
BUILDING COMMUNITIES VIA A LEARNING LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The Learning Landscape project described here is known as RedGloo and has several objectives; among others it aims to help students to make friends, contacts and join communities based on interests and competencies. RedGloo provides a space where students can support each other with personal, academic and career development, sharing insights gained from extracurricular activities as well as their degree programmes. It has shown tendencies of becoming a learning community with several communities of practice.

1. Introduction

The current version of RedGloo [1] is developed on top of the open source project Elgg [2]. It is aimed at members of the School of Systems Engineering within the University of Reading. The School includes the following disciplines: Computer Science, Cybernetics, Electronic Engineering and Information Systems. RedGloo has the following objectives:

- To actively engage them in the important activity of self reflection early on in their time at university;
- To encourage them to make friends and interact with their peers and to try to facilitate mutually beneficial eRelationships;
- To participate in an online learning community in which they can proactively share enthusiasm for academic, social and career related interests;

The Learning Landscape was developed over the summer with a small team of developers enhancing Elgg to meet our requirements, and a larger group of students trialling the functionality. RedGloo was launched in early October 2006, to coincide with the arrival of the new first year students (Freshers). The new students were given an opportunity during their induction week to use RedGloo. During this time they made a number of initial posts, created profiles and established a number of communities. After this initial activity some have not yet revisited RedGloo. However others have continued to contribute, students from other years (undergraduate and postgraduate) have joined, along with staff members. The activities that take place are analysed here.

2. Communities

The first communities created were often "test" communities and never really developed an existence. These included; "The first community", "George Forman Appreciation Society" and "Barbeque League", all of which were created and are now moribund. Others were created as links to existing web sites, for example "Reading LAN", "Staff Student Liaison Committee" and

"Photography". Other communities that were established early did thrive: ".NET", "Cake Lovers" and "Web Comics". While as later on new communities were added to meet a need, for example when the first year students were set a piece of group work several groups created communities.

Focus groups were established to provide feedback and evaluation on RedGloo. The focus groups have shown that users have had problems with identifying what a community within RedGloo is, and hence do not know when to use them. This is mainly due to the fact that the functionality of a community is limited to a blog. A newer version of Elgg has implemented forums and this might solve this problem when we upgrade our server.

3. Blogs

The content of personal blogs is varied. When the first year students were participating in the induction, they blogged about their home life and the move to university. Later when they were actively encouraged to use their blogs for reflection, many showed that they did not know how to reflect, after that when students undertook reflection, on their own initiative, they showed great insight. In general the topics blogged on were very varied. Entries ranged from deep technological discussion on Operating Systems, through programming languages, to food and drink. There are also some spin off activities that now exist beyond RedGloo, these include student led classes (prosumption [3] in education) and a robot building group.

