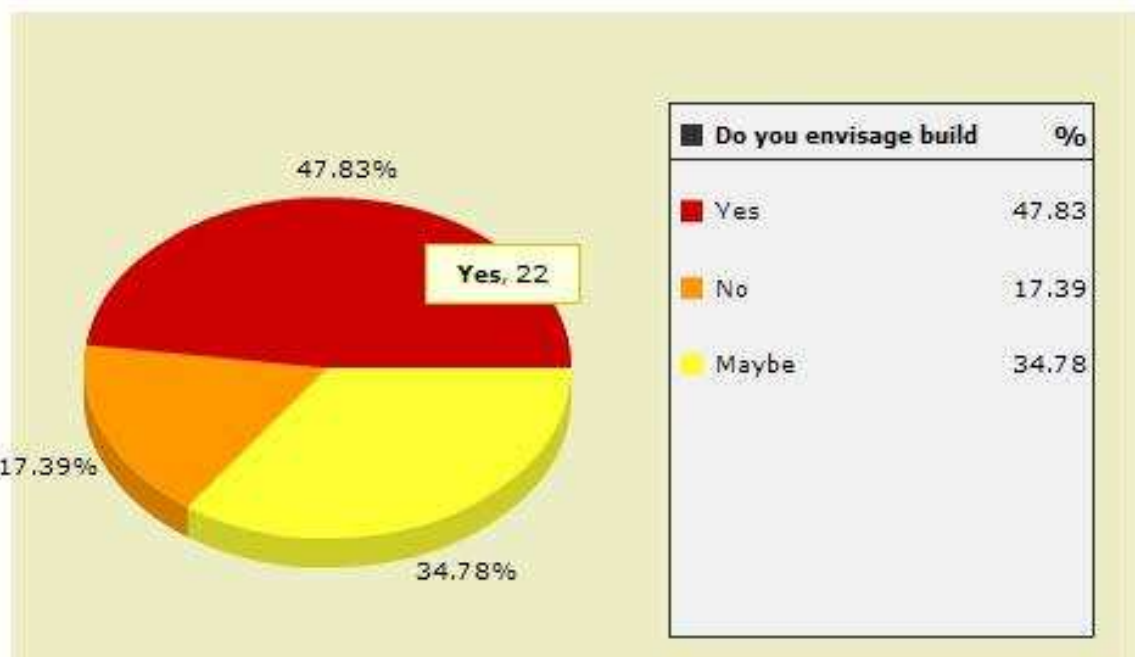


Figure 8: Do users plan to make more use of the ENEE in future?

Comments here affirmed many of the aims of ENEE, and hopefully suggest at least some users intend to build more fully on the benefits offered. Post-evaluation, we are starting to see further evidence of this.

5.5 Interviews

Five in-depth interviews with pro-active users of ENEE (two who had used the platform to support particular group activities and three who were participants on the MSc BOE) were conducted to provide further insight into issues addressed through the general survey. They were conducted as semi-structured interviews in accordance with the method advocated by Barnard (1988), and focused around broad questions on use, ease of use, benefits, engaging colleagues, and how the institution could best take forward ENEE. For those on the MSc BOE, specific questions on the use and value of the MSc BOE group space were asked.

In terms of use and ease of use, the biggest problem emerging was around navigating the ENEE and locating particular resources of interest. When clicking the group menu option the user is initially faced with a page showing the most recent activity from groups across the site. Unless the group you are interested in has been very active recently, it is unlikely to appear in this list. It is possible to click a link to access a complete list of groups, but one interview participant described the recent activity tab as “unintelligible” and described how they and others immediately gave up on that page. The alternative way to access a group involved visiting the user’s dashboard to find their own list of groups. This tool only lists groups for which the user is a member, and so doesn’t help participants locate new groups.

A related problem here seemed to be a lack of understanding of the dashboard - a customisable screen on which the user can place a number of notification boxes which will inform the user of new content. For example, the user can place a blog notifier on their dashboard which will then display all recent blog updates from everyone or their ENEE ‘friends’. None of the five interviewees, all quite experienced users of ENEE, knew that this was possible. This only came to light through watching one interviewee demonstrate the difficulty of accessing her groups, thus showing the value of user testing via task monitoring in the future. This could be carried out easily using testing approaches that have been shown to require only five participants to be effective (e.g. Virzi 1992; Neilson, 2000).

