

Title: Using Open Online Resources to Enhance Social Learning

Abstract: This case study looks at the integration of open online communication tools in a 'MA in the Creative Economy' programme at Kingston University's school of Business. Forty students set up individual blogs, created Twitter accounts, published an online research library and collaborated on team websites to record their progress and engage the public with their efforts. All of the tools used were free and publically available that allowed students to own their work and retain access to it beyond graduation.

Keywords: Online, blogs, twitter, social bookmarking

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CONTEXT

Kingston University's School of Business has developed an MA programme known as 'MA in the Creative Economy' (MACE). In MACE, postgraduate students enroll in business courses alongside 20 creative course options outside of the faculty such as design, music, film and writing. Students come from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, and in the first weeks of the programme, form into business teams where they create a product or service and develop it into a live trading business over two terms. This case study describes the resources used in the first term.

RATIONALE & DESCRIPTION

In order to track the student's progress, individually and as a team, students were required to register for a wordpress.com blog account and twitter account. This account was then linked to the MACE course blog and made publically available on the web (<http://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/maceteams>). This blog acted as the hub for all of the online activity by including links to student and team blogs, twitter updates, an online resource library and module assignments and lectures. Here members of the public and classmates can browse what students are doing individually, as well as each business team and join in the conversation. (Fig. 1)

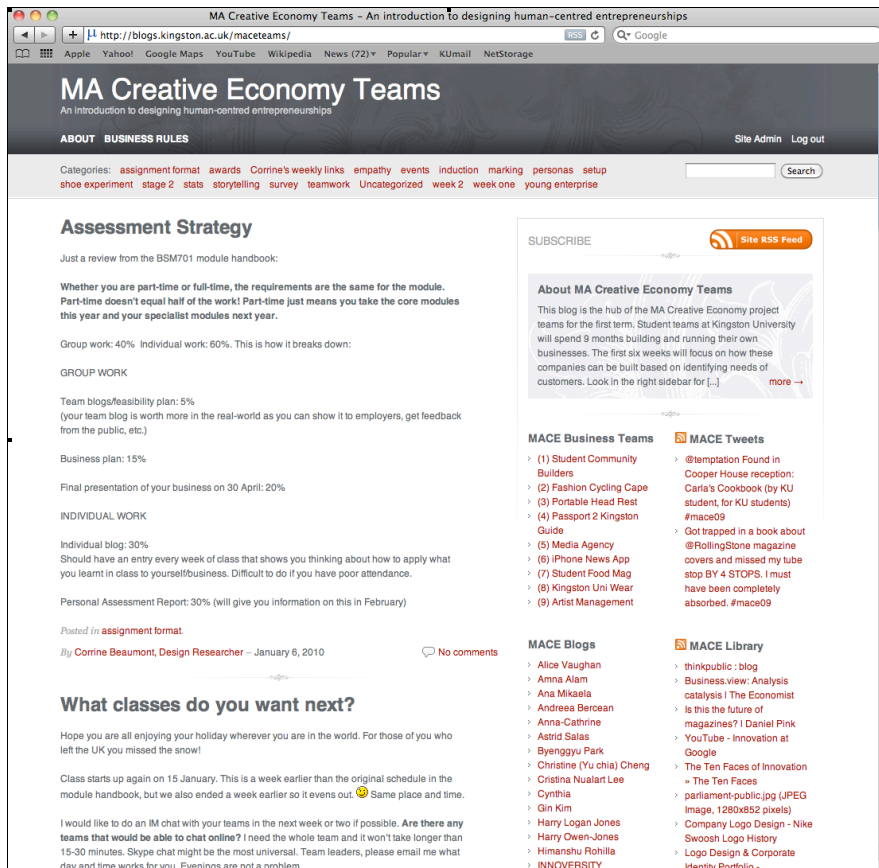


Figure 1. MACE Course Blog <http://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/maceteams>

Each team was also given a Flip video camera to record business meetings, explain their ideas and document field observation. These were then uploaded to YouTube and published on their blogs.

Traditionally, Blackboard is used as a platform for online university resources, however with Blackboard there are rules on access and features are controlled centrally which can make updating and viewing the information restricted. As the Wordpress MACE blog is made public and can be modified by the tutor, it meant potential students (and employers) could connect directly with the MACE programme which could raise the profile of the university and the student's efforts, and be fitted to changing needs throughout the year, without any cost.

Prior to MACE enrollment, most of the students were unfamiliar with blogging software and had never used Twitter. Within a month everyone was comfortable with the tools and started to adapt them to their own needs. Students were skeptical at first, but having it as part of the assessment requirement was a motivating factor to learn to get over the initial doubts of the tools. Students realised having first-hand knowledge of online social networks also gave them insight as to how businesses could interact online with their customers; such as using Twitter as a marketing tool, or how to create a public dialogue with their customers using blogging platforms.

