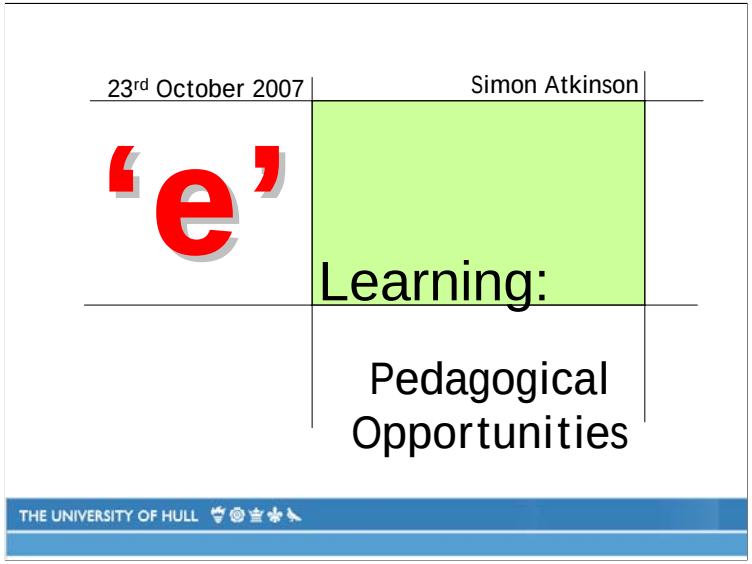

Simon Atkinson is currently Director of the Learning & Teaching Support Unit at the University of Hull. He was until August 2007 the Head of the Centre for Learning Development, and Head of eLearning. He is an educational developer with specialist interests in the future of tertiary education and strategic planning.

Prior to joining the University of Hull, Simon was part of the Academic Professional Development Programme of the Institute for Educational Technology (Open University-UK) and the Centre for Continuing Education at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Simon has also worked at Exeter University and Oxford University

His consulting role is focussed primarily around capacity building for flexible, distance and on-line delivery of tertiary education. In addition to providing tailored workshops and professional development programmes for teaching and teaching support staff he also supports organisations focussed on preparing and developing to meet future needs. Simon provides Foresight planning or 'Futures Thinking' development work for organisations to anticipate future environments and plan sensibly on the assumption that learning in the future will be different.

Simon is an MA Western European Studies (Exeter University) and holds a teaching qualification in the form of the Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education (Open University). His teaching responsibilities are in education and digital literacy, and social policy. His research interests are in changing notions of identity and digital literacies.

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I believe that every senior University committee should contain at least one 'grumpy old man', one cynic, whose job it is to question the assumptions of existing practice with the same enthusiasm that he (or she) uses to pour doubt on 'innovation'. When necessary it is my privilege to play the 'grumpy old man'.

As an educational developer I am lucky enough to work with many academics who want to do things better. They come and ask for help, advice and guidance on how to make assessment work better for their students, how they can engage students in an otherwise difficult subject. They are still the minority. The majority want to do well, they want to succeed and they care about their students. Just not enough to take risks. If they were taught sitting in a racked lecture theatre and they 'succeeded', by virtue of now standing before a class themselves, then this must be an 'acceptable way to teach'. It rarely is.

Sometimes a member of staff will say to me, "I'll be innovative with some stuff, but this is just dry, and they have to know it, so we get through it as swiftly as possible". I believe there is a Swedish saying, "There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing", and I would suggest that there is no such thing as a boring subject, only boring teaching.

Today I want to talk about e-learning pedagogy. I want to ask if there is such a thing. Tomorrow in the workshops I will share some evidence from good practices surveys which, I suggest, show that there is very little good practice and that we measure the wrong things. Then in the second half of tomorrows workshop I will share an example of 'pedagogy e-enabled'

Technology is different…

Remember the Pedagogic Opportunities…

'Overhead Projector Learning'
'Photocopier Learning'
'Whiteboard Learning'

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

At the same time that the world of business became obsessed with 'e-commerce' and the dot-com boom, so education became fascinated with e-learning. There were predictions of holographic education and totally immersive worlds by 2010, and the prospect of new Mega-Universities opening at the rate of one a week. The difficulty with all of the predictions is that the underlying business model did not change, and that institutional cultures have not adapted. With the exception of some large 'Open' institutions such as the UK Open University, UNED of Spain, FernUniversitat in Germany and the Open Universiteit in the Nederlands, 'distance' is a minor part of most European institutions provision.

E-learning in the context of distance means something quite different from e-learning in proximity.

Teaching practices changed with the introduction of new technology. When the Overhead projector arrived people could write notes on to clear transparencies once and use them again and again. A reusable learning resource. And one less likely to be kept as up to date as the chalk board. With the photocopier students could be given handouts, worksheets and last years lecture notes (!) The whiteboard is now interactive. And so is some of the lecturing.

Why did we have such high hopes for e-learning?

