

A platform for partnership: a technology review of the Padlet sharing platform

Tom Lowe, Owen Humphrey
The University of Winchester

Introduction

Since technology permeates every aspect of contemporary life, just navigating Higher Education (HE) in the 21st century makes you, to an extent, 'tech savvy'. However, when looking to technology to assist student/staff partnerships, colleagues need to take their practice beyond Microsoft Office, social media and Photoshop.

During a student/staff partnership research project¹ – part of the wider Winchester Student Fellows Scheme (Sims *et al.*, 2014) – which aimed to address the question '*Which types of student engagement lead to a 'Sense of Belonging', and to what extent in students at the University of Winchester?*', a student and a higher education professional (the 'project team') used the online platform Padlet as their selected medium for collaboration, in order to replicate such of Healy's principles of partnership as inclusivity, reciprocity, trust and community (Healy *et al.*, 2014).

Padlet has been popular amongst lecturers in HE as a platform to make debates accessible to a whole class or to facilitate a seminar or an open call for questions to a large audience. This free product is often used in small sections of teaching sessions within lectures to stimulate conversation, highlight differing opinions and engage students. However, this paper intends to explore and evaluate Padlet's other function: it will offer a review of the platform for student/staff partnership projects, to inform future use and, hopefully, to move towards the partnership attributes identified by Healy *et al.* Learning within collaborative online spaces is increasingly popular in education (Wheeler, 2009b, p. xiii); Bound and Prosser famously state that "learning does not occur in isolation, peers influence it" (Bound and Prosser, 2002, p. 239), something certainly more possible now than ever before.

The use of technology in pedagogy is growing rapidly, with many claims made for its increasingly significant impact upon processes and outcomes in learning and teaching (*op.cit.*, p. 237). Technology itself will provide new opportunities for learning: students will be able to access information, classes and courses from many sources and in a distributed way (Reddy, Goodman, 2001, p.17). Padlet is consistent with the literature as an example of a platform which offers a dramatic growth in capacity for the knowledge process in daily life: a mobile learning environment in your pocket gives you some degree of flexibility so that you can conceivably learn while you are on the move (Reddy and Goodman, 2001, p.4). Simon states that we must use technology when, and only when, we can see how it will enable us to do our educational job better (Simon, 2001, p. 63), a topic which will be explored in this paper.

Padlet summary

Padlet is a piece of 'social software' similar to blogs (collaborative content sharing and editing), social bookmarks, discussion forums (Cole, 2009, p. 141) and social network pages. Since Padlet can be used to share knowledge, as 'user generated content' (Wheeler,

¹ Findings available. (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017)

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2009a, p. 5), the researchers were keen to evaluate this, a form of knowledge repository similar to a 'wiki' (Wheeler, *ibid.*), that classic feature of Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL). The word 'wiki' was coined by Ward Cunningham and comes from the Hawaiian phrase 'wiki-wiki', which translates as 'hurry up' (*ibid.*); it is associated with fast information – information which does not involve months of waiting for publication. Wikis are viewed as wonderful 'idea dumps' – or repositories – for later use (Wheeler, 2009, p. 4), enabling participants to work collaboratively to generate, mix, edit and synthesise subject-specific knowledge within a shared and openly-accessible digital space (Wheeler, 2009a). Though many wikis in the literature are written forums (Bonk, 2004), the team has discovered that Padlet is a visual form of wiki, as it follows the same principles, useful for creating a mutual platform for student/staff partnership research.

Owen *et al.* say that 'The Wisdom Crowd' is greater than the individual and that the individuals in the group gain ownership through such group activities (Owen *et al.*, 2006). Structures like Padlet for online group work have been referred to as 'Architecture of Participating' (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 268). New content can be created and used in partnership with others (Cole, 2009, p. 141), with Padlet's provision of a "system that allows one or more people to build up a corpus of knowledge in a set of interlinked web pages, using a process of creating and editing" (Franklin and Van Harmelen, 2007, p. 5). Using Padlet in much the same way as Dropbox, the researchers established a forum for the eight-month partnership project, enabling stakeholders both to access information visually and to create an information board, quite in accordance with the app-marketing claim on Padlet's website, that it is a platform which is '*Perfecting the art of collaboration*' (Padlet, 2016). Furthermore, in addition to its merits as a platform for shared group activities, it is of individual benefit to visual learners/planners. The project team also wished to investigate whether Padlet falls under Tonkin's third category of wiki/TEL use: viz. as a collaborative writing tool, for use by a group for such joint research activities as group projects, essays or presentations (Tonkin, 2005).

