



Future Learning: Desire or Fate?

By Gilly Salmon

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times” are the opening words of Charles Dickens’s Tale of Two Cities and they might apply to Higher Education today! In my view we have a small window of opportunity of unprecedented freedom in which to create a fantastic future for learning in Higher Education.

Einstein told us that you cannot solve significant problems of today at the same level of thinking that caused them to occur in the first place. As we move away from technologically determined views of learning futures, fresh perspectives are creeping into curriculum design- from social, cultural and knowledge innovations. As Diana Laurillard points out: we 'do not lack ambition'. However, the transformation pathways we seek are as yet still muddy tracks, unacknowledged by our GPS devices. As a result, what do we have? – the motto of all advertising campaigns —“half of what is spent is wasted, we just don’t know which half” !

In my talk, I will make a start on exploring the growth, the trends, the discontinuities and the challenges...and invite your thoughts and signposts.

What I offer here is some reading for pre-thought, and some links to explore!

AND/OR

If you don’t fancy reading why not try this instead: <http://superstructgame.org/>

It’s not about learning as such but it’ll get you thinking about the future, oh yes!

FUTURE LEARNING

There are some aspects I don’t need to rehearse, I hope! They are:

Givens:

- Technology has become one of the most important features of national and international economic, social and cultural landscape

- Technology is a battlefield for beliefs, research and practical actions
- Universities are driven by technological possibilities, most of them emergent
- In 1900, there were 500,000 students in Higher Education (HE) worldwide. Now there are 100,000,000
- Universities have become highly competitive

Introduction to learning futures

Within the complex changes occurring in education emerging from the knowledge-technology-society transformations of the early 21st Century, we need to create viable and preferred Futures for learning, and new ways of achieving them. All prediction about the real world rests to a great extent on a set of inferences about the future from what has happened in the past, that is to say on history, as Eric Hobsbawm told us in his book "On History".

We are at the beginning of the greatest technological change in history. The role of the historian and of the futurologist is not just to show the momentum of events, not just the possibilities at each juncture, but the human ideas, the emotions and the visions...including the implications for society. Futurists rarely address knowledge, learning and education per se. See the link to a paper by Jim Dator below - one of the few exceptions. Fullan (2001) tells us that the development of conditions for facilitating change and stretching boundaries requires visionary leadership at all levels, cyclical energising, changing the contexts within which people work, a critical mass of support and collaborative effort. Phew! *Can we do it?*

What it takes is for each one of us here to explore ideas, make choices between scientific principles and imaginative innovations, combine ideas, and extrapolate and work together.

We all know we're in a period of rapid change in society intimately bound up with the rise of digitalisation of life: of broadband, smaller personal devices. Super computers and fibre optic networks are making data available in unimaginable ways only a few years ago. The technology and its impact on almost every aspect of daily life comes continuously fast and furious. Every time there's a change in the technology comes an inevitable rethink in ideas, including perhaps especially about learning, knowledge and education. Last week The New York Times sparked a debate among its readers with an article suggesting that the future of reading may lie with video games. Traditional forms of education – with their specialization, silo thinking and associated ways of transmitting knowledge have done little to prepare any of us for the huge abundance of information, everywhere, everyone. And there is the known

phenomenon “the arrogance of the present” – which is often associated with reductionist views, which is rife in education, and powerful in competitive times, and rarely accommodates understanding of the complexity.

Nearly everyone involved in Higher Education (HE) is constantly attempting to find new ways of learning and teaching, facing up to new challenges, achieving more with fewer resources – and in our special era – working out how technologies can be harnessed productively and successfully. The contexts and conditions for learning technologies are changing very fast. We cannot take control of the external environment of our institutions but the new technologies pouring across our boundaries offer us, the educators of the 21st century, very very special opportunities – I’d say unique in the history of formal education. For me there is no doubt, that whether or not any form of technology will add real long term value to student learning or merely prove disruptive and diversionary depends on how the educators imagine, design and integrate its potential into the curriculum.

The adoption of technologies in many of our students’ everyday lives has already outstripped our understanding of appropriate pedagogical responses. MacroMyopia (Dodge 2007) happens because new ideas and technologies feel ‘normal and ‘obvious’ to trailblazers. Innovators tend to look at the early success of something for a smallish and specific purpose and tend to assume it will ‘scale up’ in the same way (if only others would see the ‘light’...). They cast few glances backwards. They are focussed on what they are building and contributing and they barely see the often much bigger and longer terms ramifications.

How do we ensure that the curriculum benefits effectively and sustainably?

There’s lots of talk about the big issues of the 21st Century. Despite, dramatically better health, living conditions and yes, education, for much of the world, we still face huge challenges. What if education- formal, informal, conscious and unconsciously received was really able to get to grips with some of the big issues of our day. Not only are we educating the generation that will need to solve the problems of the future, but we should be enabling them to use the incredible power in the technological applications for their learning now.

Be warned- there is no grand master plan. The existing campaign maps are old and no longer describe the territories in which we will be travelling in the future. So it’s up to each of us to take fresh approaches and to learn and share constantly across all camps, using the fantastic opportunities that we have- an unrivalled chance given to our generation of educators that has never been seen before. We also have much better understanding of how to develop wisdom and action through experience and knowledge construction. We now need to apply these processes widely to learning for the future.

OK! How?

