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Inviting the World into the Online Classroom: Teaching a Gaming in Libraries Course via YouTube

Scott Nicholson

Syracuse University School of Information Studies, 214 Hinds Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244. E-mail: scott@scottnicholson.com

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This paper discusses an online graduate-level course that was taught primarily using videos posted publicly to YouTube and the Internet Archive. Videos were created specifically for this course by the instructor and by library professionals and posted each day for a 30-day period. All videos were posted publicly, and the American Library Association hosted an open discussion forum about each video. Formal enrollment in the course was low, but hundreds of people watched the videos. Post-course surveys indicate that viewers were a mix of librarians and library students along with hobby gamers and members of the gaming industry. This case study demonstrates the impact that a library school course can have on the field when the content is made freely available and distributed through social media networks.

Introduction

The model of the traditional classroom has been challenged. A Webcast discussion between well-known technology pundits, led by Leo Laporte, focused on the point that other service fields have

drastically changed the way they interact with users in the last hundred years, but traditional lecture-based instruction has stayed the same. They challenged the way that students currently interact with information, and encouraged faculty members to explore new ways of delivering content (Laporte, 2009). Video-based social media networks like YouTube are ideal for delivering media content for free to a wide variety of audiences.

During the summer of 2009, I taught an asynchronous online course on my research area, Gaming in Libraries, using YouTube as the primary platform for the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. This course was a graduate one-credit distance course and was made available to a number of library programs through the WISE+ program. The course was taught in partnership with the American Library Association with additional funding for the course provided by the Kauffman Enitiative project. The entire course is still available through http://www.gamesinlibraries.org/course/?page_id=117. This paper presents the structure of the course, data about participation in the course, impact that the course had, and recommendations for others interested in similar ventures.

Related Literature

The concept of providing high-quality content for free is at the baseline of the Open Educational Resources movement. According to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Web site, "Open Educational Resources (OER) are high-quality, openly licensed educational materials that offer an extraordinary opportunity for people everywhere to share, use, and reuse knowledge" (2010, ¶1). In the United States, the Hewlett Foundation has been the primary funder of development of the OER movement (Wiley and Gurrell, 2009). The first reference to the term OER was at a UNESCO conference in 2002, and the concept has continued to grow since that time (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 2007). One of the best-known implementations of the OER model is the Open CourseWare consortium. While MIT is the best known contributor to the Open CourseWare project, with over 1900 available courses (MIT Open CourseWare, 2009), participants include more

than 200 different institutions, each with materials from at least 10 courses made freely available (Open CoursWare Consortium, 2010).

One of the conceptual frameworks behind the funding of the OER movement is shown in Figure 1. This model presents the relationships between the creation of freely available educational content online, the removal of barriers to access of high-quality resources, and the resulting motivation in the recipients of this content to better understand a topic and pursue additional resources. The end result is that access to high-quality materials is provided to a greater number of individuals.

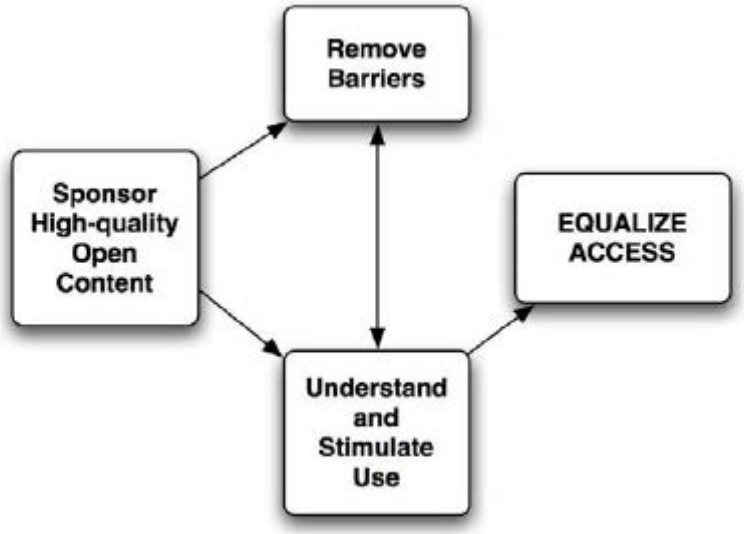

Figure 1: Open Educational Resources Logic Model (from Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007, p. 3)

This model can be applied in the LIS educational context. Traditionally, high-quality library education has either required enrollment in a program or course and the payment of tuition or the attendance at a conference or workshop. The OER model suggests that if the barriers to this content are lowered, more people can engage with the material and will be motivated to explore the content beyond the course. More libraries and library staff will have access to high-quality educational content, which may result in improvement of library services. Improved library services may result in more funding for libraries and additional library positions, which ensures the continued need for LIS programs.

