

## **Conference report: Learning futures - The Campus and Beyond**

### **Beyond Distance Research Alliance, 8 January 2008, University of Leicester**

*Attended by Louise Cooke*

#### **1 Introduction**

The Beyond Distance Research Alliance (BDRA) is a multi-disciplinary research group based at the University of Leicester with the aim of bringing together researchers and educators with an interest in innovation in learning and teaching methods. Led by Professor Gilly Salmon, the group are experimenting with a 'Media Zoo' in Second Life, as well as co-ordinating numerous other projects in areas such as localised and mobile learning, podcasting, and the use of Wikis as personal repositories in part-time collaborative professional education. They organise an annual two-day conference to share experience, to facilitate discussion and networking, and to disseminate project results. This year's focus was on 'learning futures', trying to identify future trends in education and changing student expectations, as well as discussing how educators can respond to such shifts. The recurring theme of the day is accurately summed up in Prensky's comment that 'students are no longer the people our education system was designed to teach' (Prensky, 2001).

I was able to attend the first day only of the conference, which had been given the title of 'The Campus and Beyond' to reflect the fact that education is no longer primarily a fixed location-based but instead an increasingly 'mobile' activity – taking place not just beyond our own campuses, but in 'other worlds' such as Second Life. The day comprised a combination of four keynote addresses and two parallel moderated presentation sessions. My own interest in attending stemmed from a concern that LIS educators need to be continually 'horizon scanning' in order to ensure that our provision remains relevant both in content and in delivery to the needs of current and future practitioners. This report does not aim to reproduce all of the day's content: rather, I have tried to highlight what to me were some of the key points to take away from it.

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#### **Author**

Louise Cooke is Lecturer in Information and Knowledge Management in the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University. She is also co-editor of *Library and Information Research*.

Email: [l.cooke@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:l.cooke@lboro.ac.uk)

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## 2 Keynote sessions

### **Prof. Gilly Salmon, Professor of E-Learning and Learning Technologies, University of Leicester – The campus and beyond.**

Prof. Salmon opened the introductory keynote by introducing us to the concept of ‘macromyopia’, which she defined as society’s tendency to overestimate (hype) the significance and impact of new technologies in the short term, whilst underestimating their long term potential for paradigm change. Thus, Gartner’s claim that by 2011 80% of active Internet users will have a Second Life (cited by Sharma, 2007) may well prove to be an over-estimate: on the other hand, many of the traditional media are already of less relevance to today’s students, who are finding their own means of recreation and entertainment that bypass previous content providers and intermediaries (e.g. watching videos on YouTube rather than on television or disseminating and finding new music on MySpace without the intervention of music companies); new models of publishing (e.g. blogging and podcasting); information-gathering and organisation (e.g. the use of Google and del.icio.us); and communicating, making friends and socialising (e.g. on social networking sites such as Facebook). Underpinning all of this is an increased convergence in technologies.

### **Prof. Philip Candy, Director of Education, Training & Development for the NHS National Programme for IT (Connecting for Health) – Ivory tower to concrete jungle: Will LCDs light the way?**

Prof. Candy addressed the need to consider new pedagogical approaches and methods in order for universities to remain relevant and viable in a period of changing demographics and student expectations. He suggests that we need to look beyond what VLEs have to offer, and instead to regard learning as a conversational or social process that ‘is not caused by teaching’. He noted the imperative for higher education institutions to engage with lifelong learning, as by 2012 demographic shifts will dramatically reduce the number of 18-21 year olds entering higher education. In a call to us to develop a more constructivist approach to our use of learning technologies, he commented that ‘e-learning’ is not the same as ‘e-tutoring’ or worse, ‘e-mimicking’ (using technology to copy face to face teaching) or ‘e-shovelling’ (using technology to dump lecture notes on students). He suggested that constructivism in learning and teaching can be encouraged via the adoption of learning methods such as:

- Diaries, learning journals and reflective essays (these can involve multimedia such as video or audio technologies);
- Assessment of drafts, revisions and final versions;
- Concept maps and schemata.

Such methods may or may not be facilitated using technology.

