Online presence for learning and employability
Students’ use of profiles in social networking environments

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Background

This project concerns users’ profiles in online networking environments. The profile is an area where a member can share information about themselves and add photographs. The profile forms a central role in many social networking environments, such as LinkedIn and Facebook.

Profiles enable participants to reveal their interests and personality, and learn about each other. In the world of work, profiles allow people to communicate their skills and experience to employers worldwide.

But in a learning context, how effective are profiles for representing students to each other, and building a sense of community? These questions motivate this research.

Aims

The aims of the project are:

- to investigate how user profiles contribute to online identity and community - in relation to the world of learning and the world of work
- to investigate how students use the profile facility in educational online environments
- to support students in developing their public online presence via their user profiles.

Activities

The project takes place within the new Open University module My Digital Life. Using three of the tutor groups, it investigates students’ use of profiles in Moodle forums and other social networking environments. Data is gathered at two points in the module, via observations, online surveys and online focus groups.

Analysis of this data will shed light on:

- how students’ use (or do not use) profiles
- students’ perceptions of the value of profiles
- Whether use and perceptions change during the module.