Innovating e-Learning Practice

Further information

Innovating e-Learning 2006 conference website: www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_conference06.html

For further information about the e-Learning and Pedagogy Strand of the JISC e-Learning Programme, please contact:

Sarah Knight
Programme Manager
JISC Development Group
University of Bristol
3rd Floor, Beacon House
Queens Road
Bristol, BS8 1QU

Email: info@jisc.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)117 954 5083
URL: www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning_pedagogy.html

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Editors: Geoff Minshull and Judith Mole,
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Introduction to Innovating e-Learning Practice

From the earliest times, teachers have been seeking out newer and better ways to capture the essence of the knowledge and skills their learners need. However, teaching is a challenging and dynamic process and particularly complicated by the fact that it is still not yet fully understood how humans learn.

Innovating practice in teaching and learning therefore provides all the challenges and difficulties of explanation, analysis and synthesis, and in disciplines as diverse as Physics and Maths to English and Art. The challenge of engaging and supporting learning processes with a wide range of pedagogic approaches and styles has been reinvigorating teaching and learning practices on a continual basis.

What brings many tutors into the profession of teaching and learning is not an arrogance about what is known but a real enthusiasm for their area of expertise, a desire to share and extend this knowledge and, more often than not, a passion for what is, after all, a very creative process, involving creating stories and methods for conveying some of the most abstract and complex ideas, structures and ideas. More tools are being developed that will support tutors in their engagement with new ideas and approaches, and while this is exciting, it can be stressful for tutors inundated by new learning resources and its attendant jargon.

With the emergence of the internet and a range of software tools becoming available to support and delight young and lifelong learners alike, the significant challenges of engaging and motivating learners, combined with opportunities to foster even more proactive learning on the part of learners, add a further level of complexity for tutors to engage with. Now not only can we deliver learning content to students in face-to-face class, lecture and seminar rooms, but we can also extend the space of learning to reach learners through mobile technologies whilst on the move, through electronic learning materials delivered to remote and distance learners over the web and on digital storage formats.

There are already early adopters who are concerned with innovating not just with their own practice but also with collaborative modes of learning and empowering learners to create their own sharable content. The work of Stephen Heppell over the course of his long and distinguished career has concentrated upon bringing in greater opportunities for creativity, and projects like Not School.net and Be Very Afraid have focused upon putting learners in to the driving seat, leading to a rich and impressive array of content produced to delight other learners and tutors. Chapter 1 explores the debate around developing new strategies for creativity in learning and more creative approaches to assessment.

In the future learners will be able to learn in immersive worlds like Second Life, using games as metaphors and game-based learning approaches to support diverse online and face-to-face communities. The debate between Richard Sandford and Russell Francis captured in Chapter 2 of this volume clearly demonstrated the appeal of game-based learning, particularly amongst younger learners, and engaged delegates in a discussion around issues of social inclusion, engagement and the use of commercial off the shelf (COTS) games. The potential of these kinds of applications is only now becoming known with a range of new research emerging in what promises to be an exciting field for pedagogic exploration. Paul Maharg, in his session outlined in Chapter 6, added a further dimension to the debate, this time focusing upon how the concept of authentic learning could support professional learning development through simulated worlds to assist trainees in their metamorphosis into professional legal practitioners.

A deeper analysis of how mobile devices can be harnessed for educational gain evolved in the discussion on m-learning in Chapters 3 and 5: Exploring the Role of Learning with Mobile Technologies, led by Geoff Stead and Lilian Soon, and Mobile learning on a VLE led by

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James Clay. Despite some clear pedagogical advantages in using mobile phones in fieldwork or with disaffected learners, it appeared that there were still many unresolved issues for practitioners innovating teaching and learning practice with these technologies. How, for example, do we deal with the institutional barriers which still determine the extent to which m learning can be embedded? How do practitioners maintain the sense of fun and novelty in using mobile phones in learning and assessment, as m-learning moves from a largely informal and personal role towards more formal educational uses? Most importantly, how do we maintain the spirit of enterprise and risk-taking that has characterised m-learning up until now?

Innovations in teaching and learning may come about through the use of mobile and wireless technologies, or in response to game-based learning applications, but new pedagogic approaches can also be linked to the re-design of physical learning spaces. In the discussion in Chapter 4, Learning Spaces: Emerging Trends, led by Alexi Marmot and Tom Hamilton, it was noted how learners themselves may become a catalyst for change. Learners in the 21st century are informed consumers and increasingly have more choice worldwide over the institutions in which they learn. They also look for control over where and when they study within the institution of their choice. They require more opportunities for informal learning and will seek out environments with the right ambiance for social learning. All the more important then that the spaces provided by today’s institutions are fit for purpose – technology-rich, flexible in design and supportive of a wide range of learning activities, no matter what the primary function of that space may be.

The trend towards increased learner-control over physical learning spaces is being given a further boost by the use of mobile devices. Mobile and wireless devices already support virtual communities of learners alongside those who meet face-to-face, and the blurring of the distinction between these two modes of learning is something we can expect to see grow during the 21st century. But some interesting questions arise from this development. With this insatiable demand for flexibility, will learners still continue to ‘go to university’? Will technology in learning result in a shrinking physical estate? What will be the role and function of the college and university in the 21st century?

This brief selection of the debates in Theme 3 of Innovating e-Learning 2006 gives the e-book reader a flavour of the lively exchange between practitioners, researchers and experts at the conference and captures the inspirational quality of the presenters. In particular, Chris Yapp and his advocacy of team teaching and the imperative for personalising learning through e-learning has led many to be inspired and empowered to take on the greater challenges implied by introducing blended elements of technology-enhanced learning. The focus here, as reflected in Chapter 8, the closing keynote, was upon developing confidence in practitioners and allowing opportunities for practitioners, subject experts and researchers to come together to share and explore practice at the cutting edge.

What the conference – and this e-book – demonstrates is that we are restricted only by our imaginations. We limit our own potential by believing that we cannot engage with one or other technology or approach. What became evident from the invigorating meeting of minds that occurred in Theme 3 of Innovating e-Learning 2006 is that we can achieve more than we think we can, and especially so when we work together and share best practice.

Sara de Freitas & Ros Smith.