

NextEd: an Ubun2.0 paradigm for technology enabled higher education

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Introduction

This research assumes that one way to address Africa's challenges at a systemic level is to promote fundamental change and innovation within education. The challenge for African students and faculty is that we need to become globally competitive and locally aware. Emerging technologies and platforms (like Web2.0) appear to suggest mechanisms which may be able to facilitate this process.

The challenge in education is multi-faceted as it concerns content, curriculum development, pedagogy, research and faculty development. Ideally an initiative would holistically attempt to address all these facets.

This paper looks at the NextEd approach to addressing these issues in Higher Education and focuses on the lessons learned by the collaborating faculty from South Africa, America and Kenya.

The NextEd Project: Web2.0 focus, philosophy and process

The NextEd Global Initiative (NEGI) – launched in 2007 by Blewett and Quilling, represents a collaborative, technologically enabled approach to higher education. Our current focus is on the Higher Education sector but the philosophy, process and technological tools can be applied in numerous contexts.

The NextEd project seeks to draw together educators, learners and corporate partners from various contexts to enable mutually beneficial collaboration. This collaboration includes content, pedagogy, curriculum and scholarship of learning. As a result of these interactions multidisciplinary and discipline-specific research collaborations also develop. Practically, NextEd involves the use of various Web 2.0 learning platforms (such as Second Life, social learning networks, microblogs and wikis) to facilitate multiple universities on various courses. This involves shared assessments and shared teaching on a virtual course or section of a course.

The philosophy of NextEd (ubun2.0) is strongly grounded within the concept of "ubuntu": the mutual contribution, sharing and engagement of individuals for the greater good of all. The focus is on enabling people to become lifelong-learners and mentors within their communities; wherever the community, and whatever their expertise. While this is intended to apply to both the educator and the learner our initiator is the academic staff member. Thus, we focus on facilitating a cycle of engagement which allows "life-long learner" academics to join an educational

process, experience it and gain sufficient experience that they feel comfortable enough to initiate collaborations of their own.

This phased-model of engagement we refer to as the 5C model of engagement:

Step 1 – Come – This is the invitation and discussion with potentially interested parties.

Step 2- Consume – Parties who are prepared to engage then become consumers. They participate on a course with little or no contribution required from them.

Step 3 – Collaborate. The consumer becomes a collaborator and offers to contribute to the course they are involved in.

Step 4 – Create – The participant is enabled to create their own courses and hence is initiating the cycle with others (Come) by inviting their networks into NextEd.

Step 5 – Contribute – Finally the participant will also become a contributor to the Body of Knowledge, artifacts, etc that constitute the greater NextEd project.

The Implementation: Initial American and African Collaborations

The first NextEd collaboration occurred in the second half of 2008 between the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Durban, South Africa students and students from the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth (UMD).

The UKZN students were from the Bachelor of Commerce, Information Systems and Technology Honours module “Special Topics in IS&T”(4th yr) and shared a topic area with MBA students from UMD. The class was the core MIS class that all MBA students are required to take -- a graduate class with a mix of students, some interested in accounting, some in marketing, some in operations, etc.

The mediums of delivery, required management processes, and nature of the student interactions and assessments were discussed and jointly determined by all collaborators. Students worked in “crossover” teams where cultural, academic year of study and discipline boundaries were challenged. Some management aspects of this collaboration have already been reported in Shea *et al.* (2009).

During 2008 African collaborators were actively sought and the second NextEd collaboration occurred in the first half of 2009.; involving UKZN IS&T students from the “Computer Mediated Communications” module and students from the Bachelor of Science Degree in an Applied Computer Science module on “Human computer interaction” (4th yr), Daystar, Kenya. Students shared a single topic relating to HCI in 3D virtual worlds.

Collaborations have since continued; but the focus of this discussion revolves around the learning experiences of these two interactions i.e. August 2008 till May 2009.

The Collaborative Experience

A core objective of the project is to set-up virtual environments (platforms) that both encourage and nurture academic collaboration both between students and staff. Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook, Second Life, Twitter, and others provide an ideal way to engender richer academic engagement. However a number of challenges have been experienced during the first phase of the project.

This discussion presents some of the challenges faced:

- **Funding & Timing:** Collaboration is complicated when release of funding is misaligned with the anticipated starting dates of projects: A potential collaboration collapsed as a result of this.
- **Finding courses that are compatible:** There are challenges in aligning courses from different universities which have different content and outputs.
- **Participant perceptions & engagement:** Students and academics from different institutions may have vastly differing expectations of the process. It is challenging for the incoming academic to evaluate the potential of collaboration. This suggested that the 5C engagement model required adjustment.
- **Student academic level:** To resolve potential mismatches faculty must have knowledge of their own, and their collaborators', courses and students. Again the modification of the engagement model appeared necessary
- **Aligning the requirements being made of students:** Students sharing a topic may not be able to devote the same notional study hours to a specific interaction. This appears to be more likely when the courses are less closely aligned.
- **Assessment:** Assessments present two key challenges: Modes of assessment may differ e.g. continuous assessment vs an examinable topic and grading norms need to be discussed. This is most important when you are the "initiating" party.
- **Commitment of staff and students:** Commitment to a course of action is very dependent on how motivated one is when entering the activity. Participants need to be able to speak from personal experience to engage others.
- **Web2.0 technology:** While participants were required to self-assess their ability to collaborate on NextEd, our experience has shown that technology is a moving goalpost and mission critical activities should be placed in stable environments.

Key for Us: Ubu2.0 & the 6C Model of Engagement

Collaborating for the greater good of all requires a willingness to change and adapt. This beta- mindset allows for a trial-and-error approach to solving problems. Our major lesson learned relates to the implementation of NextEd collaborations. As a result we have revised our model to a 6C engagement model.

The new model of engagement provides for a phase where interested parties can connect without committing too many resources. An additional step (Connect), between Step 1 (Come) and Step 2 (Consume) has been added. The initial expression of interest does not do enough to enlighten the potential collaborators to the compatibility of their courses, technology and pedagogies to the NextEd program. There is insufficient opportunity for the potential new partner to assess whether the program is what they envisioned. Likewise, it is important to determine the commitment of those who express an interest, so that committed parties are involved in the Consume phase.

As such "Connect" sees the potential partners being invited to better acquaint themselves with the technological environment and allow them to be a spectator on an existing collaboration. As a result this extended paradigm seems to suggest that

more potential collaborators need to be identified in order to ensure that one or two move through to more formal Consume and Collaborate phases.

Conclusion

While technological constraints have the potential to be limiting factors in Africa-linked collaborations, we see an implementation of appropriate philosophies and procedures as equally critical. In this regard the tenets which underlie Web2.0 and “African” perspectives such as ubuntu appear to provide alternative world views and mechanisms for engagement. The evolution of the 6C Engagement model provides an example of how this can be achieved.

T Shea, P Sherer, R Quilling, C Blewett: 2009

Bringing the world a little closer together: Designing Tasks for effective cross-class global virtual teams, 10th International Human Resource Management Conference, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 21-24 June 2009