

# Emerald InTouch

## Emerald InTouch for the Middlesex Centre of Excellence in Work Based Learning: A Case Study



**Middlesex Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning (CEWBL) is one of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning awarded to Universities in England by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2005.**



The CEWBL is at the leading edge of developing and rewarding teaching and learning which is directly related to the demands of knowledge-driven economies.

When Alan Durrant (Programme Leader for Professional Practice) first encountered Emerald InTouch he saw potential for using the platform to support newly trained professionals as they worked through a professional development work based learning programme. InTouch is a web space designed to support learning and collaboration. By bringing together technologies such as blogs, wikis and RSS into one place, Emerald InTouch enables users to create and join communities of practice, engage in reflective learning and collaborate with peers online. This fitted with the CEWBL's pedagogical approach of reflective learning, student-centric programmes and real-time project supervision.

Durrant observed, "When I thought about how to use Web 2.0 technology as part of my teaching, I considered the requirements of learners coming onto the Professional Practice BA Hons programme. The course is for performing arts students of 18 to 20 years old who have been in a professional context (as dancers, musicians or actors) where training has been very hands on and directed. I wanted to give these students a higher education experience counter to this approach, where they would have to take much more autonomous control over their programme of study.

The pedagogical underpinning of this method is reflective, self-directed learning. I wanted to help students develop their career management, critical and reflective skills in order to pursue their career more effectively.

The tools provided on InTouch had the

potential to either contribute to this aim or become a major part of how students construct their understanding of themselves in their professional practice" Consequently, InTouch was incorporated into the syllabus for Middlesex's BA Honours in Professional Practice programme.

Durrant identified three functionalities of platform that he believed were ideal for his course – profiling, blogs and wikis.

### *Profiling*

The aim of the profiling tool is to connect students through shared interests, research areas, courses or via a simple keyword search. According to Durrant, "The profiling tool was extremely helpful because students would be coming onto the programme largely, if not completely working at a distance. Keyword linking made instant connections between people with the same interests which was a great icebreaker. When we held the campus based induction, we focused on the profiling tool to allow students to become familiar with the system. Many of the students were already using social software such as Facebook and were therefore more comfortable about uploading information about themselves rather than starting off with some sort of course-related or professional blog.

### *Blogs*

"I saw pedagogical value in the blog tool as it gave everybody the ability to post and comment asynchronously on topics that were open for

discussion. The blog would chart the kind of journey that the students and I were having through the ideas that emerged in each posting. As students moved through the different assignments in the module, I anticipated that the blog would allow me to propose work, ask people to do tasks and comment on what other people have already done and this is largely what the community blogging tool has been used for.

As the course progressed, Durrant found more uses for the blogging functionality. He started to post up notes from campus based sessions for students in the distance learning group and encouraged both groups to learn from each other through InTouch. For example, in the last campus session the class held discussions about professional development themes. Durrant asked each student to speak about a theme whilst others took notes. After the session students were asked to post these notes onto the InTouch blog. Not only did the act of writing consolidate the knowledge in the individual's mind but it also allowed the distance learning group to benefit from the ideas that were expressed.

Another point Durrant had not anticipated at the beginning of the course was the amount of interest from students in finding out about what was needed to know in order to enhance their chances of getting work. This emerged as a real concern for students as identified by the increasing number of blog posts on the topic. Durrant was able to address these concerns on InTouch as well as take this into consideration when planning future courses.

### Wiki

The wiki functionality was the third tool Durrant felt would be of value to the course due to its collaborative qualities. As he remarked, "One of the concepts I wanted the students to think about throughout their Professional Practice Degree was what constitutes professionalism in their industry – what does it actually mean?"

"Once students had reflected on the meaning of professionalism I aimed for them to use the wiki tool to put down their own ideas and then work collaboratively with their peers to develop a 'joint statement of knowledge' because notions of professionalism are shared. Whether this works or not remains to be seen. At the moment there are just a couple of students who have used this tool. This part of the site has been less well used than the community blog or the profiling section".

### Positive Start

Emerald InTouch was introduced to MCEWBL in September 2007 and after three months it has been deemed a successful part of the

Professional Practice course where it is seen as an integral part of the first module for enabling reflection and sharing knowledge.

And like many new online systems (particularly in the Web 2.0 arena), the biggest challenge for Durrant and his colleagues at Middlesex is that of adoption. Although it is one of the course requirements to use Emerald InTouch, there have been mixed levels of usage. Some students regularly post blogs and update their profiles, whereas others have not logged on since the induction sessions. Durrant says he is "adopting an approach of strong encouragement".