First you need to capture a 'spirit of the times'. When you look at an idea you can evaluate it as a 'with-the-grain' approach. Educators prefer to stay within existing patterns, and are concerned if they can reasonably ask learners to adopt a new approach, or at least a new usage of a familiar device. Working 'with the grain' may look desirable and often more achievable but can be restrictive. Radical approaches are riskier and fewer succeed but take the great leaps needed to make serious progress. The most effective innovations are likely to be open to both perspectives – uncovering existing patterns and at times working within them, but at other times seeking to enlarge their scope to enable more ambitious learning – something technologists are really good at.

1. The traditional techniques are by:
2. Trends analysis
3. Emergence
4. Imagination and visioning
5. Scientific analysis and forecasting

At Leicester, we're having a try with 'learner voice' (see the CALF project) and creative techniques.

And we've had some fun with scenarios...

In 10 years from now:

1. My Very Own University

The UK 'Personalising' agenda is powerful and each university only offers a range of short modular courses, typically for 5-10 credits, which start at the point of each student's previous knowledge. Students choose from a vast online 'Superlearn market' and/or attend the 'My university' high street booths. Students choose from both topics that they desire and the modes and methods of learning and assessment they prefer. The approach attracts large numbers of older and younger learners and has crossed many of the boundaries between institutions from post-compulsory education onwards.

2. University of the world

Following an unprecedented period of peace, the attention of most nations has turned to health and wealth and their necessary corollary, free effective education for all. The Bologna agreement (where university credits can be transferred from one university to another) is in full swing in Europe and most other regions of the world have similar approaches. Students choose their courses based on the most relevant cultural context or the best expert/research for their learning and very few stay in one place for more than 1 semester during their under or post graduate degrees, receiving their awards from World Uni during education summits of world leaders. Resources are provided only in the world's 3 main languages: English, Spanish and Mandarin.

3. Learnearn

Begun in response to the Leitch report in 2007 which said that university must focus on skills for work and the accreditation of many private enterprises with degree awarding powers, universities ensure that every module provides for applicable and relevant skills along with knowledge. Many traditional subjects are in decline or unrecognisable, and many new topics and courses have emerged. Almost every university specialises in one or more 'employability' arenas and competition for partnerships with the best employers is fierce.

Learners and the future

What if ...learners really rose to the fore. Is education the last social institution of the 21st Century that failed to take account of its consumers, allowing only a bit of feedback at the end of 3 years of engagement, and then in a contested format?

I know there is a problem – innovation literature tells us that ask any consumer what they want of a product that they've never used and you get very little help. We know (see JISC student expectations study) that students entering higher education for example, have very little idea of what to expect of being at university so they are not much help if we merely ask them what technology will help their learning. Of course I also know that learners are not consumers choosing washing machines. But neither are they mere 'users' needing training in exploiting computers. Nor are they 'patients' where the doctors cut out the ignorance. Could learning technologists could define the new pathways to relationships between educators and educated?

How then do we best engage them about the future for learning?

How Not To Do It

The hype around e-learning, dominant at the turn of the Millennium resulted in many mistakes being made. Some were failures of investment, some were difficulties associated with big consortia, yet others were misplaced political initiatives. There were many more small disappointments that happened quietly and painfully inside institutions. Keegan and colleagues reported recently on some of them – these make for fascinating reading!

For successful new developments we need:

1. Strong and robust experience in e-learning
2. Stable technologies
3. A rapid development model
4. Avoidance of 'self' competition
5. Excellent market intelligence and good choice of programmes, (especially if operating outside known 'home economy')
6. Accredited courses
7. Long term financial planning
8. Defined institutional learning models

I was involved in the US OU initiative which is one of the researchers' case studies. I saw at first how hard it is to innovate across many fronts in a context and location unfamiliar in terms of economy, models and concepts of learning design and delivery – the radical approach. Hence to put Leicester firmly on the e-learning map we used a resource based strategy and both incremental and radical innovations (Salmon 2005, 2008).

What would you add from your experience of 'failure'?

The Gaps to Fill

There are many uncertainties but I'm sure that what happens depends on the response of the educators and learning technologists – each of us – and of course not something intrinsic within the rampant technology at our disposal.

I heard Marc Prensky (2008) speak at the M-Learn conference on 8th October.

He offers us 4 gaps to fill between:

1. Research and...practice
2. The Have (access) and...the have-nots
3. Learners... and teachers
4. Now... and the Future.

What about aspiration (design?) and deliver (engage?)

What would you add...are there more?

Refs and Links

Prensky, M. 2008 Keynote Speech at M-Learn in Telford 8th October

Dator, J. (2004) <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/dator/education/DatorOzQual.htm>

Dodge, D. (2006)

http://dondodge.typepad.com/the_next_big_thing/2006/06/macromyopia_and.html

Fullan, M. G. (2001). Leading in a culture of change. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hobsbawm, E. (1998) On History. Abacus

New York times

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/06/books/06games.html?_r=1&em&oref=slogin.

Salmon, G (2005) Flying not Flapping ALT-J Volume 13, Number 3, September , pp. 201-218

Salmon, G (2008) Building Institutional capability in e-learning design ALT-J Number 16 June pp. 95-109

Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2004) Building Futures Scenarios for Universities and Higher Education: an International Approach, in Policy Futures in Education, Vol. 2, N 2, pp. 245 – 263

Big challenges of 21st Century: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/po/jmartin.shtml>

CALF project <http://www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/calf>

Student expectations study:

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/studentexpectations.aspx>

And what about the nay-sayers- do they have valid learning points for us ?

http://blogs.nature.com/wp/nascent/2008/10/social_not_working.html