There are three primary arguments made for government support of OER programs: the open nature expands access to a wider body of students, the ease of access promotes ongoing learning, and the OER environment connects formal and informal learning environments (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 2007). All of these apply to the LIS educational space. Much of the content created for LIS education is locked behind closed systems, yet it would greatly benefit both libraries and library staff to have access to this content. Library staff members, in particular, may never matriculate into a graduate program, yet much of the content from online courses would help them improve their library services and encourage an interest in continuing education. If more content is made freely available from library schools to the profession, it would raise the awareness of what a library staff member could learn in an LIS program and thus increase the number of people interested in getting the professional LIS degree. Finally, by creating open environments where current students can interact with working librarians and library staff members, it creates a better learning environment for LIS students and allows LIS faculty to draw from a richer body of student experiences.

The idea of giving away content that library schools typically charge for will, no doubt, be questioned by school administrations. There is a model that can serve both to increase the amount of knowledge available to the profession and to allow the school to benefit from giving away the information. This model is known as the freemium model. Some content is given away for free, but to aquire access to the complete package, the user must pay for the service. These freemiums allow the consumer to determine the value of the content and can serve to bring in many more consumers than if all of the content required payment (Heath, 2006). In LIS education, these benefits might be gained through release of selected portions of courses that are most directly applicable to the working librarian and library staff members. Then, for access to the entire course and to degrees, those interested could take the full course or join the program.

In 2009, YouTube was the fourth most well known Web brand in the United States (Neilsen). With viewers watching hundreds of millions of videos every day, YouTube represents a platform where course content can reach users far beyond the traditional university web sites, blogs, and open-source

course platforms where course content typically lives (YouTube, 2010). YouTube has been recommended as a video library for classroom use (Duffy, 2007). The library program at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies has been using YouTube for several years for marketing and outreach to interested and current students. As the use of YouTube in higher education has grown in the last few years, YouTube has responded by creating YouTube EDU, a service that collects instructional resources from many different institutions and collocates them (YouTube, n.d.). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in an article entitled "YouTube Professors: Scholars as Online Video Stars," reported that many faculty members were finding success and viewers through posting videos on YouTube. Since YouTube has significant market penetration, not only can current students watch their professors, any others wanting to see what someone has to say can watch the videos. As it is easy to share videos with other viewers, some of these videos have taken on a viral quality, exposing many more individuals to concepts that would have traditionally been locked behind a password (Young, 2008). While there is a history of using closed-circuit video streams or Web-based video in an online course environment, neither of these are open access. Another platform for audio and video content educational sharing, iTunesU, was considered and rejected because of barriers to access associated with the iTunes software. Using YouTube as the primary platform for the course lowers many of the barriers traditionally found in video use in online education.

Course Structure

The course was taught through daily 10-20 minute videos during June 2009. The weekday videos consisted of lectures, and the weekend videos were presentations of specialized topics by professionals in the library field. Some universities have put guest speakers and captured lectures up on YouTube and other video sharing sites, but in most cases these are presentations done to an in-person audience that was recorded so others could observe the talks at a later time. One problem with these blended online experiences is that a video viewer may feel like an observer watching the backs of attendees' heads rather than being part of the experience. Rather than capturing video of an in-person course, my goal was to create content for the video viewer where I spoke directly to the camera

with no audience, thus greatly increasing the sense of engagement of the viewer with the course.

These videos were placed on YouTube and the Internet Archive, and new content notifications came through a blog, RSS Feed, iTunes, a YouTube subscription, or e-mail generated through Feedburner. The primary blog for the class and all content is available through http://gamesinlibraries.org/course. The typical YouTube 10-minute restriction was avoided by posting the videos in the Syracuse University space. It took between three and eight hours each day to create the content, edit the video, and go through all of these uploading and distribution steps.

The primary discussion space for the class was hosted by the American Library Association through ALA Connect, which is the social networking space for the ALA. The space was configured so that both ALA members and non-members could join and participate in the discussions. There was a forum created for each of the videos for anyone to ask questions and add comments, and the videos pointed users with questions to the forums. The discussion forums were not heavily used; instead, most people who wanted to talk about the course wrote to me privately.

Students who were enrolled in the class had a few additional activities. They were required to produce one video every week and publish it as a Video Response to one of the lectures; most of these removed following course completion. There was a secondary discussion space for enrolled students in the school's private Learning Management System. In this space, students could ask questions in a closed environment about course content and video creation, discuss assigned readings, and deliver the final project, which was a plan for a gaming program in a specific library.

Course Participation

The number of students enrolled in the class was low, as only six students were enrolled at the start (three from Syracuse, and three from the WISE consortium of library schools). During the first week of the course, three students dropped out, each claiming the course required more work than they had

expected, leaving three who continued with the course. Judging this course by the traditional output-based measure of number of tuition-paying students, this course was not successful.