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As he points out, "there are always going to be questions about how a system like InTouch fits into an academic programme. My feeling is that students are often busy people who may not take time to reflect and will simply do what they need to do to complete the course. So if we want to develop them as reflective practitioners then we have to create situations where they are forced to reflect. One of the ways to do this would be by replacing assignments with assessment of the effectiveness of a student's contribution to the collective discussions on the blog or the wiki.

"This approach may be something we consider at Middlesex, but at present we are starting by creating situations where students must record reflections via InTouch without the assessment imperative. At the start of the course this was very tutor driven but we are now seeing more peer-to-peer interaction as compared with a lot of e-learning systems InTouch is very intuitive.

However, like any system, you need to use it often enough to feel confident on it. We have found that the students that did not attend the induction session took a long time to understand InTouch and so next year it will be essential for students to attend the induction and we will carry

out a more in-depth introduction to this platform”.

As well as student usage, it has also been important to ensure that there are protocols in place for the tutors. Durrant acknowledges that he also had to do some work to ensure complete familiarity with the platform and also to regularly check InTouch for comments and new blog posts as, he asserted, there was nothing more demoralising than posting a comment and your tutor does not respond to because they have long since stopped checking the site.

### **Flexible Access, Security & Communities of Practice**

Another reason for using InTouch for Durrant was its flexibility in terms of registration. Durrant comments, “One of the very powerful things about social networking software is the idea of self-enrolment and self-selection. VLEs on the other hand are heavily controlled by the institutions that own them. I have not used the virtual learning environment that my institution provides, not because I do not understand the technology but due to its inflexible registration process. Because they are distance students, many of my course participants do not get enrolled and receive a student number until half way through their first term so would not be able to get onto the university’s VLE. InTouch is great because we control user registration so can get all our students onto the system at the very start of the programme.

“Whilst the site may have flexible registration options, it is still a closed, secure platform which allows students to communicate and collaborate in a safe, secure space.”

In addition, students can continue to use the system after they finish the course, allowing potential to grow a community of practice over time where former students can mentor current course participants who can in turn provide information and advice to people who have just been accepted onto the course and are wondering what to expect”. And whilst the site may have flexible registration options, it is still a closed, secure platform which allows students to communicate and collaborate in a safe, secure space.

Although it is the first, the Professional Practice BA Programme is not the only course that will use Emerald InTouch at CEWBL. January will see students on the Doctorate of Professional Studies programme using the site to collaborate on projects in a distance setting and Durrant has also created a new community on InTouch for a group of universities to use the wiki technology to collaboratively write a book on work based learning.

Durrant concludes, “Ultimately we want our students to contribute to each other’s learning, have the confidence to talk to people and represent their ideas to a wider audience. Because Emerald InTouch helps them to achieve this aim it is an important part of this syllabus”



**Emerald InTouch** is a Web space and hosting service designed to support learning and collaboration. By bringing together technologies such as blogs, wikis and RSS into one place, Emerald InTouch enables users to create and join communities of practice, engage in reflective learning and collaborate with peers online.

Find out more online at:

<http://ww2.emeraldinsight.com/intouch>

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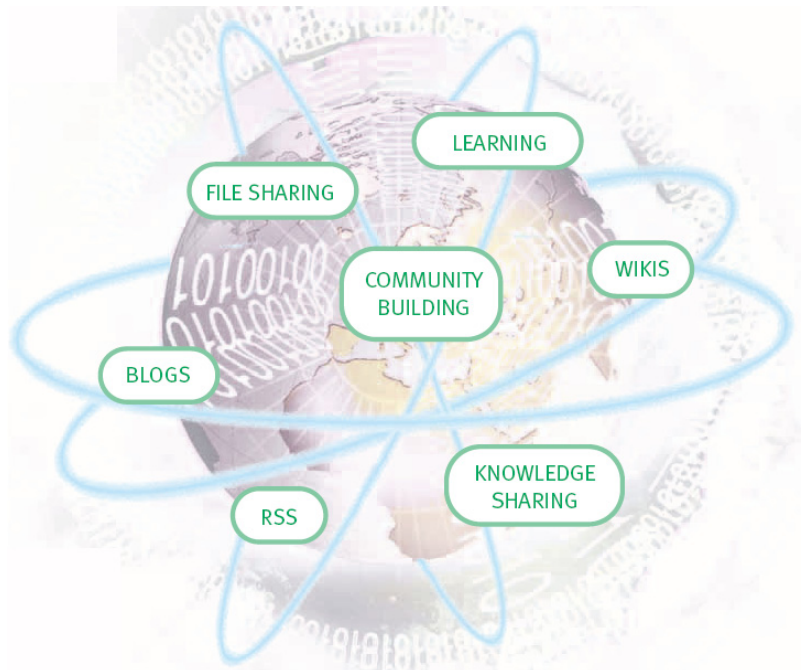
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