Pedagogic Opportunities of 'e'…

What does 'e' mean to them…

Institutions
Staff
Learners

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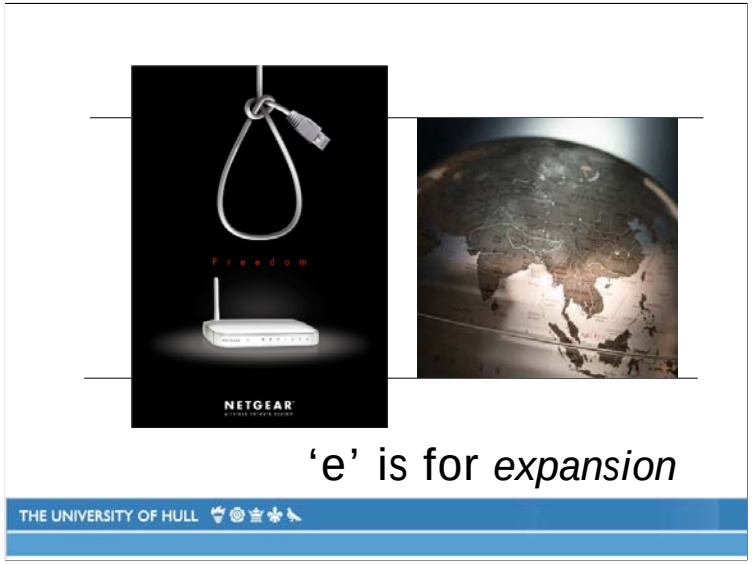
There is not one sensible definition of 'e-learning'. Agreement on a meaningful definition is usually achieved by qualification and exemption. Yet we make policy, assign resources and fund strategies to say that we will 'do' e-learning' and we want to do it well.

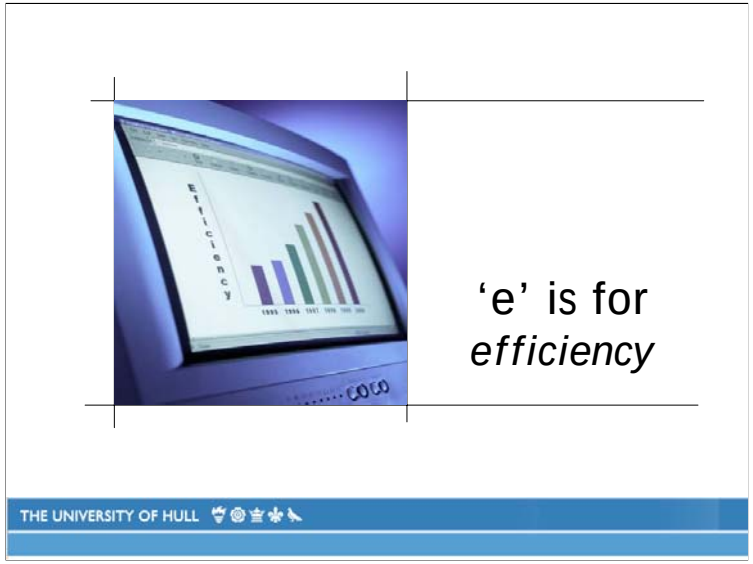
I would suggest that there is real value in agreeing first of all what the 'e' in eLearning represents. Perhaps a recognition of the audiences for this term will help us a little in identifying the pedagogic opportunities. Have you spotted the 'grumpy old man' in the room yet?



Institutions are wary of competition. In the UK we have national newspapers with league tables compiled from an incomprehensible set of matrices as well as a National Student Survey, and an International Student Barometer. We see student recruitment rise and fall in response to ‘market forces’ and we are wary of regional, national and international competitors.

In this context it is hardly surprising that senior managers see eLearning as an opportunity for expansion. Courses can be delivered overseas, to distance learners or in distance support for other forms of ‘borderless education’. The patterns of delivery are numerous, but e-learning offers scale and reach. Many are persuaded that once the initial costs are met, that the profits will follow, that opening up learning to more individuals can only be a good thing.