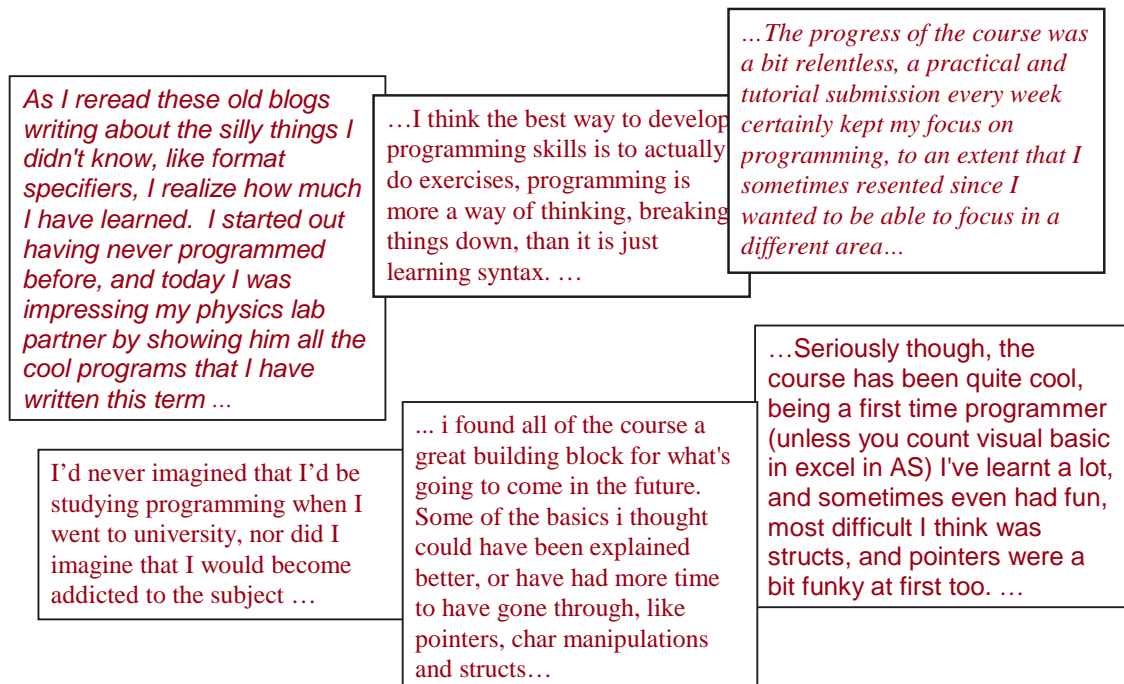


Figure 1: Reflections

All first years in the School (some 200 students) are required to take a module in Programming. As part of the student learning experience they were offered the opportunity to keep a reflective blog. Less than 10% of the class kept a regular account of their progress on RedGloo. Part of the

problem encountered by the students was that they wanted to include the code that they had produced as part of that week's work; however this was discouraged where the work was to be submitted for credit. The system within our university allows students who are unwell to be granted extensions beyond the deadline, and so a truly reflective post cannot be shared until some two weeks after the deadline, by which time it had lost its purpose.

Towards the end of the first term a piece of work was set for all first year Programming students. This had a small mark (less than 1% of the work for the whole module) this required the students to reflect on what they had learnt in the Programming module during the first term and to make a post on their RedGloo blog. Figure 1 shows some of the reflective blogs that the students posted. The quality of response was very high and much more valuable than the traditional evaluation forms given out in class at the end of the first term of the course.

4. Learning Community and Community of Practice

The latest development of RedGloo is that the users are starting to act like prosumers, in the sense that they are starting to create learning material for each other, so RedGloo is starting to become a learning community. Figure 2 features examples of prosumption. The posts on the left indicating a need for more material, and the posts on the right providing it.