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**Aaron Porter, Academic Affairs Officer, University of Leicester Students' Union, and Linda Creanor, Development Director (Professional Practice), Caledonian Academy, Glasgow Caledonian University – A student perspective on learning.**

In the third keynote session, Aaron Porter and Linda Creanor addressed the use of e-learning from a student perspective, with Aaron talking about his own recent experience at the University of Leicester and that of his student peers, whilst Linda reported on the JISC-funded *LEX* study into the learner experience of the 'always connected' generation. Aaron highlighted the following as representing what students want from their programmes:

- Wide and consistent use of Virtual Learning Environments (not just pockets of use by some lecturers);
- The use of podcasts to enable students to revisit lectures;
- The use of e-learning not as an added bonus, but as an expectation;
- A more flexible curriculum, with student input into shaping the curriculum;
- Access to learning at their own convenience;
- The encouragement of peer-to-peer learning, with lecturers being sensitive as to when it is appropriate to intervene in students' informal learning conversations (for example, to differentiate between moderating a discussion forum on the VLE and intervening in a café or facebook discussion);
- Appropriate forms of assessment, exams being the prime example of an 'inappropriate' form – he asked 'when am I ever again going to have to write using pen and paper for 3 hours without access to relevant research resources?';
- Access to information that allows them to track the progress of assignments through the marking and moderation process (he likened this to the ability to track an order with Amazon from placing the order to delivery of the item);
- No reduction in the availability of face to face contact with tutors.

The conclusions from the *LEX* project support many of these claims. The research findings suggest that students do not differentiate between technology-assisted or e-learning and other forms of learning – rather, they view the use of technology as integral to the whole educational experience. The research also highlighted the importance of not focussing exclusively on one group of students: for example, 18 year old undergraduates might relate quite differently to the use of technology than mature part-time postgraduates. Nevertheless, some themes emerged that appear to be common to all groups;

- Students want greater control and choice over how, when and what they learn;
- Students expect technology to be used in such a way as to enhance their learning, and not just 'because it's there';

- They expect tutors to engage with the technology also;
- They want assessment *for* learning, not assessment *of* learning, and the involvement of students in assessment design (for more on this, see the Re-engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish HE project at [www.reap.ac.uk](http://www.reap.ac.uk));
- Students advocated the adoption of community approaches to support collaborative learning, using applications such as discussion forums, blogs, wikis and second life.

**Dr. Tony Bates, President and CEO of Tony Bates Associates Ltd. And Prof. of Research into E-learning, Open University of Catalonia, Barcelona – The implications of Web 2.0 for teaching and learning in a knowledge-based society.**

In an inspirational keynote delivered via video with telephone link, Dr. Bates defined 'e-learning' as 'computer- and internet-based activities that support learning on and off campus'. As such, it should be differentiated from distance learning (which may or may not be facilitated by technology). Modes of learning delivery can be situated along a continuum, with wholly face to face at one end, through the use of technology as a classroom aid, towards mixed-mode delivery with some face to face and some online delivery, and with wholly online delivery at the other end of the continuum. He suggested that it is important for any programme to plan where on this continuum it aims to situate itself.

He identified the graduate skills important to the knowledge economy as including:

- Problem solving and critical thinking;
- Communication skills;
- Computing and internet skills;
- Independent learning skills;
- Entrepreneurial skills;
- Team working and networking skills;
- Creative thinking;
- Knowing how to find, evaluate and use information.

As with other speakers throughout the day, Dr. Bates asserted that the changing nature of students entering higher education means that pedagogies also need to change, from an objectivist to a more constructivist approach. Our approaches to e-learning, likewise, need to become less teacher- or institution-focussed, and to engage more with the end-user in line with the ethos of Web 2.0 applications. An advantage of adopting Web 2.0 in teaching and learning is the relatively low cost involved; however, such adoption risks a power shift from teachers to learners, which many will perceive as a threat to the authority of academics. What is important is that where we place ourselves on the continuum between teacher and learner control, should be defined with reference to the specific student group, and to the subject matter concerned.