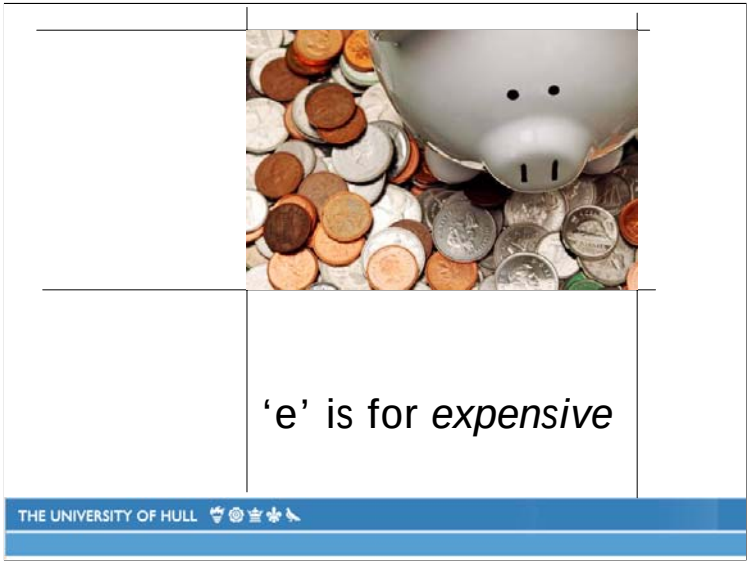
Australian universities have been particularly effective in parts of Africa, delivering courses through Franchise partners or wholly online. E-Learning initiatives in many cases have laid the groundwork for a physical presence to follow. Expansion has been about globalisation and internationalisation, as well as about eLearning.



Management in institutions have also seen opportunities for ‘efficiency’. Very often this has meant satisfying a desire for ‘quality assurance’ that too often see conformity and uniformity as a necessary precursor to innovation. So many embraced the early Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) as a means to ‘standardise’ support for all modules, or all course, across an institution. So developed sophisticated back-end systems to populate these environments with management data, students records and assessment data.

Efficiency of course does not necessarily mean effective. The Virtual in VLE became the ‘Managed’ Learning Environment. The e-systems approach has dominated some institutions with information managers, rather than teaching staff, taking control and ownership of the ‘learning environment’. Large surveys and bench-marking activities, of which I will talk more tomorrow, very often point to this obsession with ‘controlling technology’.

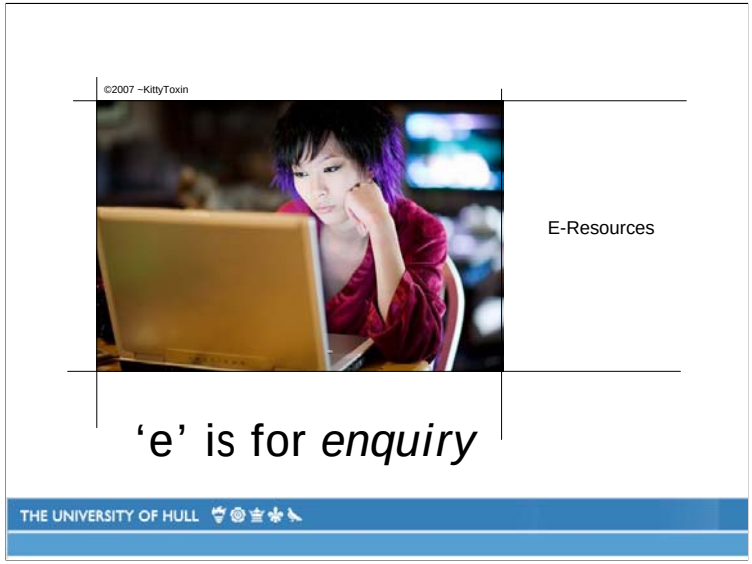
I believe this is a crucial point, although not one I will labour here, that in western universities in particular we have an obsessive belief in technology as power, as liberating, and we very often allow ourselves to be driven by technological systems, their implementation and implementers rather than by the original challenge we sought to deal with.



There is remarkably little data on the cost of ‘eLearning’ and I confess the data there is I don’t generally find credible. During 2006 my institution, along with some 40 others in the UK, took part in JISC sponsored Phase One of an eLearning benchmarking activity. Using a number of different benchmarking tools (which I will touch on tomorrow) we asked questions of ourselves and then shared, pooled, the results.

For the most part it seems we, as institutions, could not give a reliable or meaningful account of what eLearning cost us as an institution. We could not account for the proportions of staff time that we included, the fraction of this technician or that library staff member. Indeed what we discovered was that we did not really know how much ANY of our teaching activity really costed. We simply do not record expenditure in a way which would make the answer to that question credible.

Interestingly, one of the comments often made by eLearning developers and support staff is that to ‘teach properly online costs as much if not more…’. There is perhaps a desire to avoid management thinking of e-learning as a ‘cheap’ option. What I have always found interesting about these statements is that they assume firstly we understand what ‘properly’ means, and what ‘e-learning’ means. Are talking about ‘online’ learning or eLearning, since the terms are used often interchangeably, but also the idea that the two learning modes, face to face and online, are comparable.