50 blogs were created in total. Over the course of four months, forty students published over 450 blog entries, which included photos, sketches, videos and

prototypes. They wrote about what they learned in class, reported on team meetings and gave feedback on lectures. This feedback then impacted future lessons and allowed students to co-create the MACE lectures.

To keep the tutor up-to-date without having to visit each blog everyday, MACE blogs were subscribed to in Google Reader. As a new blog entry was published, the tutor was notified. The tutor then could read all of the student blogs in a central place, record personal notes, rate them and leave comments on blog entries. These blogs were also published in an RSS feed that made it easy for students to follow their classmates as well. (Fig. 2) It also turned the blogs into a searchable database of information, which made it easy to find comments on certain subjects.

A MACE online resource library was also built using social bookmarking through Delicious.com. (Fig. 3) This allowed the tutor and the students to bookmark online material that was relevant to the course and add notes to the websites as well. Over 130 resources were added in the first term. The RSS feed was published on the MACE course blog.
(<http://delicious.com/tag/macekingston>)

Twitter was used to post interesting links, to ask students questions and to socially engage and invite them to events in London related to the subject area. (Fig. 4)

Students also used Twitter as a means for looking out for each other's businesses. Alerting them to new competition, suggesting potential partnerships with outside businesses, and sending them a link to information that would be useful to their team was commonplace.

Twitter allowed them to identify useful information and quickly share it with the rest of the class.

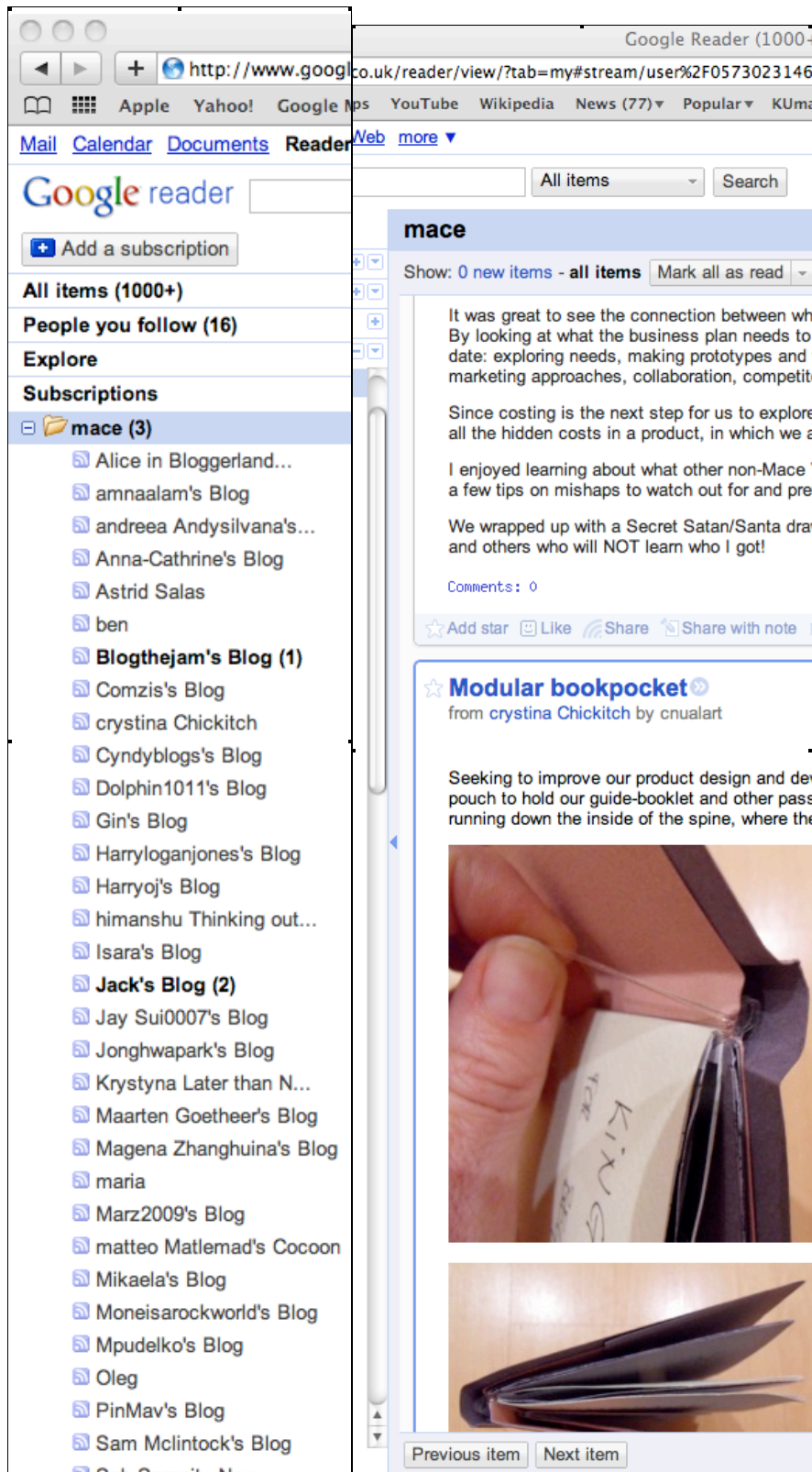


Figure 2. Google Reader Subscription list for MACE.