A further difficulty in terms of general usability concerned the process of joining ENEE. One interviewee termed site sign-up as an “application process” and described this as a “barrier” to many users. This is mainly attributable to the manual verification process that was put in place due to early ‘spam’ intrusions by external users. The participant stated that for one particular group of 22 users, 4 or 5 completely failed to access to the site. Again, this is where user testing is necessary in the future to determine exactly where difficulties lie in key processes, although the process itself (as indicated later) is now simplified as a result of the evaluation interviews.

In terms of benefits, the interviews underlined some interesting perspectives and experiences in using ENEE. One was around the sense of social presence afforded by ENEE, and the improved engagement it brings. The use of avatars throughout the site was pinpointed here. Avatars are uploaded by users after creating their profile and consist of a small picture of the user, or a representative image. Whenever a user interacts with the site, e.g. writing a discussion posting, then their avatar appears beside that item both on summary activity lists and the item itself. This results in a dashboard containing dozens of small avatars accompanying the relevant content, and users come to recognise people very easily when they contribute new material. One participant described the process of creating a new group and experiencing a “wonderful” feeling when a picture appeared in the member list displaying a real smiling face. It seems then that ENEE’s format is particularly suited to creating that sense of social presence thanks to the prevalent avatars, which is something to maintain and build upon. It also suggests that the kinds of features and activities which promote a sense of social being and belonging in online learning, and which we know are critical to engagement, satisfaction and retention in online courses (Rovai, 2003; Rovai et al 2005), are just as important for social awareness and integration in online professional networks.

The second main area of benefit highlighted was the creation of valuable reusable resources as a result of online activity in ENEE. One participant discussed having run a number of short-term, focussed activities using groups on ENEE that involved group members researching material, creating resources and then posting them in the group space. This was obviously very useful for the

group participating, but the interviewee described how that group space remained as a permanent resource for others, containing well-researched information on that particular subject. Others can potentially then join that group, carry on earlier discussions, explore outputs, and develop it further if they so wish.

This result is something which could turn out to be of great benefit. The general survey showed that 43% of users use the discussion tool within groups, 30% use the groups as a general collaborative space, and 22% use the groups as a base for projects or initiatives. This means a great deal of material is being created and will be created in the future, hopefully contributing to a rich and ongoing developmental resource for Edinburgh Napier's staff and external users of ENEE to draw usefully upon.

The final major theme emerging from the interviews was that of user engagement. Several participants mentioned the phrase 'critical mass' (the tipping point at which online activity encourages others to engage) and how they feel this is more easily achieved in small groups carrying out focussed tasks. This is opposed to larger, more broad-ranging groups that seemed to be less active, possibly due to lack of focus or inertia. A related practical consideration regarding critical mass was the request for e-mail notifications following the posting of any new content on the site. One interviewee described how it would be much easier to be timely in their responses if they were informed as soon as a new item was created in her group. This chimes with insightful comments by other interviewees regarding long-term engagement which could be very useful to the development of the ENEE. Several interviewees stated that there was an overarching problem of "multiple spaces" and that "it's not a simple matter to add a new one". Staff at Edinburgh Napier currently work across a number of informational, social and collaborative spaces including email, the staff intranet, Sharepoint for departmental work, and now ENEE for university-wide collaboration. Interviewees explained that users struggled to keep up with the existing spaces, even before ENEE became available. This is exacerbated by the disconnect currently affecting ENEE in that it isn't connected to existing university systems, requiring a new username and password.

The result of this multiple spaces issue is that often, even with the best of intentions, users do not check ENEE for many days at a time which can sometimes hamper sustaining a timely dialogue and the achievement of the critical mass mentioned earlier. The suggestion of email notifications is one possible solution to this problem. A more pro-active alternative would be an integrated informational and collaborative area which would collate input from email, the intranet, departmental sites and ENEE on one page, in much the same way as the internal ENEE dashboard does. This would require closer integration of ENEE with other university systems, but, according to the interviewees, this would be a valuable move indeed.

6. Key lessons learned from a general evaluation of ENEE

In establishing and evaluating ENEE we found ELGG to be an appropriate platform on which to base an institutional online social network-based community of educational professionals. Many of the tools inherent within ELGG, particularly the group tools and resource sharing features, lend themselves well to meaningful collaboration and sharing around issues relating to learning, teaching and assessment. However the findings of our general evaluation suggest that while comparatively easy to use alongside other social networking platforms, not all aspects of ELGG were intuitive to users. Much more guidance and instruction was required by users new to the ELGG system than had been anticipated, and this is likely to be true of any community built on the ELGG system in future.

