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Title: Mainstreaming grass roots innovation in open educational practice: benefits and challenges

Theme: Mainstreaming

Abstract

Summary

Process.arts, a grass roots web2.0 open educational environment for sharing day-to-day arts practice and research of staff and students, currently provides a new ‘open learning’ space to the University of the Arts London (UAL) that straddles the institution/educational (formal learning) environment and the social (informal learning) environment. It creates an ‘experimental’ space for open educational practitioners to develop and define a new language for open edu-social practice without conforming or being influenced by pre-existing academic structures and processes.  The transition of process.arts into an official UAL service will test this model and raise questions as to how institutions successfully support and develop autonomous and independent grassroots innovation without homogenising innovation.

Background

Chris Follows initially developed Process.arts in 2008 with the support of UAL’s Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (CLTAD). Chris was awarded a secondment and fellowship to develop his ideas for creating an open educational web environment for arts staff and students to share and cluster rich media content and resources. Process.arts has been maintained and developed by Chris as a sustainable and independent system, through agile experimentation, small project support, voluntary support, stewardship and an open university SCORE fellowship project.

In 2012 UAL began the process of rebuilding its VLE framework, and process.arts was identified as a valuable resource that could fit into the University’s new portfolio of tools; consequently, process.arts is due to be officially introduced as a supported ‘service’ in September 2012.

However, the structure of process.arts does not map onto courses; meta data links user-generated pieces of openly licensed text, image, video and audio content together through individual profiles and subject specific interest groups. Like many web2.0 environments used for education, process.arts can neither really be described as a repository nor as a VLE. Because of this it provides a novel and alternative VLE environment that encourages and supports rich media experimentation and informal learning, a welcome alternative for many to commercial alternatives.

Conversion to a full service will provide a firm foundation for long term stability, integration wth other systems, support and growth. The project team is in the process of integrating the current informal agile development approach into a more formal in-house system. The team are addressing outstanding bugs, monitoring user interface changes and identifying outstanding functionality. There will inevitably be some loss of agile spontaneity although we aim to retain the overall grass roots participatory feel.

This paper considers the pros and cons of mainstreaming, and suggests what would constitute a balanced approach, based on the experience of this transition.