That said, the goals of this course went beyond attracting tuition-paying students. One goal was to make content about this new topic broadly available. Given the controversial nature of games in libraries, there are a number of risks the library takes on in starting these programs. By making this coursework freely available, many more library staff members will be aware of these risks and know how to avoid them through careful development of gaming programs.

One way of tracking involvement in the course is to use the number of views per video reported by YouTube and the Internet Archive, but as these are open platforms are not controlled internally, these reported measures are imperfect. In many ways, these data points are similar to counting the number of people in a classroom at the start of class. They do not track how many people stopped watching the video, nor do they track if the same individual is viewing each course; however, neither does a head count of students in a classroom. Another flaw is that if the same individual watches a video several times, this will be counted as separate views. Therefore, these numbers reported will most likely be higher than the actual number of viewers that saw the entire video.
As of March 2010, there were 2300 views of the first video and 469 views of the final video of the class. The number of views varied considerably throughout the month of June, with the average number of views being 504, but the standard deviation was 358. The number of views for each video in the course is shown in Chart 1 below. Each bar represents one video of the class, with the first video being on the left and the final one on the right.

[Insert Chart 1 Here]

One interesting pattern is that the guest speakers drew fewer views than the primary lectures of the course. This was surprising, as the content provided by the guest speakers came from library staff in

the field with considerable experience. One possibility is that the guest speakers appeared on weekends; the number of views of the one guest speaker during the week was closer to the number of views of other videos during the week. Some of the comments in the survey said that the video and audio quality of the guests was notably worse, since they were filmed in the field and not in the studio setting.

At the end of June 2009, many of the videos had around 100 views; therefore, about 100 people were keeping up with the class during the time the videos were released. As time has passed, instructors have assigned specific videos for viewing with a class and individual students or library staff members have cited or linked to specific videos. While the view counts continue to rise overall, these videos that are linked to or cited attract many more views. Therefore, while the formal enrollment in the course was low, the number of library students and staff engaged in course materials is higher than other typical library school course offerings.

The course also drew a variety of interest from outside the library field: students from different degree programs, gamers, and professionals from the gaming industry all took the course. Given my background as a professional game designer and my Web-based video series, Board Games with Scott, I was able to market this course through channels to reach out to gamers and professionals from the gaming industry. In addition, ABC on Campus put together a segment about the course, which ran both on ABC on Campus and on MTV University.

During the last video of the course, viewers were asked to fill out a short survey. Out of the 469 people who saw the final video, 64 filled out the survey. Of those who took the survey, about 20% were library school students, and 45% were librarians and library staff, which means that at least 35% of those who viewed the course were not related to libraries. In fact, 10% of respondents were students in non-library programs and 8% were professionals in the gaming industry. About half of survey responders defined themselves as hobby gamers.

An open-ended question on the survey asked viewers which parts of the course were most valuable. These answers were cleaned and coded, and the results are reported in Table 1. It was interesting that the item found valuable by the most respondents was the conceptual framework used to organize all types of games in a way that allows librarians to map the library missions and goals to specific games. A typical complaint about traditional education is that it is too theoretical and not applied to reality; in this case, the framework was used as the basis for organization of a significant portion of the course.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Impact and Conclusions

The output-based measures of participation demonstrate that while there were not many students willing to pay tuition for the course, there were hundreds of individuals willing to engage with the course material. Very few elective LIS courses would draw this level of interest in a single offering from not only libraries and library students, but those not associated with libraries.

To determine the outcomes of this course, the end-of-course survey also asked a question about the impact the course had on the individual's behavior. About 25% of respondents are already involved with library gaming programs and said this course will help them improve those programs. Another 27% of respondents are going to work toward starting a gaming program in their libraries. A critical outcome was that 33% of survey respondents answered that "I am not at a library, but am going to contact a library and volunteer my time." Therefore, this course not only had an impact upon the libraries via the students and staff who participated, but also through empowering hobby gamers and those in the gaming industry to step forward and get involved in their local libraries!

This result maps to the Open Educational Resources model presented earlier. By making high-quality education resources openly available and lowering the barricades to access by making the videos available on YouTube, participants became engaged with course content and inspired to go further in the exploration of the topic. As more non-librarians seek out libraries to work with, the number of

libraries that become aware of the content rises, thus increasing the access to the content to a greater number of librarians and library staff. By using the freemium model, an LIS program can give away some content to benefit the profession, but then can use that also as a marketing tool to bring more students into the program.

