

## Podcast script – Why Create a Social Network and Why Use of Ning

This short podcast will provide an overview of why we decided to create a social network and why we decided to use ning.

I have long used social forums and tools for interacting with people ever since I engaged with the internet at University. This started off by using simple newsgroups to meet likeminded people interested in similar things to me. As the internet grew and got more sophisticated I started to use bulletin boards as the use of things like newsgroups declined.

Whilst pregnant I found an online community which enabled me to manage a significant life transition (becoming a mother) very effectively. I found a supportive community who were able to answer any questions I had, allowed me to develop friendships and supported me. I wanted to somehow replicate this amazing support network for new students when they arrived at University and offer them the same opportunities to see that everyone else was feeling the same as them, that no one had all the answers and that they could make friends easily.

Our first attempts to establish an online community were relatively limited. In 2007 we installed Moodle and created a series of discussion forums for students to post queries and for other students and staff to support them. Students were able to self register on the Moodle site. However in order to see what posts had been made they needed to be logged in with an account. Even though this activity was fairly straightforward it appeared to have put a lot of people off and the engagement with the discussion forums was limited.

Reflecting on this, and also aware that with the explosion in the use social networking tools like MySpace and Facebook other tools were available, we identified ning as a potentially suitable tool. We felt that using a much more prominent tool like Facebook was not something we were comfortable with as:

- I don't trust facebook (this is a personal thing!)
- Facebook has become increasingly unstable with posts going missing, being duplicated, the tool just generally being unreliable
- Ning has much more flexibility in terms of being able to create an identity for a group rather than being tied in with the FaceBook format.
- it's easier to upload and share documents in ning than FaceBook
- it's easier and more flexible to import 3rd party widgets into ning than FaceBook, and with FaceBook you generally have to have had a FaceBook app developed for this to happen. With ning you don't
- We had seen some issues emerge with limited moderation on facebook groups in 2007
- Some older students didn't feel comfortable using facebook as they saw that as the space their children engaged with. They wanted something for University and not trying to replicate what their children did.
- FaceBook is my personal social networking space and I like to keep it separate from my 'work' ones
- We can use google analytics more easily with a different tool like ning and this has helped us to see who is using the site and when

The ning space was initially supported by a colleague in our teaching quality enhancement group. Ruth created the initial links on the site and imported some of the widgets. We also used a student over the summer to upload lots of the events into the space. The site is now managed by the central University web team. It has nearly 2000 members as of November 2009 and is still growing. We are very pleased with how ning as a tool works. The only changes we have made are to pay to remove adverts from the site. This costs approximately \$20 per month. The wink video we have created shows what the sites looks like and how we have customised it.