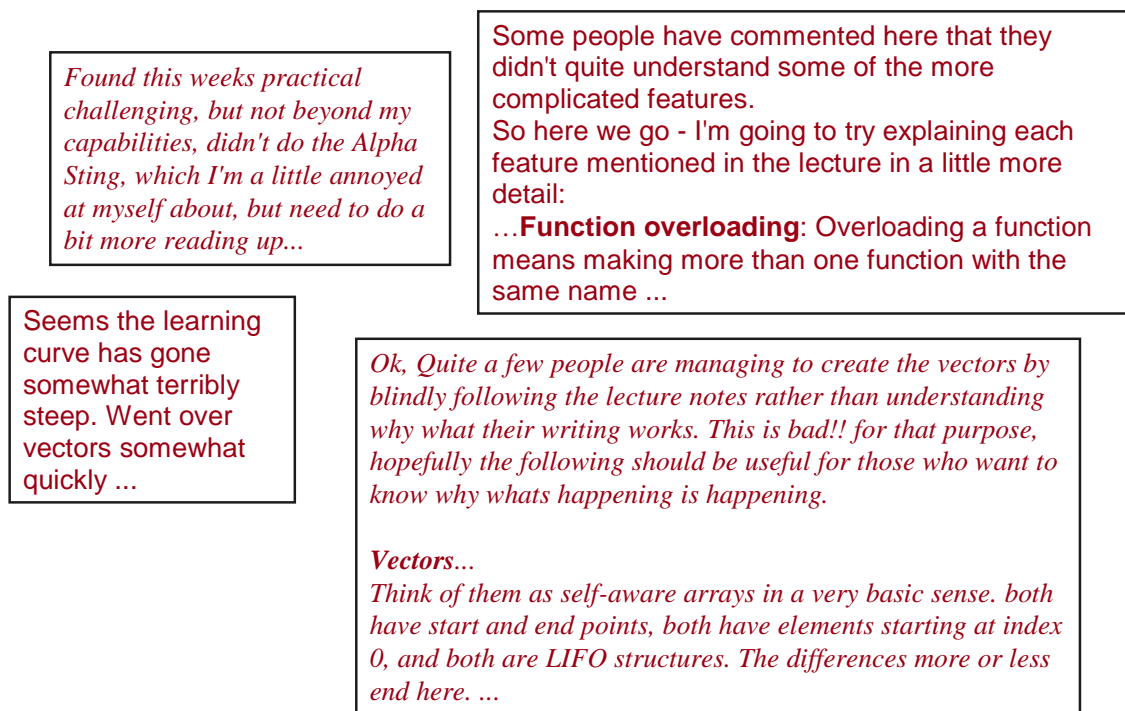


Figure 2: Prosumption

The prosumption shows that the users are starting to act like a community, where they are helping each other in each others learning. This could be the first steps of communities of practice (CoP). Etienne Wenger identifies that CoP's consist of a domain, a community and some

practices, i.e. the development of a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems [4]. He further says that “It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community.” [5]

It is our assessment after evaluation the blog entries and through our focus groups that the domain and the community elements are already part of the RedGloo community. The domains are well defined by the needs and interests of our students, e.g. a need for learning programming, the need for baking cakes in their spare time or the interests in developing compilers and games. Likewise the users are attracted to these communities both in RedGloo but also when talking to each other face to face, and several users have started with trying to build practices in RedGloo (see figure 3 and 4). But herein lies the problems, the current tools supporting communities are in the version of Elgg that is used by RedGloo merely a file store and a blog, this has been identified by our focus groups as insufficient and as one focus group member claimed: “Users don’t know when to make a community or not!” This indicates that for RedGloo to become a place with CoP’s of students there would be a need for creating more supportive tools for creation of practices.



Figure 3: Compilers



Figure 4: Cake community

The tools that has been mentioned in the focus groups as lacking within RedGloo is: An index to resources (such as student produced tutorials), FAQs, more detailed profiles, forums/discussion boards, peer review tools and wiki style collaboration.

5. Conclusion and the Future

The RedGloo project has shown that there is a need for informal learning and community building within the School of Systems Engineering at the University of Reading. After several months the project has been showing promise. Good practices are currently being identified and gathered, and has shown many functionalities that would be preferable in the future community building tools at the University. RedGloo has been a valuable prototyping tool for the future.

At present the project is at a crossroad in regards to what should happen next. One possibility is to further improve the RedGloo source code and add the functionalities that are needed, however The University of Reading has committed to the Blackboard system [6], so there is a reluctance to accept other learning tools. The project has already bought a license to the Blackboard Building Blocks so that some of the desired functionalities could be developed for that system, but according to the focus groups that could be viewed by some of the community users as being too “official” and tied in to the course decreasing the level of informal learning and community building. Another suggestion has been to use some external social networks such as facebook [7] or liveJournal [8], the rationale behind this is that most of the users are native Internet user and are already users of such tools, hence the take up would be high. A facebook trial has been started to see if that is a viable way for the project, but early indications show that take up is much lower than the original RedGloo service.

6. Acknowledgements

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