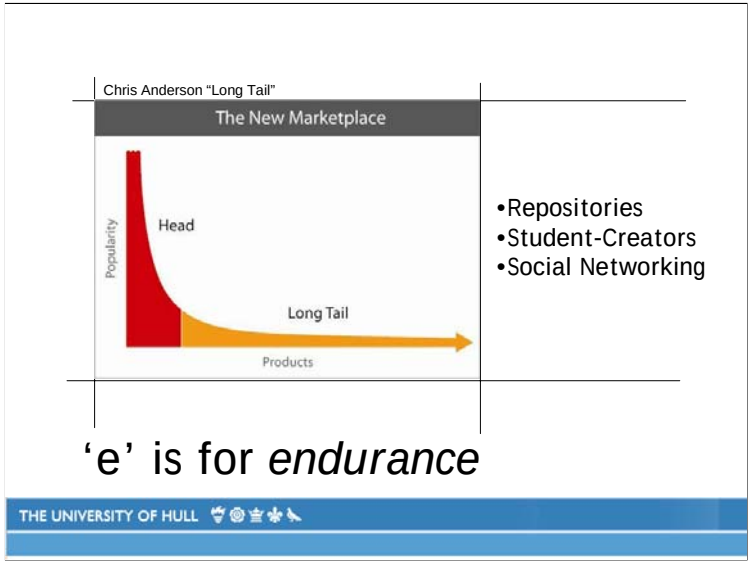


Let us turn to more positive thoughts. Moving away from the ‘e’s that obsess our institutions we can consider what makes eLearning special for staff.

Driven often by their research agenda, staff quickly become aware of the Internet as a means of gathering, identifying, producing and sharing vast amounts of data. For many the web has become a new, a slightly daunting, library. In just 20 years the world-wide web has become a resource like none before it and the patterns of engagement with it, the skills required to exploit it, and the opportunities it represents have all taken academia by storm.

As staff become aware of the internet in particular as an environment of enquiry, they begin to see its pedagogic uses. Rather than deny students the opportunity to engage with the web for fear that Wikipedia will feature to prominently in the bibliography of an essay or that plagiarism will run amuck, staff can instead set specific research tasks, ask for data to be verified and tri-angulated and, in some cases, exploit the student body as an effective research team to support their own work to mutual benefit.

To consider e-learning as enquiry-based-learning is a positive step.



The engagement with the web in particular as a resource raises some interesting issues in learning for what is considered relevant, topical and contemporary. The views on a subject expressed in the blog of an academic in New Zealand must now somehow be 'measured' against the established UK journal for instance. Who is to decide what insight is credible and well informed, what skills are required?

The JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) in the UK, which has some of the same functions as SRCE, has spent considerable time and effort exploring the role, or perhaps one should say 'prospect', of digital repositories in higher education. The debate has gone on for several years as to how academic work should be published, stored, archived, meta-tagged, shared, protected and retrieved.

It is ironic of course that in the last few years such 'repositories' for student-authored creative and expressive works has grown substantially. More on that in a moment.

What is clear is that content can be more easily shared and distributed in an e-Learning context than was perhaps the case previously. Content can be distributed instantly to hundreds or thousands of users as appropriate. It is also, conversely, possible to address more effectively the audience of one, providing tailored material. These forms of content also, subject to storage and preservation conditions, have a very long shelf life. If managed well they too can be versioned, adapted and reused.

This has given rise to Chris Anderson's notion of the 'Long Tail', in which the proportion of material (creative or otherwise) might be said to be as large as that which is currently 'popular'. In an academic context one might simply say that there is a ready supply of non current material in a given discipline.

The important issue for me is that because we are here talking about digital content, it is can be easy to find and repurpose. The pedagogic opportunities of asking learners to do just that are enormous.

Tomorrow I am going to talk more about a project that I am directly involved in to create 'assisted take-up' materials for a JISC funded digitisation project. The Independent Television News Archive, which includes early newsreels and Reuters material for example, is being partially digitised and made available free of charge to the UK tertiary community. The particular resource is called NewsFilm Online. We are creating exemplars and scenarios for the pedagogic exploitation of this e-resource. This is e-Learning driven by the pedagogy not by the context. Our models are to apply to a range of resources, not just newsfilm archives.

Used well there is no question that the experience of learning through technology can enhance the experience of the learner. Whether it is as simple as having access to lecture notes from a missed session available through the VLE, or having the opportunity to take part in a discussion online with otherwise distance participants, students can come to rely on these tools to form part of their experience. But now the benchmark is higher. It is not enough to simply have an online discussion or distribute support material electronically. We know we can do that and the students know we can do that (in my institution they shout loudly when a lecturer falls short of such expectations), now it is a question of whether the eLearning is adding something.

I noticed on the Carnet website that you have translated some of the work of Mark Prensky on Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants and so I will not spend too much time on this issue, suffice it to say that some students, certainly the younger 18-20 year old school leavers have an expectation that University will use technology to enhance their experience, they expect it to be 'School Plus' .

