

# Cyber campus Security/Partnerships



Dr Dick Rayne of Birkbeck College is using Google Docs to distribute lab data: 'Speed and shareability are the key,' says Rayne

## Teach the teachers

Web-based applications are developing fast. Yet while students tend to be tech-savvy, their lecturers may need some encouragement

**Martin Whittaker**

Educational ICT is undergoing something of a revolution, thanks to a new generation of accessible online tools.

The explosion of web applications such as blogging, social networking sites, and online packages allowing collaborative work on documents is unstoppable. And demand is led by students, with universities struggling to keep up, says Lawrie Phipps, programme manager with the Joint Information Services Committee (Jisc), the body promoting use of ICT in universities and colleges.

"It's a learning curve," he says. "Students are using these tools, which is prompting lecturers to get involved."

Such tools are often easy to master, because they have been designed for public use. But they require a new kind of ICT literacy, says Phipps.

"When I left university, lecturers were telling me I had to know Excel and Word because these are transferable skills. Now, one of the key transferable skills is judging which tool suits which purpose. If I want to publish something and share it with somebody, do I use a wiki, or Google Docs?"

Some universities are embracing the new web technology. The University of Leeds, for example, has launched its own answer to YouTube - LUTube - which allows staff and students to share video securely online. It also has its own blogging system

for research students, and runs courses for PhD students in using web tools.

Some staff are also experimenting with online tools in teaching and learning. "Technology has transformed what we do in quite remarkable ways, particularly since the mid-90s," says Dr Terry Wassall, principal teaching fellow in sociology at the University of Leeds. "It's a very, very different world now."

But he says lecturers have not always kept up. "Long after Powerpoint was available, staff were still using acetates and overhead projectors."

Wassall may be approaching retirement, but he is no Luddite. A champion of the latest web 2.0 technology and social networking in learning, he is focusing on personal learning or research environments, exploiting freely available web tools. He points out that while universities invest millions in virtual learning environments (VLEs), students are only with the university for a few short years - and they are familiar with online applications like Facebook and instant messaging before they arrive.

"If you think about the lifelong learning agenda and labour market projections for the next 15-20 years, people will need to carry their learning environment well beyond the confines of their university," he says. He has used social networking service Ning to set up online communities for staff and students.

In another example, a group of Leeds politics students formed an editorial board to publish their own online journal on critical theory. "At the moment we're doing this within our institutional VLE," says Wassall. "But if we didn't have the VLE, we could have done this on the web."

Meanwhile, the Bloomsbury group of University of London colleges is running the APT-Stairs project, examining

how online collaborative tools can support teaching, learning, research and administration.

At Birkbeck college, head of biology Dr Dick Rayne is using Google Docs spreadsheets with mature students to collect and share data from lab experiments. Working in groups, students use a wireless-connected mini-computer to enter their data onto a spreadsheet, which can then be shared online with the whole class. Before, they used to put their numbers down on paper and hand them in to Rayne, who would then compile a spreadsheet and distribute it on the college's VLE.

"Speed and shareability are the key," says Rayne. "It's easier to share it instantly with Google Docs. And it's easy to use, if you've seen Excel before."

There is training available to help staff keep pace. Jisc, for example, has set up a new arm - Jisc Services Management Company - covering a range of services, including training in digital media, e-learning and web technologies.

"It's quite clear that students are coming in with all these kinds of skills," says its chairman, Professor Derek Law. "The real problem is with academic staff, and I don't mean that unkindly. But it's the old thing - by definition students change every three years, whereas staff change every 30, and so re-skilling the staff is really quite difficult. And you get the 10% to 15% who are into everything, which is great, but the challenge is how to get the great mass in the middle to shift into what they see as ephemeral trends."

### Weblinks

APT-Stairs project: [bloomsbury.ac.uk/ble](http://bloomsbury.ac.uk/ble)  
LUTube: [lutube.leeds.ac.uk/](http://lutube.leeds.ac.uk/)  
Jisc technology training: [jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/services/netskills.aspx](http://jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/services/netskills.aspx)