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Report

Practical experiences in evaluating Web2 for Adult & Community Education

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AccessACE research circles
Networks of professional development 2009

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1. Introduction

We were asked to introduce web2 components into our teaching and professional development programs at Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre (FSNLC).

These requests came from two areas: Firstly agencies such as ACFE which requested that we develop online content for increased efficiency and wider program deliveries; Secondly community organisations who wanted to try to increase interest in their online activities by using web2 applications.

Unfortunately we did not have any particular guidance in what web2 applications we should try, or what efficiency targets we could aim at, and with a very small IT team we had to concentrate our efforts to achieve results.

What we did receive was a flood of information, advertising hundreds of web2 applications, all claiming to be efficient, useful for productivity, very easy to use, and of course fun.

When we started testing these applications and sharing our knowledge with our co-workers we encountered much resistance to testing web2 applications in the workplace. This was occurring because our co-workers are very overworked already and they saw new applications as a learning burden, not as a promise of new efficiency and fun.

2. Testing web2: What do we want to do?

As we started testing web2 applications we quickly decided that our reluctant co-workers were right. Each new web2 application required many hours to learn, and in many cases the actual increases in efficiency were minimal, but the cost in learning the application, deploying it, training users, and changing work processes to suit the application was considerable.

However we found that our application testing had been organised very unscientifically: We were testing applications simply because some people were suggesting them to us. But in many cases this was just a different form of advertising. Some recommendations, like the ones coming from IT magazines, were often superficial, or sometimes the people proposing the application did not do the same kind of work we did.

So we decided that the first consideration in testing web2 application had to be:

What do we want to do?

We now could filter web2 suggestions through this question, and if the application had no value for our program direction, we did not test it.

We did keep it on a long list of possible applications for the future, but that proved not to be valuable over time, as new web2 applications were developed constantly.

3. Testing web2: Is it worth the effort?

Our process was not smooth. We kept testing web2 applications on the run, in our lunchtime sometimes, and we were very frustrated with the results. Many web2 applications that were recommended to us were simply not useful for any of our work activities, and we abandoned them after spending precious hours on them.

However some web2 applications were worth the effort.

So we had a discussion to evaluate which applications we liked, and we discussed our process of testing web2 applications, why we were happy with some applications and why we were unhappy with others.

We developed a standard way of evaluating web2 applications for use at FSNLC:

We ask: *What do we want to do?*

Then we evaluate the web2 application that we are considering for the task with ten questions.

These questions minimise evaluation time, because if the web2 application does not pass each question, we stop at that point and abandon the application for use at FSNLC.

Questions about the use of the application:

- i) Is this app for providing information [one-to-many] ?
- ii) Is this app for communication [many-to-many] ?
- iii) Is this app for collaboration [working on shared documents] ?

Questions about possible threats from using the application:

- iv) Is it possible to achieve information & communication privacy ?
- v) Is it possible to maintain security for our computers, network and data?
- vi) Will there be continuity [will the app be supported in one year] ?
- vii) Is the company / organisation developing the app reliable, is there a support base ?

Questions about the process of deploying the application in our workplace:

- viii) Is the app easy to use, does it give immediate benefit to the user ?
- ix) Is the app easy to deploy, is it easy to customise, how much training is required ?
- x) Does the app provide organisational value [are the benefits greater than the costs] ?

4. Testing web2: Applications we have tried.

Most of the applications we tested failed our value test. They proved to have just too many privacy holes or they were just too hard to learn for people who were not IT specialists.

This is a table of the applications that we tested systematically, and our results. Some of the applications are not strictly web2 apps however they have web2 components or modules.

There was one question which we have dropped from this table and that is whether we hosted an app on our servers, or whether it was hosted on a company's servers. This has become less important as we have seen that some companies can be reliable and some not regardless of where the app and the associated database is hosted.

The score of 1 means very bad and 9 means very good.