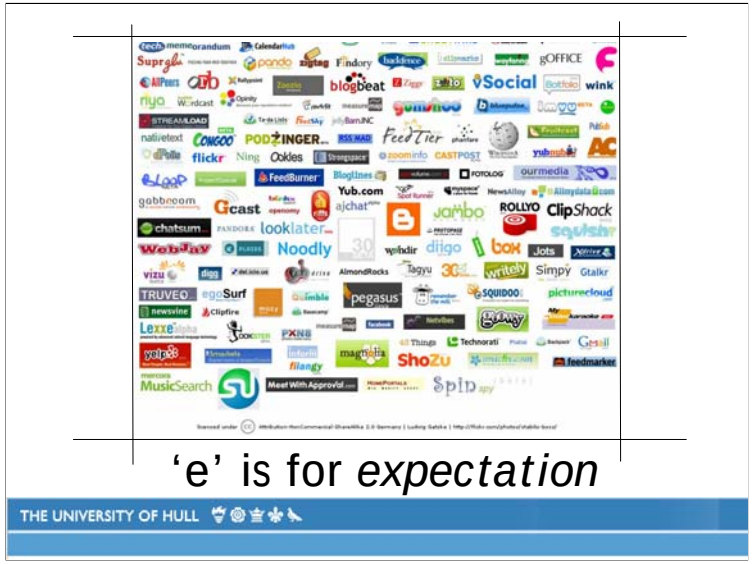
They expect to be ‘tuned in’ as Prensky once remarked. They expect to be engaged.

Certainly the e-environments can be fascinating, absorbing and full of their own drama and intrigue.

But the reality for many, if not most, is that the virtual learning environments they are offered are relatively sterile places with large amounts of words not much different to their lecture theatres, except it is on paper rather than spoken. Document repositories are what many VLEs become. It’s a function they perform very well. Don’t blame the tool, blame the craftsman.

Engagement is not just about making sure that learners can receive information from us 24/7 instead of for 2 hours in the classroom. Engagement is about providing learners with an opportunity to interact, with learning not just with each other. I am constantly disappointed by colleagues who appear to have embraced the social constructivist model online to the point where they appear to believe that they need only provide the smallest amount of the ‘constructivism’ and allow the ‘social’ to do the majority of the work. There are examples of courses taught online which resemble self-help groups rather than anything tutor led. These programmes may of course have their place, but they seldom match learners expectations.

I believe engagement means a certain loss of control on the part of the academic. The tools are powerful, indeed one might almost say limitless in that learners will not have time to exhaust their potential. Academics need to stop doing a virtual version of ‘eyes front, look at me’ and release students to engage in directed learning elsewhere. Engagement with learning may mean disengagement from the front of the lecture theatre.



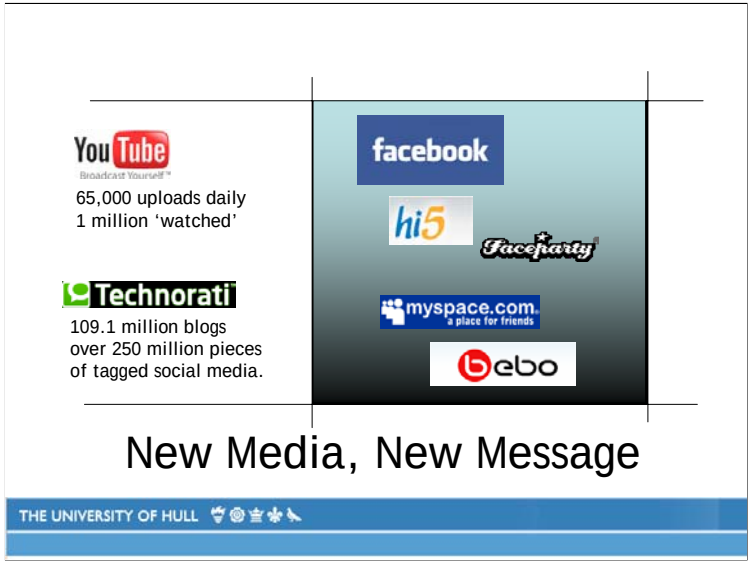
Part of the expectation of learners arriving in Universities is their existing experience with communication tools. Even adult learners long out of any category we might label ‘youth’, are frequently exposed to social networking tools in the workplace. It isn’t a fad , it’s a reality,.

How much is online social networking growing ? Comsource World Metrix (Guardian October 19th 2007) reported that there were 114 million MySpace visitors in 2006-07, a 72% growth on the previous year. Facebook had 52 million, a 270% growth on the year. 56.4% of Europeans access social networking sites, some 127 million.

My own area of research is around changing concepts of identity. I am exploring a a shift in the conceptualisation of space and time in communications, and in the individual as producer of communication, with the rise of social networking technology. Given the extremely diverse discipline framework in which this work sits one has to be conscious of the need to acknowledge the degree to which terminology varies markedly between disciplines and languages.

