Animation Club ~ Using Informal Social Networks within XStream

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ABSTRACT

There are many challenges facing the assessment teaching and learning of Animation, as this is a subject which combines the application of creativity through digital technology. This is set against the backcloth of large cohorts of students on a number of different courses ranging from Music and New Media to Games Design, with a diversity of needs. These needs include the wish to develop either 2D cell or 3D computer animation using a variety of professional software. The assessment is based around a competition called the 11 second club which has an eleven second audio clip from an old movie as its starting point. The basis for learning is through this initial problem and the production pipeline they then follow, which gives authenticity to the experience. Activities within the pipeline include an online test that points the students at the material and support available with exemplar work as a feature. Then an animatic as an interim assessment point was used, with the final assignment being uploaded to the Universities formal VLE. Due to the popularity of social networks and the lack of activity on formal VLE discussion boards, an informal social network called the "Animation Club" was formed using a NING. This enabled students to upload their work as it progressed and share help and information with each other, they also became co-creators of learning material in this way. Other facilities within the Animation club included RSS feeds to podcasts and the formation of interest groups. The students felt they had some control of this area. This paper presents how both formal and informal learning communities can be used to handle large cohorts with a diversity of abilities and needs and how creativity can still be encouraged through the application of digital technology and Web 2.0 tools.

Keywords: *E-Learning, Blended Learning, Learning communities, Diversity, Creativity*

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the method and techniques used in and the supporting theory in developing this activity for level 2 undergraduates. The main aim was to develop an active blended learning experience that could be described as authentic i.e. almost a simulated work environment. Another aim was to deliver this subject in a more open and creative way i.e. allow the students free reign to develop the type of animation that they were interested in, as long as they met the module learning outcomes and the marking criteria. All of this had to be taught efficiently and provide a good student experience with improved success rates from the previous year. The following chapters describe the challenges and implications of teaching a creative subject effectively and the approach taken in meeting the above aims.

Challenges

There were many challenges in delivering this type of subject area:

- Around 200 students who want to use a variety of tools and techniques in the context of their particular award i.e. 2D digital Cell for Music and New Media students wanting to create an animation to music or alternatively Games Design students wishing to produce 3D digital games characters.
- It had to be 11 seconds long; this was the specification for a competition as well

- Must be emotive, make good use of cinematography and lighting.
- Contain some of the 12 principles of animation i.e. timing, movement in arcs, squash and stretch ie to be able to breathe life into the character.

These learning outcomes could be met in any creative way using any of the above supported software.

Design

The design of the VLE, shown in Figure 1 had to address this diversity and number of students by arranging the learning in a structured way and also investigating how I could get students to interact more with each other. English R (2008) study of formal University VLE's shows that even though students can be members of many discussion groups, unless there is formal assessment then there is very little activity. If successful this activity soon tails off after initial interest. This begs the questions why are formal University VLE's so poor at social collaboration and why are informal on-line communities such as Facebook so successful?

This research indicates that Facebook is much more personable and discussions are much more informal with effective communication, group reinforcement, encouragement and support. This research suggests that the sense of community was very strong. Sas C et al (2009), suggest that Facebook experiences are all about positive emotions, in particular those on connectedness and entertainment.

TEAM TEACHING

Digital animation requires a multi disciplinary approach as this subject area crosses the divide between computer technology and art. This can have many pit falls as outlined in Orr G and Nord M. (2005 who state " the main problem is one of boring or confusing half the class at the same time i.e. one half could be strong in art while the other half strong in technology, it can be costly to have a number of staff with different expertise in different area, rather than one multi disciplined staff.