7. Post evaluation modifications

Following the results of the general ENEE evaluation, and through general issues that also recurred within the evaluation of the MSc BOE group space, two main areas of work were identified where immediate gains could be made. These were the areas of documentation and of user authentication.

7.1 Documentation and Guidance

It became clear through the survey and interviews detailed above that many elements of the ENEE were quite confusing to new users. Having an area of the site described as 'unintelligible' was quite a surprise to the project team considering ELGG was chosen due to its inherent usability.

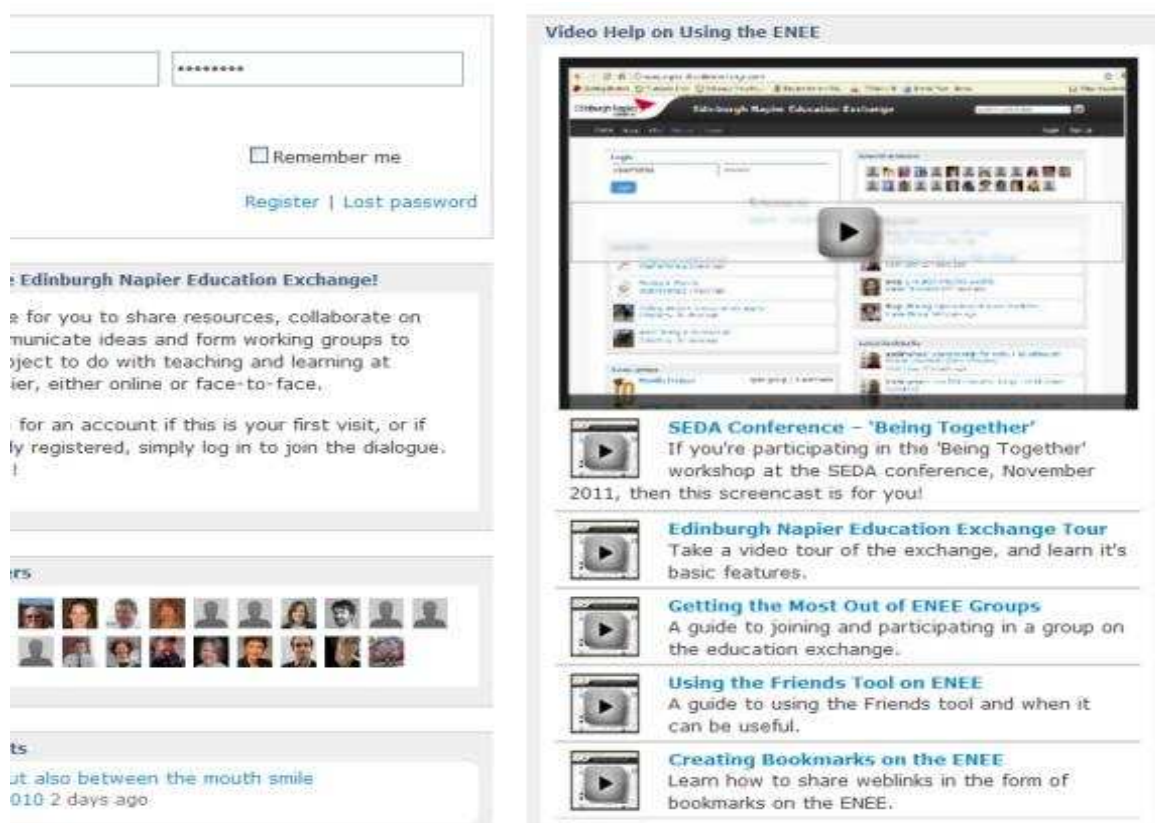


Figure 9: Re-designed ENEE home page with access to video tutorials

To combat this, new documentation and guidance was produced to introduce new users to the site. This documentation was created in the form of screencasts - recordings of a tutor's screen narrated with audio instruction - in order to provide a modern, media-enhanced form of instruction, commensurate with the ethos of the ENEE as a whole. In addition, the combination of audio and visual elements of instruction has been found by Mayer (2001) to aid in instructional effectiveness thanks to a multi-modal delivery method which utilises both modes of a learner's working memory. Five tutorial videos were created in total introducing the user to the basic functions of the ENEE. This included signing up to the site, a general tour of its features, and using the ENEE groups. It was hoped that these videos would serve as a central resource to overcome the common barriers found by many novice ENEE users.