Both technology and intelligence are contested and divergently applied terms across the social sciences. Technology conjures up images of the range of C&IT technology, electronic and digital computers, ITC, communications, as well as cars, planes and physical constructions of all kinds. This is an inadequate conceptualisation of technology and intelligence, since technology and social practice are indivisible. A definition of technology needs to be broadened to not only include the tools commonly defined as technology, but also the context of deployment in their social context (Cole & Derry, 2005). This rich vein of research theory in the tradition of the Cultural-Historical Activity Theorists suggests that technology is then social milieu as well as ‘tools’. This is a step beyond the territory of the ‘Social construction of technology’ with its roots in the work of Bruno Latour, which posits that technology is not so much a determinate of human action, but that rather, human actions serve to shape technology. Cole suggests that technologies should therefore be envisaged as forms of ‘tool-mediated social practice’.

Cole, M., & Derry, J. (2005). We have met technology and it is us. In R. J. Sternberg & D. D. Preiss (Eds.), *Intelligence and technology: The impact of tools on the nature and development of human abilities* (pp. xxiv+248). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.



YouTube, just one of the video-sharing websites but by far the largest, is recording some 65,000 uploads each day with a million watched videos daily. The academic quality of this material is often questionable but there are examples of staff generated and learner generated content which is making an impact on effective learning. At the University of Hull we have examples of student support services using YouTube to act as a repository for guidance on essay writing and time-keeping, examples of academic staff creating ICT tutorials and making them open to the world yet targeted at their students. And we have examples of students being encouraged to produce work for dissemination (and assessment!) via YouTube.

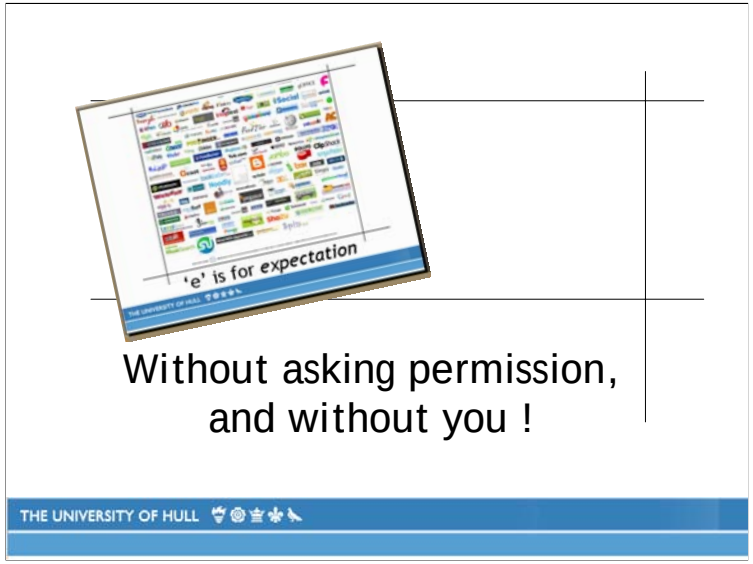
My institution, like many others, continues to debate the ways in which it might enable students to create and complete effective learning logs or portfolios of reflective practice. Meanwhile Technorati tracks 109 million blogs, published openly on the world wide web.

Despite the burgeoning popularity of user-generated content amongst the so called 'YouTube Generation', the potential of this media as a tool for teaching and learning in Higher Education remains largely unexplored (Young & Asensio, 2002; Karpinnen, 2005). Indeed recent studies have indicated an alarming degree of 'non optimal' uses for video and film which seriously diminish and weaken the value of video as a learning tool (Hobbs, 2006). The NewsFilm Online project I will talk more about tomorrow aims to explore some of these issues further.

Hobbs, R. (2006). Non-optimal uses of video in the classroom. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 31(1), 35

Karpinnen, P. (2005). Meaningful Learning with Digital and Online Videos: Theoretical Perspectives. *AACE Journal*, *13*(3), 233-250.

Young, C., & Asensio, M. (2002). Looking through Three 'I's". Retrieved August 8, 2007, from http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/past/nlc2002/proceedings/papers/47.htm

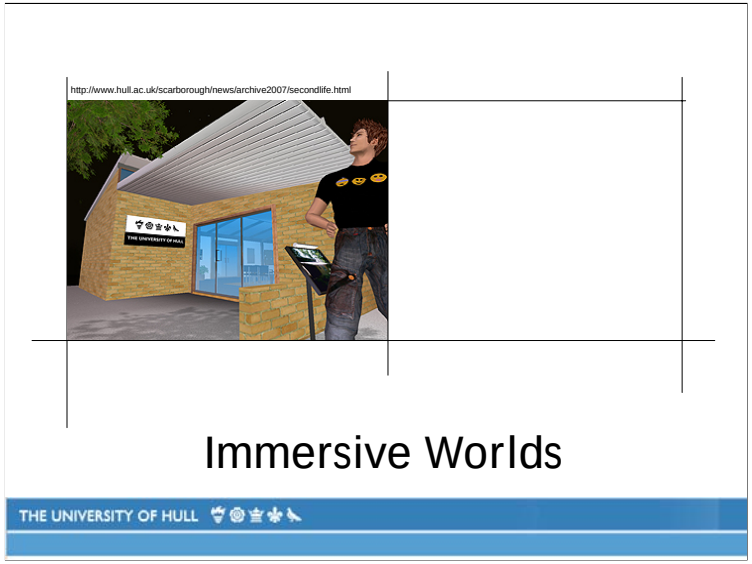


There is a word of caution however. I am an enthusiast for encouraging students to engage with the technology and to make it work for them. But I don't have to manage their access to it. And if I did I would be unpopular.