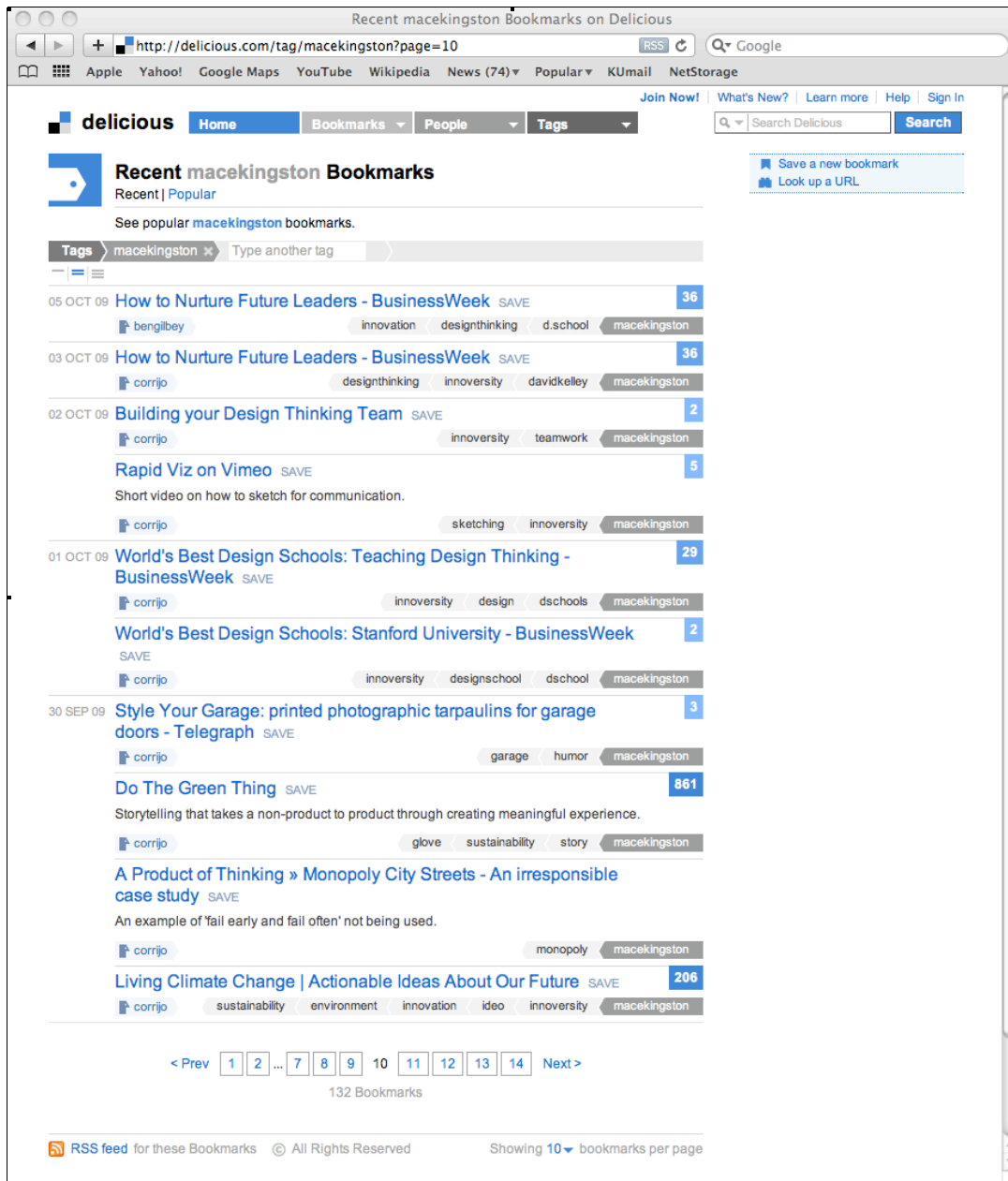


Figure 3. Delicious online resource library for MACE.