7.2 User authentication

One barrier to entry for many new ENEE users which was considered worth investigating was the initial site registration. Many users were being put off by the sign-up process which, at the time of the survey and interviews above, involved being manually approved by the site administrators. As has been mentioned, this caused a significant amount of confusion, particularly when involving non-Edinburgh Napier staff. The plug-ins required to facilitate this method also utilised an automatic authentication method in the form of a 'type what you see' question at the bottom of the form, commonly called a Captcha. This tool had been reported to cause problems on some isolated systems, not allowing completion of the form. The combination of these problems prevented some users from engaging with the site at all.

Due to the large problem with spam users on a publicly available site such as this, some method of authentication was still required, but it was obvious that manual authentication was not working.

It was decided to implement a manually programmed solution whereby the registration form would only accept .ac.uk email addresses. This was considered to be very secure as only trusted users would have access to an .ac.uk email address, and the downsides of excluding non-academic users was considered worth the ease of use of the solution. This meant that anyone with an .ac.uk could very quickly and easily register for the site and begin using it immediately, thus overcoming all of the current registration barriers. In the rare case that a non-academic user was required to register we

could manually enter their email address, the process not taking much longer than the current manual authentication method.

7.3 Initial modifications results

The two enhancements detailed above have now had around 3 months to bed in, having been implemented in late July. Figure 10 shows the user registration pattern up to present.

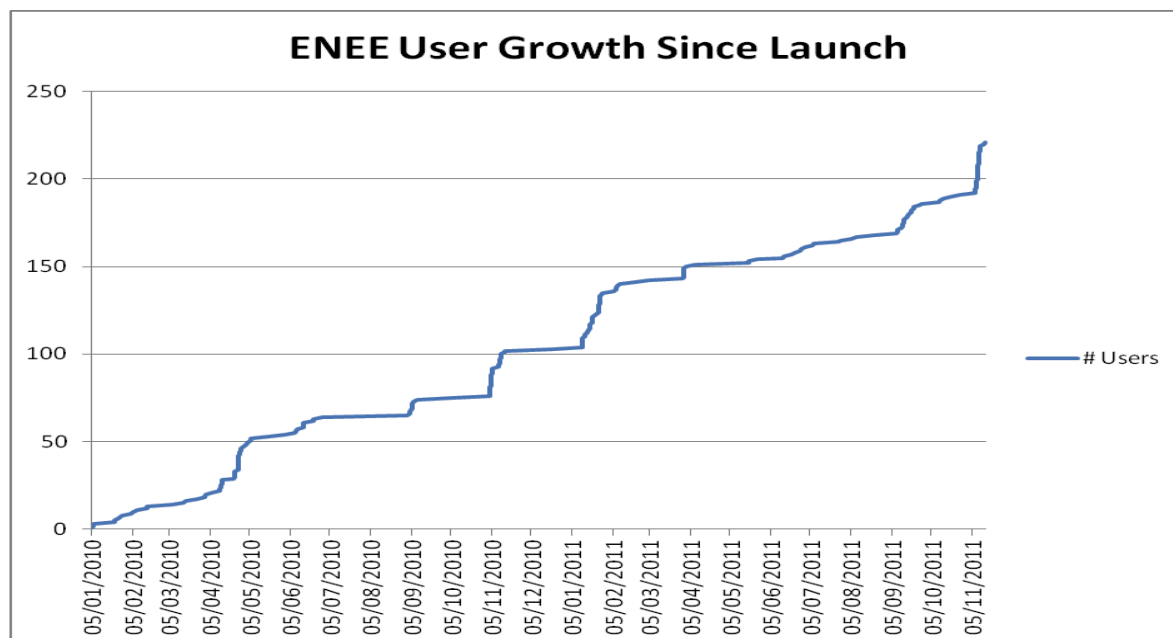


Figure 10: Continued growth in registrations for ENEE up to November 2011

The change is not dramatic, but it seems that there is an upturn in registrations, disregarding the vertical jumps due to individual projects, since these enhancements were put in place. This will require further investigation, however, as a number of variables could come into play in this measurement.