Application / Possible use	Privacy	Security	Continuity Reliability	Easy to use	Much training required ?	Easy to deploy / customise	Total / Org value	We use it in our work ?	Do we teach it ?
Facebook / Communication	1	1	2	6	4	1	15	No	No
Ning / Communication	3	3	3	5	3	3	20	No	No
Joomla! Information	6	6	6	2	1	1	22	No	No
Twitter / Information	1	2	5	4	4	7	23	No	No
Moodle / Collaboration	7	5	6	2	2	2	24	Yes	No
Blogs / Information	2	4	3	5	6	5	25	No	Yes
Wikis / Communication	5	4	3	5	5	5	27	No	No
Wordpress / Information	7	7	7	3	2	2	28	No	Yes
Youtube / Information	1	3	9	4	4	8	29	Yes	Yes
Drupal / Information	8	8	9	2	1	2	30	Yes	Yes
DokuWiki / Information	7	6	4	5	5	4	31	No	Yes
Online class / Collaboration	6	6	3	4	6	6	31	Yes	No
Skype video / Communication	4	3	7	6	7	6	33	No	Yes
Elgg / Communication	8	7	5	6	4	6	36	No	Yes
Pommo / Information	8	8	7	8	6	4	41	No	Yes
Google Apps / Collaboration	8	8	9	6	7	9	47	Yes	Yes

From our table it is clear that we value privacy and security very highly. Another organisation may have different priorities and so evaluate the same applications differently.

The best score for us was achieved by Google apps, and we use them all the time for our work and in class teaching our students.

5. Conclusion

Testing and evaluating web2 applications for our organisation has been valuable on a number of levels. We have become much more aware about the organisation's capacity to incorporate new IT systems, and the actual problems that are involved.

We have a better idea of what web2 apps are around and how they are constructed and the possible advantages and threats that come with them.

We have come to the conclusion that there is a main cost in the introduction of a web2 app in a systematic way in our workplace.

This is the time spent in discussing the app, learning about it, testing it, proposing it to the organisation, deploying it, customising and standardising it, and then training our co-worker in the best use of it. This is really a very significant amount of time, and it is not currently factored in the organisation's allocation of resources.

An app has to have very significant benefits to be worth this amount of time and resources.

This process can't be by-passed because introducing an untested application with little training may have very significant consequences in terms of loss of critical data, or in terms of unintended release of private information that may affect a student, a client or a member of staff, or the whole organisation.

Because we don't have spare staff, or spare time and resources, we found that excessive evaluation of new apps puts a great deal of stress on our IT staff, who are forced to do the evaluation in their spare time, or on the organisation, as other work has to be dropped.

So we have decided to be very strict in our process of evaluation, and we will not spend time on any new app unless there are compelling reasons and obvious benefits in beginning the testing process in our organisation. The fact that an app is popular among our peers or heavily promoted in the IT industry or it is "free!!" is not enough reasons to try to introduce it in our workplace. So we follow our evaluation steps, even if we may be considered conservative or unadventurous for doing it.

During this process we have been able to discuss and decide the kind of help we would like from government or institutions that support us. In order of importance we need:

- More resources, that is an allocation of time and funding specifically for discussing, testing, evaluating and reporting on IT systems and applications.
- Accessible peer support officers who are *experts*, who would be able to discuss applications in the terms we have outlined, including privacy, security and training.
- Training for our IT staff in new industry developments. This is more than just discussions with our peers or conferences and workshops. There is no substitute to having a good teacher when we start a new and difficult subject.
- Joint projects with other organisations. This is different to just sharing stories, experiences or information. A joint project would let us learn about each others' capacity and build a relationship that could continue.

6. Thank you

We have learned a lot during this project.

We would like to thank Delia Bradshaw, Josie Rose and all ACFE and Access-ACE staff for inviting us and encouraging our continued participation and involvement.

We would also like to thank Leanne FitzGerald, Michael Chalk, and Lynne Gibb for always answering our questions so promptly and for their advice and support.

We would like to thank the very nice people from the organisations, companies and groups that we have met through this project, who have shared their experiences with us in various meetings and online. We have learned a lot about different approaches and different levels that exist in our sector, and this has made us more confident in participating in discussions and in sharing the bits that we have learned.

We hope to continue to participate in these types of projects in the future, and we will do our best to share what we learn with our co-workers and our students.

It is starting to look like that computers may not disappear from our workplaces or education centres anytime soon, and this type of project can help all of us to be a little bit more in control of these little machines and their ever-expanding networks, and help us maintain our focus as we deal with constant and ever-expanding technological change.

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