SRHE Proposal

Title of Paper: **Using Social Media to Build Communities of Practice across Disciplines, Programmes and Schools**

Paper submitted and to be presented by:

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<u>Bios</u>
Elizabeth Nelson MA, PGCE and BA(Hons), is the programme leader for Photography for Fashion & Advertising at the University of Wales, Newport. Her recent research has been centered around notions of identity, space and creativity.

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<u>Research Domains:</u>
*   Learning, Teaching and Assessment
*   Student Experience

Part 1, Abstract:

The purpose of this research proposal is to address the challenges faced by staff at HEIs in terms of teaching, learning, and inter-disciplinary practice post restructuring.

In order to foster collaboration, a pilot study has been carried out using social media to build a community of practice in a digital learning space. Following the success and willingness of students to engage in and use this medium as a collaborative learning environment, the study will be expanded to include two programmes: Advertising Design and Photography for Fashion and Advertising.

Alongside traditional obstacles to collaboration, additional barriers occurred: first, half of the School of Art, Media and Design moved to an urban campus, then the university restructured.

This research aims to discover ways to build connections and communities and offer the best student experience possible, whilst withstanding the challenges of restructuring, political agendas and financial implications.

Part 2, Outline of paper entitled **Using Social Media to Build Communities of Practice across Disciplines, Programmes and Schools**

This proposal is research in progress with the results to be formally compiled and presented at the conference. The aim of this research is to address the challenges faced by staff at HEIs, in particular those at the University of Wales, Newport, in terms of teaching, learning, and interdisciplinary practices, post-restructuring.

Fostering interdisciplinary collaboration can at times be a challenge. Our students tend to have a comfort zone, a tendency to be insular within their own programmes, and a hesitancy to jump into the unknown and approach students they haven't met.

In the past year, additional obstacles have been added: a university restructure occurred at the same time that half of the School of Art, Media and Design moved to a new campus in Newport's urban centre. The other half of the School, the 'messy' courses that required practical applications to function such as photography, were left behind at a rural setting.

The physical divide of the move was accompanied by a psychological one: programmes relying on each other to inform teaching, learning and the student experience were split across schools. The abolishment of the School of Art, Media and Design altogether meant that programmes that should be working together were now housed in totally different areas.

The two programmes in this study are Advertising Design and Photography for Fashion and Advertising. Post- restructure, Advertising Design sits in the school of Design, Engineering, Fashion and Technology. Photography for Fashion and Advertising (known throughout the paper as PFA), sits within the school of Film, Photography and Digital Media. This division ignored obvious connections and the interdisciplinary nature of course content.

This research paper endeavours to find ways of circumnavigating these challenges, building connections and communities to withstand the restructure whilst offering the best student experience possible.

In addition to using social media to build a community of practice, other methods will be utilised such as cross-campus events and addressing physical learning spaces.

Social media

In *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities*, Wenger states that what makes interactions on the Internet attractive and productive is the ability to experience "learning friendships" which occur when there is a common interest and a space to learn together. (Wenger, 2009)

As a new and relatively unexplored educational opportunity, social media provides a digital learning space in which members can establish relationships and build trust. The technology allows communal aspects to form.

The same three characteristics of communities of practice set out by Wenger (1998) in *Communities of Practice* also exist in the digital realm: domain, community and practice. The shared domain and its definition sustains the process of learning together over time, providing an identity for the community through which members recognise each other as learning partners. (Wenger, 2009)

Within each of the programmes, small communities of practice have already been established with success. Both Advertising Design and PFA have dedicated Facebook pages for each year group, where students interact with one other outside of the University's official methods of communication.

Research into the Advertising student use of Facebook as a forum has shown that students are more likely to use it as a learning space than other digital media, especially if the group is closed to outsiders. Students feel confident participating and interacting with one another, knowing that comments will not be read by University management. In surveys, students said that Facebook use as a learning environment was more 'comfortable' and 'enjoyable', than spaces managed by the university.

These individual groups will be expanded to the specific year cohorts on the different courses, encouraging interaction on a learning environment that doesn't depend on physical space. These will be established in September and monitored until mid-November, at which point analysis of the level of extra-curricular, cross-course collaboration will be identified and formally compiled as a paper for presentation.

Cross-campus events

Currently, course-specific teaching is also site-specific, allowing no day-to-day interaction between the programmes. To overcome this, we will establish extra-curricular joint seminar/workshop sessions to provide a forum for learning in a physical space, and to establish relationships that may be further developed online.

We will also set industry project briefs that require different skills from the cohorts. For example, Advertising Design students will be responsible for copywriting, layout, and idea generation, while PFA students will be responsible for image execution. Upon success of these early briefs, the process can be expanded to include other programmes.

The final outcome for these events becomes a professional product, reflective of the joint working relationships found within industry. Examples of the work produced at these events will be evidenced in the research output.

Physical space

In Wenger's (1998) *Communities of Practice* where domain, community and practice are the primary characteristics, *space* becomes increasingly important in terms of generating connections and communities within University infrastructure.

In the new urban campus, there has been a move away from definitive, subject-specific areas and studio culture. The founding concept of the building was to enable interaction between individuals and with the building itself, contouring the user's mobility efficiently. Designed to factor spatial and temporal flow alongside a mobile public/private dimension, the spaces within the building are predicated on user fluctuation and mobility rather than on traditional forms of inert occupation.

Within this new environment, students struggle to form bonds with the spaces they occupy, lessening overall engagement with their own programmes, let alone with other courses.

To enable interdisciplinary practice, our intention is to introduce and familiarise each course with the space of the other, encouraging collaboration. This should encourage design students to feel more comfortable in the photo studios space. Mobile lighting studios have also been ordered so that the 'shoot' can go to the Advertising Design studio, once again enabling and encouraging a shared space.

The hope of this research is to put in place clear directives for establishing interdisciplinary communities of practice and collaboration to overcome the challenges put in place by politics, finance and management and building a positive future at the University of Wales, Newport.

Molly Bibliography

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