I'M MELTING! I'M MELTING!
WEB 2.0 AND THE DEATH OF THE VLE

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A new generation of Internet tools and services, the so called 'Web 2.0' applications, have rapidly grown to dominate the web, so much so that Time elected 'you' their personality of the year in 2006 in respect of the millions of contributions to sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Blogger, Flickr and so on. Educational use of these technologies, in particular wikis and blogs, is gradually entering the mainstream, although students are doing this themselves to a much greater extent through elective systems such as Facebook. As a counterpoint to the rise of Web 2.0 there are significant institutional concerns over security, validity, ownership and access of these third-party systems and content, for instance some institutions refuse to acknowledge Wikipedia references whilst others have blocked instant messaging or YouTube.

Whereas 'traditional' virtual learning environments or learning management systems are intrinsically representative of the institution's interests and pre-emptive decisions, the growth of Web 2.0 suggests that there are very significant issues affecting institutional identity and power. The majority of off-the-shelf VLEs offer centrally managed, restrictively normalised and tightly unified platforms that mostly support (and enforce) management and administrative processes. This corporate view is – superficially, at least - antithetical to the Web 2.0 generation of applications which emphasise self- or collaboratively published, richly editable, completely customisable and, critically, self-administered content and services.

Reflecting on the ways individuals, their professions and their institutions are being challenged by new ways of working this paper describes the introduction of Web 2.0 applications to support delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate healthcare education and research at the University of Edinburgh, the effects this has had on existing VLE systems and the impact made upon the student's learning environment and the institution by tools that significantly shift the balance of control towards the individual user.

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