



**STUDENT COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: WHAT  
VIRTUAL MODELS CAN ENGAGE AND ADDRESS THE  
NEEDS OF A DIVERSE STUDENT ENVIRONMENT.**

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## DIVERSITY AND PEER NETWORKS

- personal networks affect student attainment (Eggens, van der Werf et al. 2007)
- students from lower income families have less peer support to draw on. (Harvey, Drew et al. 2006)
- Farmer et al., (2008)...
  - older students perceive peer support as less supportive
  - similar findings found for 1<sup>st</sup> generation students
  - international students experienced difficulty integrating into the university community.



# NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY STUDENT COHORT

- 26,500 students
- 25% of whom are over the age of 25,
- 23% of the cohort on part-time programmes
- 13.1% of students being classed as international (the majority of whom originate from Asia).



## PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

- N = 451
- majority of respondents (80%) were in the 19-24 age group
- 20% of the respondents were non-UK students
- 11% declared a disability the majority of whom cited Dyslexia.
- 50% were 1<sup>st</sup> generation students (40% first of sibling group).
- responses were received from students...
  - in all of Northumbria's nine academic schools
  - across all levels of study (i.e. foundation level to postgraduate). Full-time and Part-Time.



## SOME BASICS ...INTERNET ACCESS, SKILLS

- Place of Residence...
  - a 1/3 continued to live with their own family.
  - 10% of students resided in University accommodation.
  - Majority (49%) in private rental accommodation.
- Access to the internet.
  - 82% full private access.
  - 12% saying they had frequent shared access.
- Users for...
  - 79% internet users for 5 years or more (80% of the 19-24 age group).
  - 68% email accounts for 5 years or more.
- Skills...
  - 84% self taught.
  - 10% get help from friends.
  - 5% of the sample who had sought help from the University's helpline.



## MODELS FOR PEER BASED INTERACTIONS

- “established” technologies e.g. virtual learning environments (VLEs)
- “populist” technologies e.g. Social networking as illustrated by Facebook
- “emerging” technologies e.g. Virtual Worlds illustrated by Second Life.



# MODEL 1: VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE)

## POSITIVES...

- provides students opportunities to engage in social interactions with their peers alongside course related conversations (Burge 1994; Sole and Lindquist 2001)
- Potential to break down some social barriers found in the classroom (Gibbs 1999; Arbaugh 2000)
- two-thirds of respondents saying they access the VLE on a daily basis, further 30% stating they access on a weekly basis. This was the cases across all demographic factors

*I agree that I could not successfully complete a module without the VLE site. I use VLE to allow me to interact with other students and lecturers via the discussion boards and it often helps when I am struggling with work, especially when I know others are also finding it difficult.*



# MODEL 1: VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VLE)

## DOWNSIDE...

- VLEs exist “in a ‘blended’ relationship with human activities”. (Ellaway, Dewhurst et al. 2004)
- commonest model in undergraduate teaching is that of ‘transmission’ (MacLaren 2004)
- students unenthusiastic about VLEs citing them as an unimaginative repository for materials (Conole and De Laat 2006)

*The VLE ...depends on the lecturer and how they use it. It also depends on the student cohort. For example, one of my lecturers started a discussion board this semester which I thought was a really good idea and a good way to stimulate interest but no one bothered to post anything there! The VLE is mainly used as a repository...it really does depend so much on the lecturer and student cohort.*

- nature of institutional control is likely to lead to difficulties in facilitating or engaging with social communities of informal and impromptu learning (O'Hear 2006).





## MODEL 2: SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS)

### POSITIVES...

- potential for creating social learning environments that offer 'social communities of practice' (Phipps 2007; Cain 2008; Ryberg and Christiansen 2008)
- access to social networking sites is a day to day occurrence (Bausch and Han 2006).
- When considering what drew students to such sites interviewees noted '*they take the work out of meeting people' whilst giving you the benefit you desire*'. Tufekci (2008)
- Northumbria: over three quarters of the respondents noting that it is accessed on a daily basis, 10% more than those accessing the VLE daily.