Research findings – interviews with participants

An external Research Officer conducted an evaluation survey of the project: the Student Fellow and staff partners jointly reflected on the survey's questions to determine whether they had indeed found Padlet to be a forum well-suited to collaboration. The research exercise had been a form of cooperative learning situated within the social constructivist paradigm, with two individuals working as a team – with individual and joint accountability for conceptual understandings (Cole, 2009, p. 142) – both on the project and, arguably, a problem.

Q1. What do you think are the challenges you found to group work in Higher Education online?

The staff partner referred to issues concerning group expectations and the practicalities of getting people physically together in a room when some members were not always on campus. He confirmed that, though the project team had heard of students and staff using TEL platforms for collaboration, getting both stakeholders to understand what was expected of individual group members presented challenge, as, consequently, did achieving any kind of parity in participants' effort and input, since there was no pressure to contribute when they were not in a room together. The Student Fellow identified and outlined the inherent

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dichotomy of many online platforms: tools manage either working in dynamic forums or working with static data and Padlet caters predominately for the latter.

Q2. What were the features that made you want to use Padlet on your research project?

The staff partner had been attracted to the visual, '*pin-board*' feature of Padlet. Both partners agreed that Padlet was a good medium for sharing ideas, sharing resources and for planning for collaboration seamlessly and in a mutual space.

Q3. What did you think were the positive features of using something like Padlet for group work?

Both partners considered that Padlet was easy for sharing things '*seamlessly*' and also that it was a good way of '*collecting stuff together*'. The staff partner also valued the ability to add things continuously without the need to press 'save', making the user experience engaging and even '*enjoyable*'.

Q4. What do you think were the limitations for using Padlet for group work?

Both partners commented upon Padlet's document (Word, Excel) editing limitations when the project arrived at the point of dissemination. The Student Fellow used the term '*dynamic data*' when the team wished to edit documents for the purpose of writing up the research as an article / report in a shared creative space. Both partners acknowledged that they had moved to Google Docs, as a co-creation document service is available there; such a facility is lacking on Padlet, from which documents would have had to be downloaded and edited before being uploaded again. Both partners considered having to do this a '*time-consuming process*'.

Q5. What other online platforms have you used for group work instead of Padlet and why?

Both partners spoke about moving away from Padlet to use Google Docs; the staff partner discussed the benefits of using Outlook to '*transfer big documents such as spreadsheets to each other*'. The Student Fellow further elaborated on the benefits of Google Docs in allowing each group member to see another's edits, write comments and make changes easily.

Q6. Do you feel that the alternative platforms you've mentioned matched the positive features of Padlet?

The staff partner was very positive about the features of Padlet and remarked: '*None of the other platforms offer the visual and engaging aspects for group work*'. He also said that '*Dropbox is great for sharing large amounts of content and Outlook has its benefits for just quickly pinging across documents*' but he considered that Padlet still held a unique place as a 'picture board' which he regarded as '*really cool and great for a visual learner to just bring ideas together in that kind of scruffy, starting-the-research-off time.*' The Student Fellow thought the platforms discussed were each '*completely different, with both positives and negatives*' and regarded all of them as '*good*' because you could access them wherever you were.

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Q7. What improvements do you think Padlet needs in order for it to be used for class-based group projects?

Both the partners were very keen to see Padlet incorporate:

- the '*dynamic data*' / '*in-browser-editing*' abilities of Google Docs to allow for editing of Word documents within the platform without downloading;
- a notification service of changes like Outlook's;
- '*folder*' functions for filing items like Dropbox or Windows documents.

The Student Fellow actually stated that Padlet would be better than Google Docs if its designers embraced these changes, as the visual, '*static*', side of Padlet is not matched by Google Docs.

Conclusion

This review aimed to investigate and evaluate Padlet as a platform for collaboration in HE. As learning and collaboration – and, indeed, life in general! – increasingly move online, the team was interested to look at an alternative platform to the mainstream Google Docs; to investigate an alternative collaborative platform and app for student/staff partnership. From its experience as outlined above, the team recommends that Padlet *is* a worthy application for partnerships to use at the '*idea-gathering*' stage of a project. This brief evaluation has suggested that Padlet is also useful for sharing ideas and '*bombarding*' resources into a shared space, much like a wiki, as outlined in the literature review. Also, for visual learners, Padlet offers a '*pin board*' style of platform to review content and ideas, whereas a list on a Word document or a set of files on Dropbox cannot compete with Padlet's visual and colourful presentation. However, as outlined by the evaluation interviews, Padlet does not offer the space for co-writing '*dynamic*' resources, which led the team to move to Google Docs when writing up the research project. Despite this limitation, the partners valued Padlet as the best available medium for bringing ideas together at the early stages of a project.

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