A MORI poll of 500 students undertaken for the JISC and published in September 2007, reported that students did not welcome Universities attempting to market to them in OSNT, which they considered 'their space'. These 'sixth-form' students – school leavers, saw themselves as 'digital natives' but did not see educational value in the 'social tools'. The tools are part of the communication model and world-view that new generations are creating to communicate, but they conflict with the 'expectation' of the University experience.

See JISC briefing paper:
http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/studentexpectationsbpv1.pdf

It may be that the real power of these tools is in the hands of the learners, not the institutions.



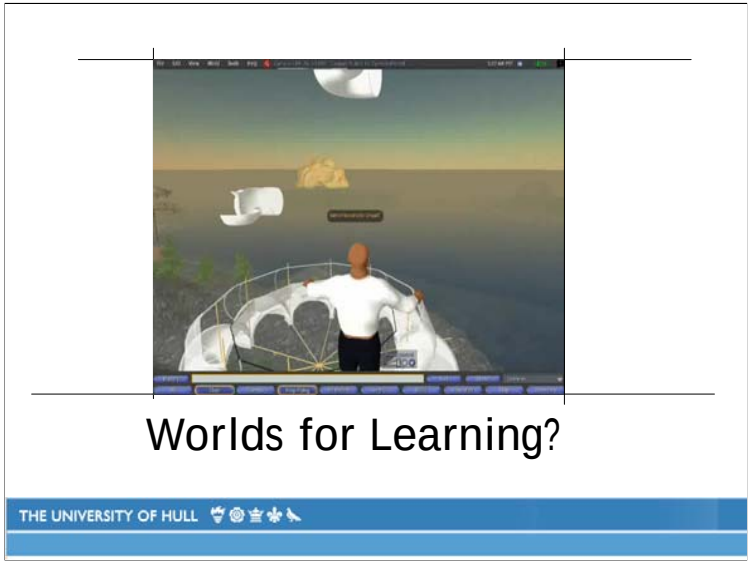
Second Life is a good example in my opinion of how most educational institutions have 'missed the point'. The possibilities for teaching in a theoretically limitless space, unrestricted by the laws of physics, and fashion sense, are mind boggling. And there are some interesting examples of environments within Second Life which exploit these alternate realities to do 'different' things. But they are the exemption. There has been a good deal made of recent moves by UK based institutions to take a presence in Second Life, my Institution has a 'building' in a kind of University Park, whilst several others have bought 'Islands' and constructed entire virtual campuses.

I find this really quite confusing. I can build and create anything I want, I can teach in any 'space' I want, through typed text and now voice, to learners who choose to join my synchronously irrespective of where they are geographically. Yet here are virtual campuses with buildings, glass doors, plants, posters, chairs…. And lecture theatres. Rows and rows of lecture seating. As I said earlier Plus ça change,

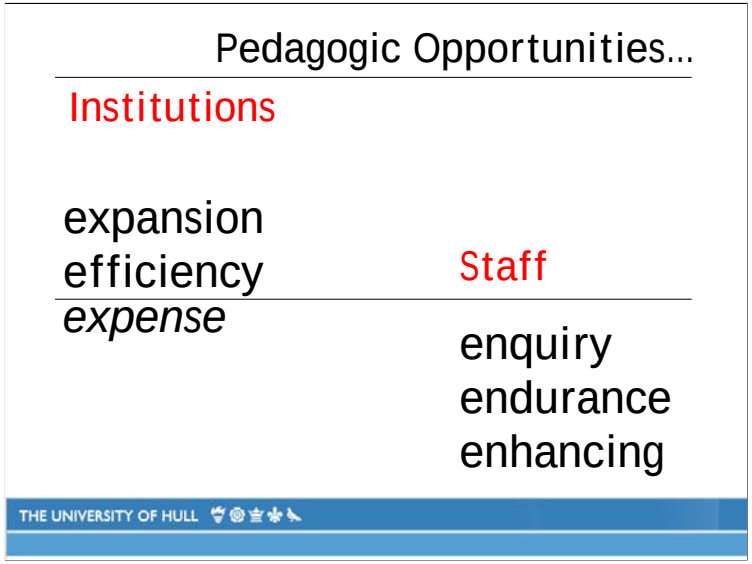
plus c'est la même chose.

