SHORT COMMUNICATION

KINSHIP - KING'S SOCIAL HARMONISATION PROJECT. PILOT PHASE OF A SOCIAL NETWORK FOR USE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (HE).

B.A. John[1]

[1]King's Undergraduate Medical Education in the Community Team (KUMEC), Dept of Primary Care and Health Sciences, King's College London School of Medicine, 4th Floor, Capital House, 42 Weston Street, London SE1 3QD, UK

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Abstract
Students entering Higher Education are increasingly information and communications technology literate. Many students (graduates and undergraduates) arrive as "digital residents", who are adept with social media and technologically fluent. The informal use of social media for learning is becoming increasingly evident, along with the potentially detrimental effects of a poor digital profile on employment prospects.

This paper describes the creation of Kinship (King's Social Harmonisation Project), a university hosted, members only social network, which is currently being piloted in the Medical School at King's College London. Along with a number of other teaching and learning resources, it is intended to use Kinship to establish an informal code of conduct by modelling and moderating appropriate professional online behaviour.

Kinship was developed using an open source Elgg platform, thanks to funding of £20,000 from the College Teaching Fund under the mentorship of Brighton University (1). This educational research project, led by Medicine, was proposed to select, customise and evaluate a social networking platform in order to provide functionality that would enhance new and existing e-learning resources, support group interaction, participation and sharing and meet the diverse needs of three academic schools: Medicine, the Dental Institute and two separate Departments, the Modern Languages Centre and the Department of English from Arts & Humanities, as a pilot for wider College deployment.

Student involvement is central to the project, from conducting the evaluation to moulding and customising the functionality and look of Kinship, in order to ensure that the site is authentic and evolves in response to their wishes and requirements. Formal evaluation of Kinship commences summer 2012.

Introduction
At a round-table discussion at the Brescia Colloquium 2011, the need for a university hosted, members only social network was discussed and explored. Benefits were considered to include enhanced communication, collaboration, sense of community, informal learning opportunities and enhanced skills for the establishment of an appropriate online professional profile.

There are already a number of established exemplars of open source social networking platforms for use in education. Therefore evaluation of the current popular functionality and systems being utilised by other universities such as Brighton, Leeds, Birmingham, Hong Kong and Harvard (all currently use an open source platform called Elgg) was considered valuable in order to inform the selection and customisation of an appropriate social networking platform for the College.

This project aims to identify, customise, and evaluate a social networking platform, created specifically to meet the diverse educational and communication needs of King's College London's (KCL's) multidisciplinary students, and to establish whether the provision of such

a platform is perceived as of benefit to students already established on existing commercial sites such as Facebook.

This paper will describe the creation of the working pilot site and discuss functionality.

Materials and Methods

Full technical information is available at the Elgg.org website, including installation documentation, server requirements, a comprehensive repository of plugins, details about the Elgg framework, the language it is written in, installation instructions and a forum to enable networking with others developing sites using the platform. The mentorship and work of Dr Stan Stanier from Brighton University (2009) was essential in informing our customisation of the generic "out of the box" site (1).

An internal eLearning content developer liaised with two specialist contractors to create templates for the site, respecting College policy, regulations and guidelines. Advice was sought with regard to the font and layout in an effort to ensure that the site is accessible to those who are visually impaired (Figure 1).
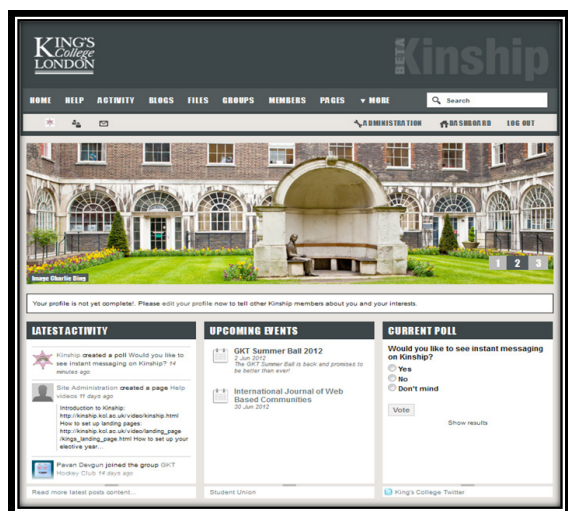

Figure 1. Screen shot of home page of Kinship site

Kinship is hosted on a commercial, scalable, external, UK based cloud server which is key if UK/EU Law is to apply to the content (3GB RAM, 150 GB of disk space). The site uses an academic URL and was granted access to the university Active Directory to provide simple login using the standard institutional username and password. This will ultimately facilitate smooth integration into the main KCL website in order to enable successful, seamless adoption of the site by the University at the end of the pilot Kinship was built in Elgg version 1.8

which was released late in September 2011, so there was a small amount of initial expense incurred from having to eliminate early bugs that became apparent in the plugins that we chose to integrate in this newest version of the platform. The latest version of the Elgg platform has the several important new features as standard, including the ability to run the site as a "walled garden" or invitation only site as standard.