Within programmes, he suggested that Web 2.0 applications can be used to facilitate or enhance group work, project and case study work, access to outside experts and content, field work, and multimedia assignments and portfolios. In a technology-enhanced environment, he sees the primary role of academics as being to provide learners with structure and guidance, and suggests that we should continue actively to experiment with and evaluate the potential and effectiveness of new technologies. However, e-learning should be seen as a tool, not a panacea: we need to identify where and how it will bring most benefit. This will again depend on the subject matter and the nature of the students.

### 3 Parallel sessions

#### **Dr. Bill Ashraf, University of Bradford – Reaching the Google-eyed YouTube generation: “Do the ipod shuffle, but don’t miss the lecture”.**

Dr. Ashraf’s use of podcasting of lectures has received considerable recent media attention, that originated with an article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (see Attwood, 2007). He has experimented widely with the medium, and found that it offers particular advantages for overseas, dyslexic and part-time students in work, who are able to view lectures at their convenience both with regard to time and place, and on multiple occasions. He identified other drivers for making learning more flexible, including:

- Demographic shift (as noted in an earlier session) which will mean that institutions will have to focus increasingly on delivery by alternative modes such as lifelong learning, and two-year programmes;
- Increasing competition between and within institutions, and with private and corporate education providers; a 24/7 culture and increased student ‘consumerisation’; and diversification of the student body.

These factors will all require greater flexibility, an increased focus on customer service and more institutional and programme differentiation on the part of higher education institutions.

Dr. Ashraf noted the ubiquity of the mobile phone among the student population and increasing digital convergence (e.g. the i-phone) and suggested that we should be making use of this technology to make learning more mobile. He still sees blended learning, incorporating some face to face tuition, as being the main way forward: for example, the use of podcasts to disseminate lectures to large groups of students has enabled him to provide additional case-study based tutorials to smaller groups. His approach appears to be meeting with some success: although it is early days to evaluate the full impact of his innovations, his student rates of progression and achievement appear to have improved as a result. He made an interesting point in suggesting that we should harness the knowledge and expertise of our students when implementing technological innovation – after all, who better to ask about ‘how to do’ things like podcasting than our own technology-savvy students?

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**Dr. Dirk Schneckenberg, Strategy & Marketing Dept., ESC Rennes – Web 2.0 in the corporate context – a lever for the empowerment of the knowledge worker.**

I targeted this session which focussed on learning in a corporate context as it was of interest to me with regard to the delivery of work-based and continuing professional education, as well as to my own teaching area of information and knowledge management. Dr. Schneckenberg discussed changes from hierarchical to flatter corporate structures (from ‘pyramids to pancakes’), and how this has empowered employees’ decision-making. He maintains that the use by organisations of Web 2.0 applications has a similar potential to empower knowledge workers. A 2007 survey by McKinsey reports that c.75% of global corporations are using Web 2.0 applications such as wikis, blogs and RSS feeds to aid collaboration and as a platform for knowledge exchange. He suggested that the strength of such applications lies in their adherence to the three key principles of Web 2.0 (as proposed by Downes, 2007): usability; relevance of content; and interaction between peers. For organisations, he suggested that one of the main benefits of social networking sites lies in what Granovetter (1973) described as ‘the importance of weak ties’, whereby large, distributed social networks allow us to extend our knowledge and influence beyond our own immediate disciplinary and departmental or organisational domain.

**4 Some conclusions from the day**

It was a very full and thought-provoking day and it has taken some time for me to assimilate my thoughts from all the different sessions. A few consistent themes can, however, be identified very clearly. The first is that our students and their world are changing – and higher education will need to embrace change if it is to remain relevant to their needs. We must be open to new pedagogical approaches to teaching and assessment, as well as to new technologies and modes of programme delivery whilst being cautious not to be swept up in the wake of too much media-generated hype. There seems to be little doubt that engagement with Web 2.0 applications in the learning and teaching process offers real potential benefit; however, we should also take note of the fact that, in embracing technology and all that it has to offer, students still value face to face interaction very highly.

Powerpoint presentations from the day are available on the BDRA website at [http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/event/previous\\_events/conferences/conferences-2008/conference2008/conference2008](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/event/previous_events/conferences/conferences-2008/conference2008/conference2008).

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