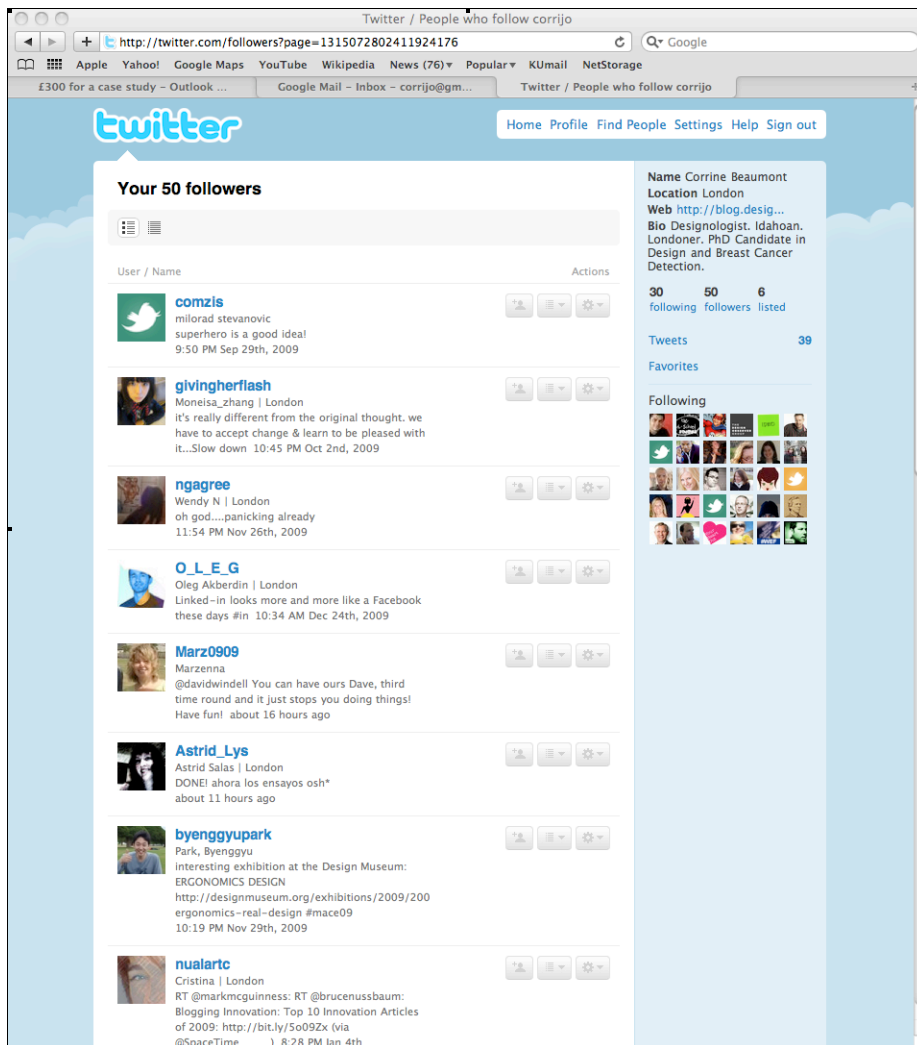


Figure 4. Twitter conversations with MACE students.

Student teams were also offered the opportunity to video conference with the tutor outside of class using Skype. This allowed the students to work on their own schedules and be able to interact with the tutor despite being in different locations. One team wrote on their blog, “On the 5th meeting we had, we manage to get [the tutor] to skype with in the middle part of the meeting. We had a lot of progress after talking with her.” Another team wrote, “Skyping worked well although one member had difficulty with the audio. Quite a civilised way to have meetings though; at home on a Sunday afternoon with a mug of coffee.”

Skype meetings allowed teams to stay on track when schedules didn’t work to be on campus together. The previous year’s cohort did not take advantage of Skype and because of difficulties in meeting together, several businesses failed as a result.

RESULTS

For the tutor, being able to read student reflections, tweet, gather feedback and have documentation of student work in a central, virtual location was key to the module's success. As one student wrote:

"I remember how we were the first couple of weeks, just a bunch of individuals, put together in a room, trying to find our way like rats in a maze. And now? I totally see and relate to each team. They're all distinctive, they're all special in their own way. They've really meshed and formed into a brand. That's pretty amazing."

Part of this meshing was due to offline and online connections that kept the students in contact with the tutor and each other between classes. The online communication resources enhanced the classroom experience.

For students that did not take advantage of the communication tools, they found their teams less cohesive, and struggled to develop a business idea and hand-in assignments on time.

Using the online resources also fulfilled university requirements of keeping a record of students work for the module, as well as responding to QA feedback concerning the need for more communication links with students.

The next cohort of students will be able to read the previous year's blogs and be able to understand how they can learn from other's mistakes and follow other's successes. It will also allow them to network with graduates of the programme.

The online tools are still being used with the MACE students who will be finishing their course in the Autumn of 2010. The public is invited to view the MACE website, browse the blogs and leave comments about student work. Your comments and insight we hope will become part of the course!