8. MSc blended and online education

As part of the ENEE evaluation, a focused evaluation of the MSc BOE programme cohort's group space was undertaken to provide an early insight into how effective ENEE may be in supporting students and tutors on taught programmes. At the time, the MSc BOE was the only taught programme using ENEE.

The MSc BOE is a fully online distance programme for lecturers and other education professionals. It has been running successfully since 2007 and currently has around 60 professionals from across mainland Europe and beyond enrolled as participants. The nature of the programme is reported elsewhere (Smyth, 2009). In relation to ENEE, the MSc BOE sought to use the platform to establish a 'programme wide' community space that would allow participants to get a greater sense of who was on each module, share news and resources across module groups, access live and recorded Guest Expert webinars, and provide a blogging space for reflective writing projects. The overall aim was to promote a greater sense of belonging to a programme community, rather than groups being segregated within module specific silos in the VLE, and to extend the excellent peer-peer support seen in modules across the whole cohort.

8.1 Use and perceived value of the MSc BOE group

The MSc BOE group on ENEE was introduced in February 2011. Of the 50 students and 4 tutors on the programme at the time of the evaluation, 33 in total (29 students and 4 tutors) had joined the group space. Of the 29 students, 9 participated in an online survey of use and impact and 3, as indicated, participated in the individual interviews as part of the overall evaluation of ENEE. The online survey is available at:

<http://www2.napier.ac.uk/UltimateSurvey/Surveys/TakeSurvey.aspx?surveyid=1677>

While we are drawing here from a small sample, around a third of student members of the MSc BOE group, we can see in Figure 9 a clear value being placed on accessing information about who is on the programme (via the Who's who pages, and group members area), and in accessing information about and participating in the live Guest Expert webinars that are linked to from within the MSc BOE group. The value of this sense of community is not to be underestimated in terms of student support gains, and 7 out of the 9 participants agreed with the statement 'Having the MSc BOE group space promotes a greater sense of belonging to a programme-wide community'. Six also agreed that 'Having access to the information and resources provided in the MSc BOE group space is contributing positively to my experience of being a participant on the programme'.

MSc BOE group feature or use	Very valuable	Valuable	Not sure	Has limited value	Of no value
Who's who page for your current module	4	2	0	1	1
Who's who pages for other modules	2	4	0	1	2
Information about previous Guest Expert sessions	0	3	1	1	1
Access to recordings of previous Guest Expert sessions	3	2	0	1	1
Information about upcoming Guest Expert sessions	4	3	0	1	1
Participation in live Guest Expert sessions	5	0	2	0	2
Discussion forums (to read)	2	2	0	3	1
Discussion forums (to contribute)	2	1	0	3	1
Group blog	1	1	1	3	1
Group bookmarks	0	1	2	1	1
Group members area (to view and read profiles)	2	5	0	0	1
Friends feature (to 'friend' other group members)	2	1	2	1	1
Mail feature (to mail other group members via the Education Exchange)	0	0	3	1	1

Figure 11: Perceived value of MSc BOE group features

While some value was being placed on the general discussion forums (which were used to share information covering things like upcoming events and new publications), it is clear that not all of the respondents valued access to these forums for reading or contributing. As one participant commented in relation to levels of participation within the group discussion boards, "Perhaps it is not yet clear if the BOE Group space is something informal or should be thought of as an official part of the course. This is perhaps partly why contributions are lacking". This is a fair comment, and in what is already a busy online programme with much academic and peer support activity taking place within module sites, the legitimacy and potential of the MSc BOE group on ENEE may not yet be fully understood or appreciated by students or staff. Echoing findings from the general evaluation, we need to also acknowledge that the challenge of 'multiple spaces' may be exacerbated in a fully online distance learning course.

As one of those less enthusiastic about the use of ENEE for the programme commented, "It's a real problem to have two virtual spaces, the VLE and the ENEE. I'm sorry, but there's no way I can keep up with two, it's just too much with the other professional places I have to go to". However, there was certainly evidence to suggest that the early signs for introducing the ENEE to the MSc BOE programme were promising, and that the way forward may be to embed effective use of ENEE from the outset of the programme for the next intake: "If this group space had been available three years ago when I started on the MSc BOE I would have used it much more. I am currently very busy with

my dissertation, however if I was just entering the programme and was completely new to the programme and Edinburgh Napier I would have really appreciated and used such a space”.