If I were to teach a course like this again, there are some changes I would make. I would not run the course on weekends in order to provide a break for me and for the students; I hypothesize the views of the guest speakers would have been higher if they had been presented during the week. I would also use the freemium model, where enough of the course is freely available to provide some information and attract interest, but some of the course is available only to students enrolled in the course. This might help to raise enrollment to the point where the model was financially viable without grant funding. I would not require students to publicly post content to YouTube; while students were able to do so anonymously, I learned that some students did not enroll in the course because of this requirement. Finally, I would consider doing a course in conjunction with a faculty member from another department in order to double the potential interest, enrollment, and provide more connections between library science and other fields.

To conclude, from a tuition-based economic perspective, this course was a failure; a school working toward this type of public course must consider other outcomes to determine success. It is important that additional measurements be taken to provide evidence for these outcomes. This course has served as a marketing tool both for the school and for the profession. It has also helped libraries around the world start gaming programs that fall in line with library goals, which brings in new patrons and increases interest in other library services. Anecdotally speaking, after the course a number of gamers wrote me personal notes indicating that they were now wanting to become librarians. Several high school students have inquired as to what undergraduate degree would best prepare them for the library degree. When library schools open their content to the world, it serves to not only benefit librarians and library staff, but also to attract those passionate about a topic to the library career.

Inviting the world into the online classroom is an activity that, while not directly generating tuition, can market the profession to new groups of people and can result in more students coming to the institution. It also serves to help librarians, library staff, and library volunteers who may not have the funds for continuing education to learn about new developments in the field, which can result in improved library services and continued library funding. Opening up the classroom to the social networks through authentic course content, while risky due to the public nature of these networks, can be a great marketing tool for the school and for the profession and have significant impact on libraries.

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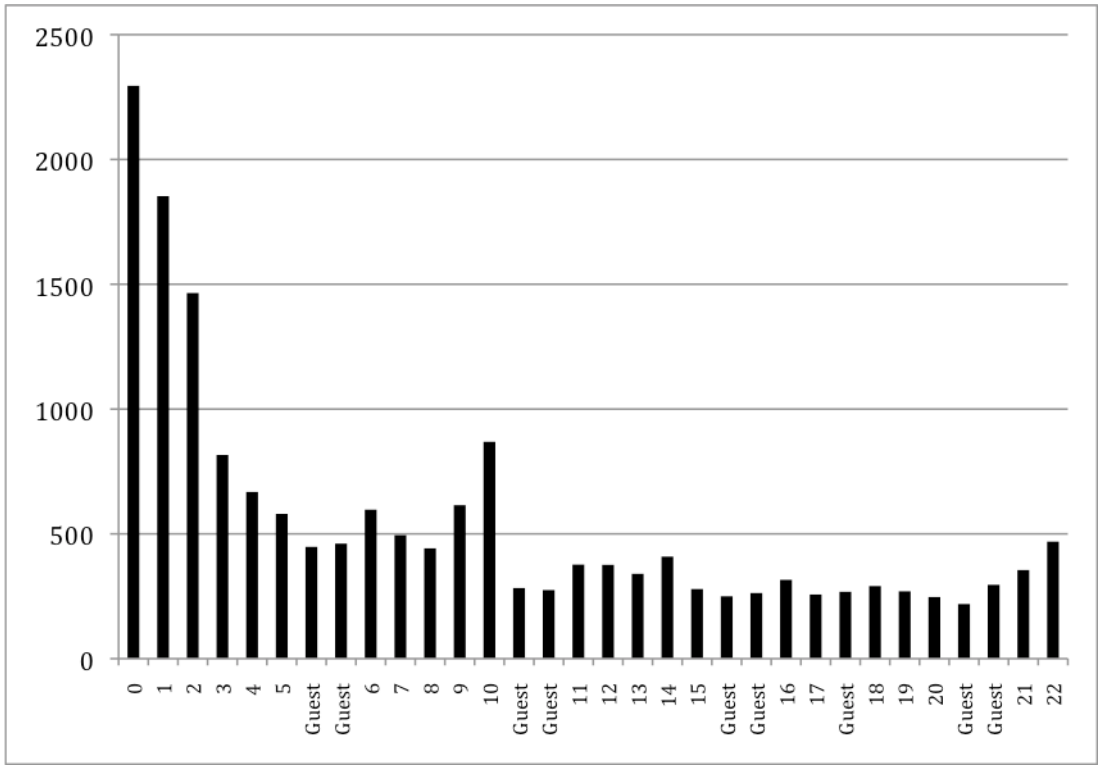

Chart 1. Number of views of each video in the course.

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Topic	Percentage of Respondents Naming this Topic
Conceptual Framework	36%
The Role of Gaming in Libraries	22%
Practical Advice for Running Gaming Programs	16%
Guest Speakers	12%
Collection Development	10%
Social Aspects of Gaming	9%
Definitions of Gaming	9%

Table 1. Results of Open-Ended Question about Most Valuable Components