# Who needs a VLE?

## Background

> "Studying is more of a team sport than I realised. I really miss …not being able to talk stuff through down the pub." *student blog post in first few weeks of course.*

- University of Bradford MEd Training and Development degree (distance learning)
- The course:
  - 2 year part-time professional course for Trainers & HRD staff
- The technology:
  - Ning - members only social network for each cohort of students.
  - Facilities include: discussion forums, blogs, personal page, images, video, audio, ability to embed any type of web2.0 widget & RSS feeds
  - Widgets used: Google Calendar, box, LibraryThing, slideshare

## What are the benefits of using social software?

- Recent learning theory has recognised the social nature of learning (Leslie & Landon, 2008) and the importance of discussion online (Laurillard, 2001) .
- Key benefits we have observed:
  - Greater ownership of online environment.
  - More motivated to work and share online.
  - Builds stronger personal relations between students
  - Better quality and quantity of group discussion.
  - Learning processes are more explicit and obvious, so can pick up problems earlier.
  - Evidence of greater reflection through blogs.
  - Better assessment results???



Member photos — Recent activity
Delicious social bookmarks widget — Forum
Podcasts — Aggregated student blogs
Reading material widget

## Findings: ownership & control

- Greater sense of ownership of the space.
- This is their space.

> "I think that those of us in the cohort who use ning regularly have already normed and to have someone stranger (a new tutor) suddenly pitch-forked in is very disconcerting." *Student*

- They want everyone to engage fully.

> "I really would like to interact with more people, particularly now as I'm struggling to make meaning of what we're doing and would like to hear others' points of view to get me along." *Student*

Student A

- Images seem to be so crucial for building social bonds.

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In pilot group (n=12) - 5 users changed their personal images. The ones most likely to change their image were also the ones most likely to contribute.

## Motivation

- "…recognition of the centrality of a user's motivation to the success of systems aligns very well with the general turn to 'learner-centricity'" Leslie & Landon (2008:5)
- **More** motivated,
- Produced **more** discussions,
- Better **quality** discussions (for example, more theory was used).

Some numbers: From just 12 participants

Discussions – avg. 28 per week

Blogs – avg. 3.7 per week

Longest post: 2,530 word blog post that took 2 ½ hours to write!

Site use: 21 visits/ day (i.e. each person visits more than once a day),

12 page views/ person/ day.

All of this was completely voluntary, none of it was assessed.

## Findings: Safety & privacy

- Students valued a safe, sheltered environment to share, through discussion and experiment with tools such as blogs.

> "I'm concerned about others I don't know having access to my blogs and thoughts …what if …I've said something indiscreet in a blog? Remember, I'm leading a major change programme and my staff don't know some of the stuff I've shared with cohort colleagues." *Student*

Leslie and Landon (2008) suggest that we should teach our students to learn in the open and not in private environments. *However:*
- How do we get students started who are fearful of that public nature of open blogs.
- How willing will they be to write and reflect openly given:
  - They may want to discuss privileged information.
  - They may want to criticise organisations / individuals without fear of reprisal.
  - Revealing personal thoughts to an environment where anyone, employers included, can access them.

## Watching learning as it unfolds

- Reflective blogging in a safe environment has made explicit some of the learning processes that have been taking place.

- Peers as critical friend audience (Costa & Kallick 1993)

- Better & faster learning??



Assessment marks
Social network group, 2006 group, 2005 group
mean, median
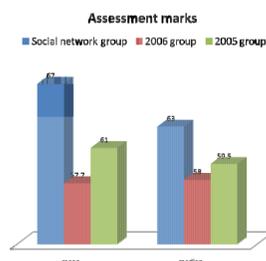
## A social network works just fine…the student view.

> "…told you this gets more addictive than 'e' bay. My students haven't had so many fag and brew breaks"

> "I anticipate not being able to use ning for part of each week…there are implications: 1) withdrawal symptoms for me… I'll just have to come back with a vengeance at the weekend!"

> "I have no idea why but I am strangely inspired to bare my incredibly shallow soul through this medium."

> "…express my gratitude to you for being there for me and for caring about me, I just want to say: THANK YOU! to all of you and to tell you that it's a real privilege for me to be in this course with you!"

International student who has never met any of the other students.

> "Unleash the Ningmaniacs…How fantastic was all that Ning activity on Monday?"

**References:**

Costa, A L & Kallick, B (1993) *"Through the Lens of a Critical Friend"*, Educational Leadership, 51-2 pp. 49-51.

Laurillard, D. (2001), *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies*, RoutledgeFalmer, London.

Leslie, S. and Landon, B. (2008), *Social Software for Learning: What is it and why use it?* Report for the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, OBHE, London