9. Key lessons learned from evaluation of MSc BOE group space

Echoing both the general evaluation of ENEE and similar work summarised earlier in this paper, the ‘keeping abreast’ of others and their work was the most valued aspect for those on the MSc Blended and Online Education. Participants were able to get a greater sense of who else was on the programme, and for some this was at least starting to contribute to participants feeling a greater sense of belonging to a programme-wide online community rather than being ‘siloed’ into module groups within the institutional VLE (which is perhaps one of the key barriers to community building within online distance programmes).

While a lack of clarity around how ENEE complemented formal course spaces on the MSc BOE led to some uncertainty about ENEE’s role and value, a critical point was raised around the potential to clarify the role and purpose for new participants coming onto the programme in the future.

10. Post evaluation modifications to MSc BOE group space

With the above in mind, the post-evaluation enhancements to the BOE group space were deliberately focused on strengthening the content and features that would foster a greater sense of who was within the programme community, and what was happening across that community. A number of refinements were also made to the information made available, both within module spaces in the VLE and on the BOE group space itself, concerning the intended purpose of the BOE group space.

Figure 12 provides an indication of the information offered on the group’s home page about how the group could be used, and also illustrates some of the new pages created. These include a ‘BOE role call’ page listing every student on a module for that trimester in one listing, organised by modules. A similar page is used to provide a list of current and recently completed MSc BOE projects, which we know anecdotally has already proven useful and motivating for a number of participants now at the stage of planning and embarking on this final stage of the programme. A number of activities on the MSc BOE involve maintaining project and reflective blogs, including blogs used for assessment on particular modules, and the ‘BOE Blog Roll’ page has been created as a means to link to a range of these project blogs as additional resources that could support participants in tackling particular projects as well as creating and maintaining their own blogs if they are new to this kind of activity.

The screenshot displays the 'Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange' interface. The top navigation bar includes links for Home, Blogs, Bookmarks, Files, Friends, Groups, Members, Pages, and The wire. A search bar is also present. The main content area is titled 'MSc BOE' and features a description of the group space, its owner (Keith Smyth), and a list of members. The sidebar on the left contains links for 'Subscribe to feed', 'Bookmark this', 'Report this', 'Edit Group Layout', 'Edit group', 'Invite friends', 'Manage join requests', 'Group discussion', 'Group files', and 'Group pages'.

Figure 12: Re-designed MSc BOE group explaining purpose of group

While participants on the MSc BOE often create blogs using tools such as Wordpress, we are seeing an increasing number of participants now choosing to create their blogs within the BOE group space. This seems to be partly due to established students becoming more comfortable and familiar with the ENEE and BOE group space, and partly as a result of embedding an introduction to ENEE and the BOE group within the start of the programme itself. For those who started on module 1 of the MSc BOE in September this year, specific induction activities involving joining ENEE, setting up a profile, and requesting to join the BOE group space had to be undertaken as part of the week 1 orientation.

Further new features introduced post-evaluation include a programme Twitter feed that is embedded on the home page of the BOE group space (Figure 13), and all module sites within the VLE.

