Plymouth College of Art: Syncing student blogs with RSS feeds using mobile applications/iPad devices

Summary

Martial Bugliolo has successfully used RSS (really simple syndication) feeds to synchronise an iPad so that it aggregates all his students' digital sketchbooks. This has enabled him to employ a much more streamlined approach to delivering teaching and learning support for his students. The iPad and iPhone applications have really made it possible for him to move his teaching practice into a truly innovative and refreshing digital era.

About Plymouth College of Art

As one of four further and higher education specialist art and design colleges in the country, the Plymouth College of Art provides a role locally, regionally, nationally and internationally in providing excellence in art and design education and training. The College is part of the National Arts Learning Network, with collaborative links to other specialist art and design higher education institutions.

The challenge

Martial wanted to see how he could use mobile technologies and modern devices like iPads to help enable his students to progress more fluidly with their studies and provide a platform that could enhance formative and summative assessment. Martial also wanted to utilise something that would give him a better way to monitor student progress.

Martial looked into the possibilities of using RSS feeds with Google Reader (an RSS reader) and then, when the iPhone/iPad came into the market, Martial discovered many new applications and RSS readers that were available to use with these devices. It was at this point that Martial realised that he would be able to sync his students' digital sketchbooks through an iPad and be able to almost instantly see when his students had submitted new work.

One of the main challenges for Martial was not setting up the blogs or RSS feeds, but the fact that the software is often updated, which can lead to changes in the way it functions. This means that Martial would need to retrain staff when such updates took place, which could be time-consuming.

A further challenge was to make transferable content, which could be used several times and in many different ways through different platforms.
The activity

Martial initially developed a series of video tutorials, which he embedded in the College's Moodle VLE (virtual learning environment), with the aim of reinforcing learning. This was quite popular with the students, so Martial transferred the videos onto iPod devices to try and provide more alternatives for his students.

Due to the success of the videos and tutorials on Moodle, he decided to investigate new devices to streamline delivery of content even further. Martial had an idea of getting the students to use blogs for the work they submitted to him on his iPad. He decided to test the idea by running a pilot with a group of students. This proved so successful that the College quickly embraced his ideas and provided iPads to a select group of staff.

After this period Martial was able to set up every student with their own blog through the Blogger website, which each student was expected to use to submit any coursework. Martial started off using Google Reader to access all the students’ blogs, but found greater functionality through using the Acrylic reader application for the iPad.

![An example screen shot of a student's blog on the Blogger website](image)

Once his students have submitted a blog post with their work, or as part of a project related to a module, Martial can monitor their activity in real time through his iPad. All Martial needs to do is copy the website address, which contains the RSS feed for the student’s blog, and add the address to a new feed within the Acrylic reader application. The program then immediately syncs to the student's blog and all Martial needs to do is use the intuitive ‘drag and drop’ features, which he controls with his fingers directly on the screen to navigate and access the student's work.

“It's like having their sketchbook on your table all the time.” - Martial Bugliolo, Course Leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts
The iPad being used with the Acrylic RSS reader application, showing the student blogs

Martial can also focus on individual students and communicate with them through their blog, as well as add comments to their work.

“Every time the student posts something on their blog you will receive an alert.” - Martial Bugliolo, Course Leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts

Within the lectures, Martial has been complementing this project by using LAN School, which is software that can be used to monitor every student screen in the class on one screen. This also enables Martial to set questions to the whole class, allowing him to check the students’ understanding of a particular topic. LAN School then produces a useful graph so that Martial can visually digest whether he needs to adapt or change his teaching approach during the lecture.
An example screen shot of LanSchool, showing all the students’ screens

The outcomes

Through the digital sketchbooks, Martial has undoubtedly provided the students with better access to resources and their work, as well as enhancing his own teaching practice. The digital sketchbooks have improved many areas as a whole:

- Peer assessment;
- Self-assessment;
- Formative assessment;
- Summative assessment;
- Streamlining the delivery of coursework and access to resources;
- Assessors realise real-time and cost savings;
- Students have an e-portfolio of work they can access after they leave College; and
- The students’ work does not need to be printed out.

One advantage of a digital sketchbook over a more traditional physical sketchbook is that the content produced can be viewed online quickly and effectively.
Pulse is another iPad application, which Martial uses to aggregate his students' blogs

Students have found the blogs a versatile and easy-to-use system for submitting their artwork. They also like the fact that they can access and use the blogs through their mobile devices, as well as instantly access their work and resources. This will also benefit them in the future when they leave the College because they will still be able to use their blogs and full portfolio of work. Employers will be able to access their work and easily see the content; it also shows that the students are using the latest online-based technologies. This is an important factor in keeping up with modern technology and shows that they have studied at a college that was active in exploring new ideas and concepts.

The College did have a minor issue with some students forgetting their username to log in to the Blogger website to access their blogs. So in order to resolve this issue Martial decided to create any future student blogs using the students' Plymouth College of Art username; the same login ID that they would need to login to the College network to access computer services, including Moodle.

LAN School has proved popular for use within the classroom and means that Martial can easily adapt his lessons accordingly as he teaches. The software is powerful enough to allow Martial to control the students' computers if required. This has really cut down students browsing social networking websites and helped to focus their studies.

“You can adjust your teaching according to their understanding.” - Martial Bugliolo - Course leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts

**The impact**

Ultimately, Martial has employed a more blended learning approach to help his students, which is providing them with additional e-learning support. This suits their learning needs, as some students work better individually as opposed to working in groups.

Developing the digital sketchbooks through blogs has provided the students with a platform they can access and use through their own mobile devices.

“Being able to enable the students to use their mobile phones is a great benefit, as posts are being submitted all the time.” - Martial Bugliolo - Course leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts
Through his iPad, Martial can see instantly what is going on in his classes at any time of the day, and no paper is printed out at all, it is all done online. Easy access to students' work is a real benefit for the examining board Edexcel, as it also means Edexcel no longer need to travel to the College and look through a mass of paper-based evidence. In fact, the online sketchbooks show the whole production of the coursework, including Martial's comments and advice.

Another important factor is the fact that Martial can easily see if a student is struggling with a particular topic or has fallen behind. This allows him to provide additional support for that student.

“The iPad is the perfect tool to enable me to keep track of student progress through the RSS feeds and the blogs.” - Martial Bugliolo - Course leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts

The students are now more involved in their courses than before, and even students who have been struggling have been able to overcome their problems and excel.

“Comparing the same courses to last year, I can really see the difference, and there is a significant increase in the amount of work that the students do.” - Martial Bugliolo - Course leader for Diploma in Interactive Media & Game Arts

**Useful links**

- [Plymouth College of Art](#)
- [LanSchool](#)
- [Pulse](#)
- [Blogger](#)

**Disclaimer**

*Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes.*