



Is Web 2.0 the problem for VLEs?

This month's Executive Soapbox is written by David Black, CEO, Autology World Limited.

Last month *The Assignment Report* pointed out that according to Ofsted, 'use of VLEs across schools and colleges has been slow to take off' and concluded that the use of VLEs to enhance learning was 'not widespread'.

This has led some to question whether the VLE, in its current form, is a sufficient and effective means of achieving the government's aim to personalise learning.

There is no doubt that VLEs provide an excellent tool for *organising* learning by means of curriculum mapping, student tracking, electronic communication, internet linking etc.: in effect – a digital filing cabinet. However, this is a supply-side approach to learning with the emphasis on teaching and information delivery; whereas in a Web 2.0 enabled world, learning is much more demand driven and the requirement is to *bring* resources to the learner personalised to his or her perceived need.

This is the real challenge: to customise learning as opposed to standardising teaching. However VLEs are not pedagogically neutral in their support of teaching and learning and their interdependent architecture tends to standardise, rather than customise, learning. This is reinforced by the need for teachers to select and upload resources which will, inevitably, because of the time and effort required, tend to be limited and assignment specific: in effect, electronic handouts which encourage passive learning – new technology, old practice. The danger is that the VLE ends up as little more than a repository for old and rarely used resources.

Web 2.0 approaches are changing all this as they change the way learners interact with technology and one another.

Although the definition of Web 2.0 still remains open to debate, it is generally understood to refer to a collection of web-based services that harness network economies to build collaborative systems based on user input. This means that content is becoming user focused, dynamic and collaborative. Learners can now generate their own taxonomies; blogs and wikis are becoming new learning communities and users are producing their own 'learning toolkits' including YouTube, Bebo and Facebook. These networks are radical experiments in trust and collaboration and represent a chance to improve and share knowledge, expertise and interests: they have become enormously popular. Subsequently, if learning is to be personalised, this is the world that needs to be acknowledged as we are forced towards a more constructivist view of learning where knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment.

However, these new applications are not without their problems and limitations and they require a corresponding technology which integrates them into an effective learning environment. They require a meaning-based approach to information processing in order to enhance the learner's experience and grant the teacher and the school greater control over information management. As with any tools, they will work well only when properly managed and applied appropriately, but will fail when used out of context.

Managing the technology is part of the problem schools are experiencing with implementing VLEs, since a considerable amount of time is required to create them.

Limited non-contact time and the pressure of day-to-day tasks means there is little time left to provide replicas of work that has already taken place. There needs to be a recognition that VLEs will require complementary technologies if they are to win the assent of the staff who are needed to make them work. There should be no need for them to be content driven, since it is now possible to bring, or even 'push', resources to students in real time and without the need for manual tagging. Such functionality is a key part of Web 2.0 technology and can help build student communities and promote collaborative learning since it forms a conceptual understanding of the student user as he or she interacts with information.

More importantly, such technologies do not require a change of behaviour on the part of staff or students. VLEs are labour intensive and, to a degree, adopt a point solution approach that forces the user to adapt their behaviour to the technology, whereas the use of 'implicit querying' ensures that students stay on task with minimal behavioural change. In other words they could work in a Word document and have resources pushed to them, conceptually matched to the task in hand. There are indications that schools are beginning to look at these next generation technologies; Autology, for instance, is attracting significant interest from the sector.

Ultimately we are forced to acknowledge that the ability of VLEs to affect learning is limited and that they sit uncomfortably alongside the new technologies that permit learners to shape the information environment in which they work. Students will need to re-engage with information creation and processing so that they become active participants in the learning process rather than passive consumers. However, they will need to leverage the power of the 'meaning-based' technologies if they are to form the conceptual and contextual understandings from the sea of information currently available and growing exponentially. It is more vital than ever that today's students are strong swimmers.

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