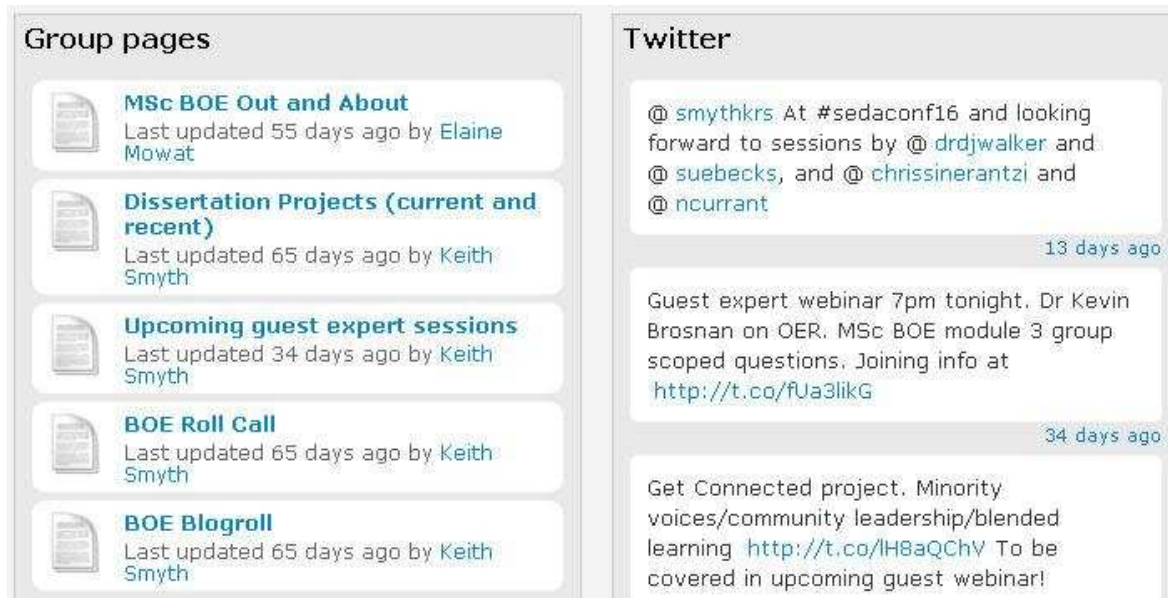


Figure 13: New pages feature within MSc BOE alongside feed to programme-wide Twitter updates

This is not used routinely, as regular updates come via various other means within the modules themselves, but is instead used in a targeted way specifically for programme-wide short announcements as and when these need to be communicated across the programme. Those who follow the MSc BOE programme on Twitter will receive these automatically, but by embedding the feed within the BOE group space and the institutional VLE all participants will receive the updates regardless of their use of twitter.

Finally, the way in which the BOE group space was beginning to prove useful during the initial period of implementation has also led the programme team to identifying a range of other ways in which the ENEE can be used to extend and 'open up' activities previously only available to those on the MSc BOE programme. This has included the recent online 'writing for publication in technology enhanced learning' initiative (Write-TEL) that supported a range of Edinburgh Napier staff and external participants in writing up a TEL initiative for publication (Figure 14). It also includes the current TEL-Connect series of online webinars, based on the guest expert online seminars used on the MSc BOE but opened up (via ENEE) to anyone who is interested in participating.

11. Conclusions

In a relatively short time, from initial scoping through to implementation and evaluation, we have been encouraged by the potential of ELGG as a platform to support an online professional community of educators within Edinburgh Napier. Particularly encouraging is that the original rationale for establishing ENEE has been borne out by the growing number of staff (internal and external) who are creating or joining groups, and the features within ENEE that they are finding useful. This extends in many key respects to the MSc BOE group space, the use of which is confirming that ENEE can play a role in supporting student as well as staff groups and which may provide a useful template that programme leaders of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the University may find useful to adapt.

The screenshot shows the Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange (ENEE) website. The header includes the Edinburgh Napier University logo and the text 'Edinburgh Napier Education Exchange'. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: Home, Blogs, Bookmarks, Files, Friends, Groups, Members, Pages, The wire, Settings, Administration, and Log out. The main content area is titled 'Write-TEL' and features a yellow 'Write TEL' logo. The page includes a description of the group, its owner (Keith Smyth), and a list of group members. The sidebar on the left contains links for 'Subscribe to feed', 'Bookmark this', 'Report this', 'Edit Group Layout', 'Edit group', 'Invite friends', 'Group discussion', 'Group pages', 'Group bookmarks', and 'Group members'.

Figure 14: The ENEE is now supporting staff development activities developed from the MSc BOE

The danger remains of participants struggling to cope with 'multiple online spaces' when faced with using a resource like ENEE alongside other internal and external means of online communication and collaboration, and of learning to use rich environments like ELGG in order to engage with the networking spaces they provide the technical platform for. Some of the improvements introduced post-evaluation, particularly around sign-up and through the provision of interactive tutorials, will hopefully help address at least some of the challenges faced by those who took part in the evaluation. Another key lesson learned, through the BOE group space evaluation, lies in clearly communicating the purpose of groups and community spaces established within a resource like ENEE and where they differentiate in their purpose from the other institutional and external spaces we may require staff and students to use and engage with. There was a strong sense from the general evaluation that small groups with a clear focus around a narrow set of clear shared objectives were proving to be the most effective and productive in ENEE, and there are lessons learned in all of this to take forward in further developing ENEE to support staff development, resource sharing and, over time, formal learning and teaching activities.

The 'holy grail' of allowing a single sign-on which accesses ENEE and all University online resources, all within a properly integrated environment will, however, very likely remain a key desire on the part of users. This will, however, remain a difficult technical challenge for Edinburgh Napier and other institutions to resolve short-term.

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