# SNS = FACEBOOK?

- social networking engagement is culturally dependent.  
(Boyd and Ellison 2007)
  - MySpace, Twitter ...**North America**
  - Bebo, Hi5, MySpace, Tagged, XING, and Skyrock...**Europe**
  - Orkut and Hi5 ...South and Central **America**
  - Friendster, Orkut, Xiaonei and Cyworld ....**Asia.**



# NORTHUMBRIA SNS USAGE

SNS	Use Daily	Use Weekly	Occasion-ally	Rarely	Know it but Don't Use	Never heard of it
<b>Facebook</b>	<b>76.2%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>
Bebo	3.8%	3.1%	5.5%	11.6%	60.0%	16.1%
MySpace	5.0%	5.5%	9.5%	22.5%	50.0%	7.6%
Xanga	0.5%	0.2%	1.2%	1.0%	28.5%	68.6%
Friendster	0.7%	1.2%	1.0%	2.9%	31.0%	63.2%
Hi 5	0.7%	1.2%	2.6%	6.0%	36.0%	53.5%
Tagged	0.5%	1.4%	1.7%	5.5%	32.2%	58.7%
Xing	0.2%	0.2%	0.5%	1.0%	17.1%	80.9%
Skyrock	0.2%	0.2%	0.5%	1.7%	15.5%	81.8%
<b>Orkut</b>	<b>2.4%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>0.2%</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>16.1%</b>	<b>79.3%</b>
Xiaonel	0.7%	1.2%	0.2%	0.7%	14.0%	83.1%
Cyworld	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.7%	15.6%	83.1%
Faceparty	0.7%	0.2%	1.2%	4.6%	38.7%	54.5%
Friends Reunited	0.2%	0.7%	1.2%	9.4%	57.7%	30.8%
<b>Twitter</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>47.2%</b>	<b>45.3%</b>



## FACEBOOK...

- Students reported that they specifically joined *Facebook pre-registration as a means of making new friends at university*
- Students thought *Facebook was used most* importantly for social reasons sometimes used informally for learning purposes. (Madge et al 2009)



# MODEL 2: SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS)

## DOWNSIDERS...

- Struggle to see how used in learning ...free expression without worrying what “professors” might think. (Monteith and Smith 2001; Lipka 2007; JISC 2008)
- Lipka (2007) additionally warns that students may also expect special privileges in the name of being a Facebook “friend”
- *“potential damage to an institution’s image.” and “potential negative consequences for individual students”* e.g. US media cases of sexual assault, stalking (Kolek and Saunders 2008)
- to offset, Kolek and Saunders (2008) recommend that institutions at the very least *“should develop clear policies and procedures for the use of Facebook and other social networking sites in (the name of) official institutional business”*



## MODEL 3: VIRTUAL WORLDS

### POSITIVES...

- Second Life creators claim that such spaces offer a community based environment that mirrors reality (Kirriemuir 2008)
- *“ that Second Life is not simply the latest online fad, but part of a continuum of instructional technology tools that corresponds to twentieth and twenty-first century developments in educational theory.”* Cheal (2007)
- *“ there are not going to be the usual discrimination issues of the face-to-face environment...the student and the teacher are on the same level.”* (Salmon, G. as quoted in Shepard 2008)
- (Gartner.Inc. 2007) predicts that by 2011, 78% of internet users will have a “second life”.



## MODEL 3: VIRTUAL WORLDS

### Downsides...

- greater learning curve required to operate at a basic level. (Wetsch 2008); strong scaffolding and support will be required. (Salmon 2009) .
- The vast choice of communities deters casual use (Warburton, 2009). Navigation, codes of etiquette, stigmatisation of a newbie etc can lead to an isolating experience (Boostrom 2008).
- staff skills were the greater challenge in incorporating Virtual World technologies into learning (Browne, Hewitt et al. 2008)
- Academic as Second Life moderators, designers are crucial in ensuring student engagement and success. (Edirisingha, Salmon et al. 2009)



## MODEL 3: VIRTUAL WORLDS

### Downsides...

- (Warburton 2009) recognises that although the Second Life Avatar characters do have first life profiles they are limited and as such do not provide the level of social discovery that SNS like Facebook can provide...
- At Northumbria ...
  - Only 12 of the 451 respondents indicated they used the Second Life Virtual World.
  - 1/3 have heard of it but do not use...
  - 2/3 of the sample said they hadn't even heard of the application .





## CONCLUSION

- Virtual Model likely to work....access and skills in place for vast majority of students
- Virtual Learning Environment
  - Regularly used by students.
  - Can be used for collaboration.
  - Viewed as too much under staff control.
- Social Networking
  - Heavily used by all students.
  - No apparent cultural difference in use but.. Age can be a factor.
  - “student” social territory...will HE need to control?
- Virtual Worlds
  - Ideally no staff student barrier so more “learning” potential.
  - Larger learning curve.
  - Very little student engagement or knowledge of application..