My colleague at Hull on our Scarborough Campus, Toni Sant, has found an ingenious way to avoid the rows and rows of theatre sitting. Since you can never be sure how many students will actually turn up to a seminar, in Toni's space there is only one chair. As the first person arrives and sits, a new chair instantly appears. There is always a spare chair, but only ever one more than the number of participants.

So far Second Life is being used mostly by those exploring such technologies, in Gaming, Modelling and virtual pedagogy. In practice, the hardware requirements look likely to out-run the average user and the support burden on our University helpdesks would be unmanageable in such a volatile environment.



I include this slide in order to show you a short video capture from Second Life for those of you unfamiliar with this technology.

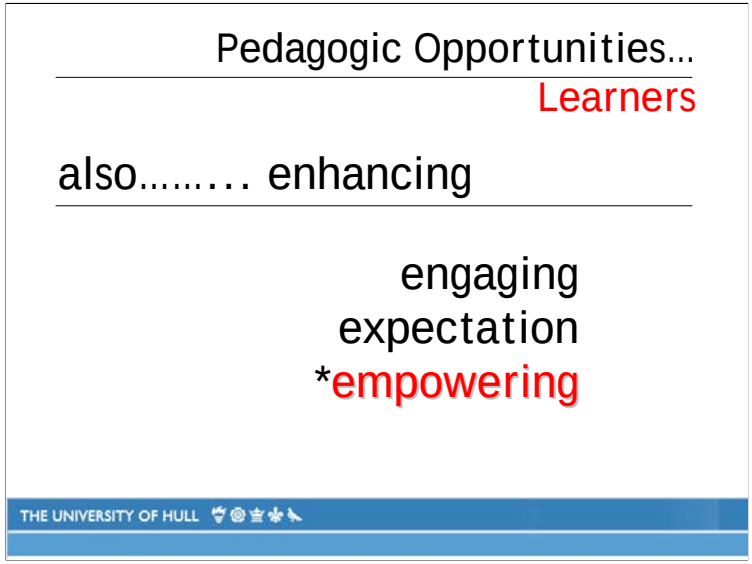


I began by suggesting we should recognise that different communities conceive of eLearning differently. That institutions see in eLearning something often related to their management systems, that staff often equate eLearning as a 'resource' to support, for better or for worse, their learning deliver.

Institutions can see expansion and efficiency in their ability to reach more students, improve the flexibility of their delivery and the opportunity to 'manage' learning processes better. Often there is discussion about quality assurance processes, standards and templates.

Some staff will always want to exploit opportunities. They are enthusiastic, open, flexible and engaged. They become what G.A. Moore described as the 'early adopters' (1991). Staff generally can recognise that e-learning tools are a means to promote and provoke 'enquiry'. With guidance they can enhance the learning of their students and the experience of teaching them, by exploiting the enduring resource available digitally.

Moore, G.A., (1991) Crossing the Chasm, Harper Business, New York



Students come in all shapes and sizes. There is a danger of talking about 'students today' as though they are all 'digital natives' with a thirst for Virtuality. This is not true. In many respects they often approach University with the deepest engrained conservatism, expecting to be 'taught', and inclined towards lazy passive reception. They are in many cases better equipped at home, or have experience technology at school, which Universities and University Staff have not yet discovered. However, the agenda, in the UK at least, towards increasing participation in higher education means that there are many learners who clearly digital immigrants.

Nonetheless we might useful describe eLearning for a significant proportion of students as providing opportunities for engagement and there is a clear expectation on the part of students that technology will be effectively deployed in support of their student experience.

‘e’ is for empower

Opportunity comes from courage to let go….

Learner freedom to use technology

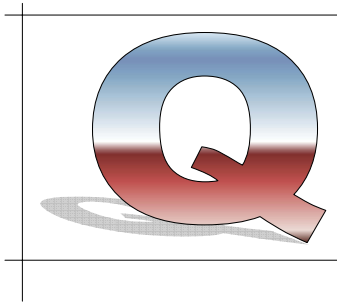
Creativity over Control

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

I believe the real pedagogical power of eLearning is in the hands of learners if we, as institutions, have the courage to ‘let go’. Given that with all the power available to us in Second Life the best we can do is to construct lecture theatres, I think the time has come to trust students with technology. Instead of assuming that we must focus their attention on us, we must release them to use these technologies freely, as they chose, to support guided learning tasks.

There may be a place for e-management of learning support documentation though the VLE, and they may well be a place for e-assessment documentation and tracking for the purpose of accountability. But if we allow our bureaucratic processes to determine the pedagogic potential of the emerging toolset, we will stifle pedagogic innovation on the part of learners. Releasing them to exploit the tools they have, on the platforms they run, in the communities of which they are a part, is to exploit the pedagogic potential of e-learning.

For us as staff, having to work with that ‘lack of control’ over technology will release US from the confines of the VLE, to set exciting, meaningful learning tasks to enhance our learning and teaching.



Discussion

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