Ethical approval has been granted so that the formal evaluation process can begin in earnest when the site is launched to the medical school at the beginning of the next academic year. It is intended to circulate questionnaires and run formal focus groups.

Results

The site has initially been tested by 650, self selected medical students for three months and their views were sought at a series of informal focus groups in order to eliminate bugs and inform the initial incarnation and functionality of the site. Students have suggested that that the ideal time of year for the launch of Kinship is the beginning of the academic year and consider this as key if it is to be successful, speculating that those who are absorbed in exam revision will no adopt or explore a new social networking site. Student societies and organisations are currently being contacted and encouraged to create a presence on the site and the internal infrastructure to enable a smooth roll out is being put in place. Formal evaluation of the site, to begin Autumn 2012, will include focus groups, interviews with students and staff and an email questionnaire.

Although a working social networking platform, built in Elgg has been developed, which enables secure authentication using students' own College logins and is accessible via http://kinship.kcl.ac.uk, this was completed during exam season when the students were otherwise occupied. Early usage statistics and student feedback have shown the site to be perceived as serving a need, especially for group working and for honing their digital identity, and a valuable addition to their portfolio of ICT tools. Although the site has been promoted as a pilot, initially being launched to the medical school only, there are members from various schools within the college as students have heard about the site from each other. The initial "soft launch" has been useful in assisting with the identification of the

appropriate time of year to formally launch the site to the student body.

Student representatives from medicine have stated that the academic URL and sign in with standard institutional username and password are key, as the impression that the site is to be rolled out and not part of a small temporary study is essential if students are to be motivated to contribute to and engage with it. Students are not happy to invest their time and energy on creating content on such a site if it is temporary.

Students have high expectations with regard to ease of use, particularly speed and functionality, and initial feedback regarding one particular plugin has proved informative. One group of students reported dissatisfaction concerning the quantity and resolution of images that could be uploaded simultaneously - the initial plugin permitted only a dozen images to be uploaded at a time and speed was considered to be imperative by students familiar with commercial sites.

In response to negative feedback an alternative plugin was identified, newly launched on the Elgg repository (paid for and developed by another user), enabling much quicker uploading of over 100 images at a time. The cost of this development was minimal due to the open source nature of the platform – we paid just £110 to load the plugin into a parallel test site for testing, amending the look of the plugin so that it blended seamlessly into our site, before integrating it into the main site for general release. The response from the students was very positive and they were delighted to see their feedback being acted upon so quickly.

Discussion

A live open-source social network has been developed for formal launch to the medical school with the beginning of the next academic year (2012/13) and roll out to other participating schools organically and in response to feedback and demand. A poll feature has been integrated into a specific landing page (after login), accessible only to medical students initially. This will be used to collate feedback with regard to functionality that will be proposed for integration onto the site as it progresses. Kinship is a "beta" site, which means it is in development, but as social media is constantly evolving and at such speed, it is anticipated that Kinship will remain a beta site for the duration of its use.

It is anticipated that Kinship could play a major role in keeping alumni in touch with the university, acting as mentors and inspiration to prospective students (who can be invited in), the site will function as an online yearbook, a place to collaborate and communicate around assignments and university based social activities and events, a place to model digital professionalism and even potentially as a notice board for events, a place to advertise the sale of books and the rental of accommodation. Further work now includes:

- The creation of a mobile site to gauge whether the creation of an App would make the site more accessible for students using handheld, internet enabled mobile devices
- Evaluation of students' requirements for an academic social network
- Engagement with students to ensure that they are at the centre of the evolution, development and evaluation of the site moving forward
- Creation of further internal infrastructure to enable each school to have their own landing home page for their students and staff, with the ability to archive and establish individual personalities and communities
- Exploration of an international perspective of Kinship and it's functionality for wider global applicability
- Identification of the best technical solutions to meet student needs, by mapping the functionality and performance within our Elgg platform against that of other open source solutions.

Conclusions

It is anticipated that Kinship will remain in "beta" as social media, its functionality and presentation will continuously evolve. This institutional "walled garden" site is intended to foster a sense of community with students who are increasingly studying part time and at very disparate campuses. Rising tuition fees and other study costs including accommodation, mean that students are increasingly living off campus and are using social media to accommodate group study. It is hoped that Kinship will provide a more inclusive, safer area for students to collaborate and communicate. We have yet to establish whether students expect and want this from the university or whether they simply prefer to use Facebook.

References

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