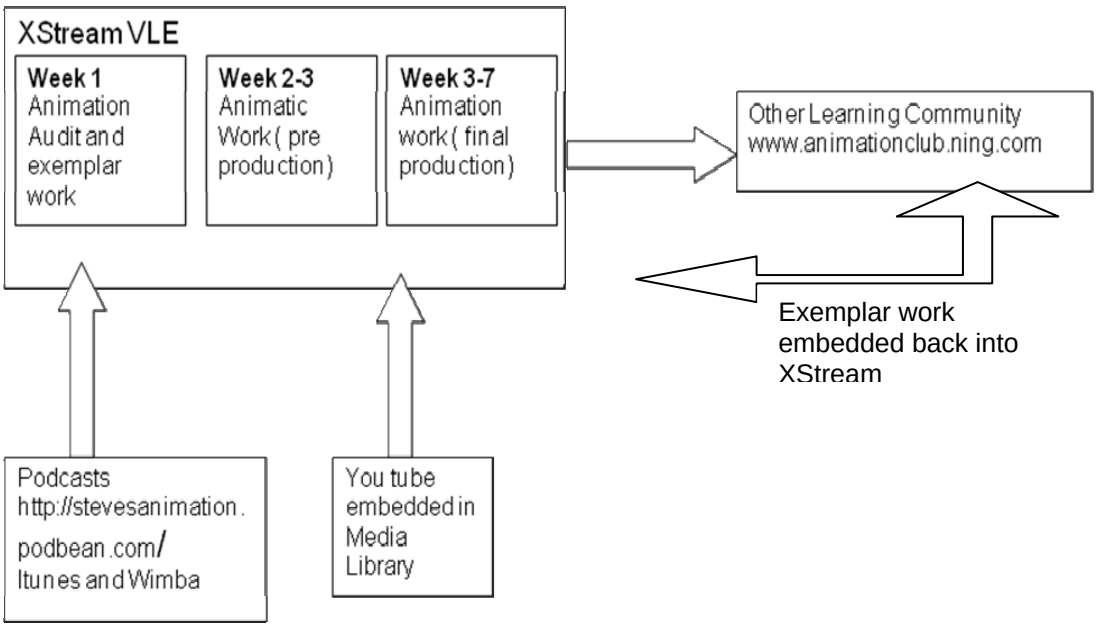

Figure 1: Blended Learning Design.

Other benefits of utilising a rich variety of learning material, was in order to accommodate different learning styles ie Visual, Auditory, Read/ Write and Kinaesthetic (VARK), Fleming N.D. (1995). This research has shown that some students prefer to learn through viewing content or listening to a lecture or reading and writing or doing a practical task. There may be a combination of different styles for each student; however we need to acknowledge that everyone has different learning needs and styles.

What do we mean by authentic learning?

The drive to develop" authentic activities", (Bonk and Graham, 2004), and the use of inspirational exemplar work, (Sadler R, 2002) was one of the main drivers for using this style of teaching and learning community support.

There are a number of features typical to creative industries we need to use in order to give students an authentic learning experience in this area, namely :-

- Being able to appreciate the function of a production pipeline.
- Being able to give and receive critique of their work

The creative industries, whether it be developing a computer game or producing the next Shrek movie use a production pipeline, Geiger K. (2008). One of the main types of pipeline production used within the animation industry is shown in Figure 2.

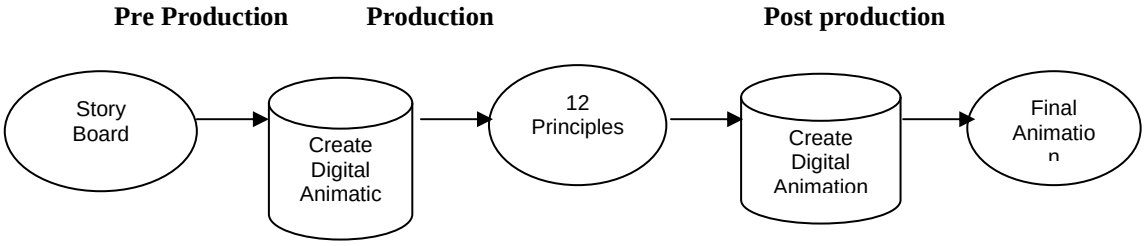

Figure 2: Production pipeline.

The ability to accept and receive critique for an artist is an every day event; however modern day animators can be tied too much into the technology in order to reveal the basic message of their work, McCracken C.(2006).

The Animation Club

The informal learning community" Animation Club" was created using a "Ning" which is an online platform for anyone who wants to create their own social networks. The creator Bianchini G (2005) states that "we've built an online service (or Playground, as we like to call it) for building and using social applications. Social "apps" are web applications that enable people to match, transact, and communicate with other people ".

The benefit of learning communities is that people are becoming more active regarding content production, sharing, and in co-creation of User Generated Content (UGC), Obrist M et al (2008).Other supporting evidence is given by Wenger E (1998) who states " Communities of practice are groups of people who share concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly "

These findings are supported by Kazmer M. (2005) who states that "individuals know how to behave in the online space, and how to expect others to behave ", as they build this relationship they gain support and continuity that is inherent in a community. Other benefits are given by Smyth, K. (2006) who states "Put emphasis on peers learning together (building a learning community)".

Podcasting

The Learning community developed at www.animationclub.ning.com , see appendix 2, had an RSS feed from http://stevesanimation.podbean.com/ ,:

Ormond P (2008) states that "Podcasting enables learning anytime, anywhere " Other benefits include the use of podcasts to replace a talk and then invite students via the VLE to post questions based on the podcasts and then have a lecture to discuss these questions, (Sadler 2008).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The design of the blended learning experience and the utilisation of learning communities outside of the formal Blackboard VLE helped address some of the challenges outlined in chapter 1, namely:

- Addressing a range of diverse needs by providing a rich variety of learning material such as podcasts, screencasts and media library. This also helped to address different learning styles.
- The Week 1 on-line animation audit was found to be very useful in that it helped to :-
    - Give access to previous years exemplar work and to obtain an idea of what is expected and what constitutes a good grade.
    - Familiarise students as to what was required in terms of criteria, type of submission, how many hours work that they had to do and more importantly what the module leader looked like.
    - Other benefits was to track which students had actively engaged with the module through the submission of this on-line test, appropriate action could then be taken.
- The WIP assessment meant that students could receive timely feedback on their ideas and whether they should take these forward to the next stage. Again feedback given on-line and in class.
- The final assessment was the complete animation which could be used to give valuable feedback and a source of exemplar work for the following year. Again many students had already shown this during their activity within class and on-line at the animation club.
- The benefits of shared practice, interest and co-creation through the informal animation club social network.

Other more quantifiable results obtained were:-

- Greater student satisfaction from the module evaluation questionnaire, ie many said they enjoyed the module and thought that it was well organised.
- There was significantly more activity within the Animation Club discussion areas than the more formal Blackboard discussion area.
- Around 1/3 of the students joined the Animation Club, however these were the most enthusiastic, although anyone could view the material without joining.
- Can listen to podcasts and review the material.

Still images of some of the work produced are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

In conclusion, the utilisation of these technologies and the design of this Blended Learning experience, helped to address the problems of diversity. The Animation Club was an outlet for the more enthusiastic students who wanted to showcase their work and communicate with likeminded students. Further research on how students can peer support each other using this approach will be investigated.

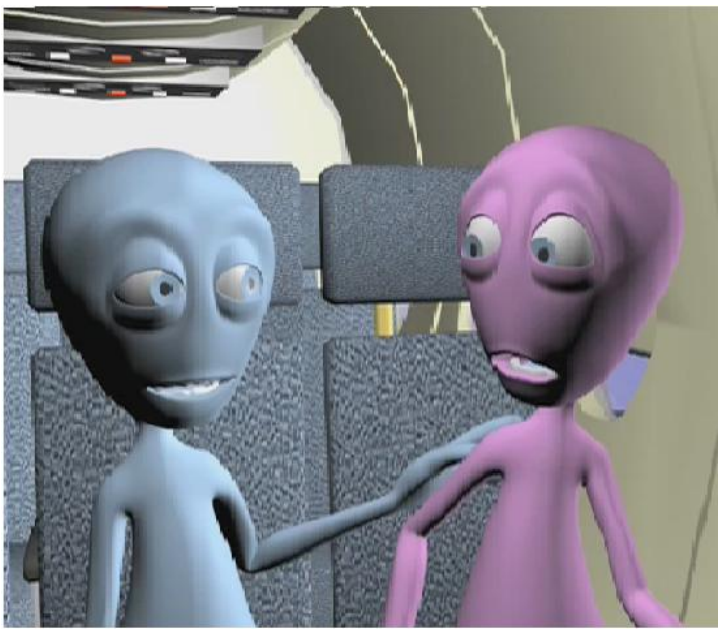

Figure 3: Final 3D animation example.

Figure 4: Final 2D animation example.

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