



# **Adult informal learning and the role of technology**

**An Open Space discussion (18 September 2008)**

**Summary**

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## **BACKGROUND**

On 18 September 2008, at the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining in London, Futurelab gathered together representatives from policy, practice, research and industry to discuss issues around adult informal learning and the role of technology. The event took on an Open Space format that allowed participants to host their own conversations whilst others moved around the space from one discussion to another. The event was divided into three parts:

1. Opening speakers
2. Open Space discussions
3. Plenary

## **OPENING SPEAKERS**

Six speakers were asked to make a two-minute presentation regarding their thoughts on adult informal learning and the role of technology. Key points are reported here.

### **Julian Sefton-Green (Nottingham University)**

- Used to work in the non-formal learning sector, in a North London arts and media centre called Weekend Arts College [www.wac.ac.uk](http://www.wac.ac.uk).
- The Weekend Arts College (WAC) offers semi-organised and organised training in arts and media led by practitioners – giving people who have been failed by the education system opportunities to express themselves.
- WAC and similar providers offer people a different type of place to learn and a different way to learn. An interesting challenge is how we sustain a diverse education provision when much education in this country has a tendency to homogenise and offer a uniform kind of provision.
- Key issues specific to adult learning and technology need to be considered in the context of the Lisbon agenda, which is a broad sign up to increasing economic competitiveness by increasing the kind of skills level of workers.

### **Amy Swan (Help the Aged)**

- Informal adult learning offers a whole raft of opportunities, whether it is people learning for pleasure, for personal development, for health reasons and even people learning ways to benefit their community. However, we should draw the line at learning opportunities such as watching the TV or reading a book or doing a crossword, unless it is improving their life in some way.
- Informal learning is a great way to deliver certain skills that can help vulnerable groups, eg older people, to be more included in society. Help the Aged has published a report called Learning for Life which looks at specific skills, eg financial literacy and citizenship literacy.
- We need to explore the opportunities offered by digital TV. For older people this is a wonderful opportunity to push a two-way functionality so that they are not just sitting and receiving but also responding.
- 71% of people over 65 have never used the internet. Older people feel less confident with IT such as mobile phones and digital technologies.

### **Alastair Clark (NIACE)**

- NIACE is a non-government body which promotes the interests of adult learning. NIACE's strapline is '*More, different and better*' – more learners, different learners and better learning. Technology could play a role in delivering NIACE's strapline.
- Technology should be seen as neutral, it is what we do with it that's important.

- Adult learning is important as it is a key driver towards social equity and a vibrant democracy. Citizens should have access to learn.
- We should distinguish between informal and non-formal learning. Non-formal learning is structured but takes place in an informal location, whereas informal learning is often unintentional and sometimes not even recognised by the people who are undertaking it.
- If we want to develop critical thinking and an understanding of context, just delivering a podcast will not do. That's the stuff of learning – we need a stir as well. Learning is stuff and stir.

### **Alex Johnstone (DIUS)**

- DIUS is responsible for delivering the current government consultation on informal adult learning. Over a six-month period there were over 5,000 responses, which was more than there were for the debate on nuclear energy.
- A lot of responses have been around serious technology replacing what has traditionally been face-to-face delivery of informal learning. However, that was not the intention of the consultation.
- DIUS wishes to hear how technology can be better used for learners, for intermediaries, for tutors and providers, so that they can deliver more effective adult learning.

### **Natasha Innocent (MLA)**

- The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the DCMS. Learning is at the very heart of everything that museums, libraries and archives do.
- Technology is increasingly significant to the development and display of collections in our sector and is also transforming service delivery. For example the development of interactive displays and digitisation of collections which is widening access.
- The People's Network, a network of 30,000 free internet-enabled PCs in public libraries, is extremely popular and has changed the user base of libraries. Library staff are all trained in ECDL and have a role to support users to get online. To ensure digital equality this provision of public access PCs is essential - there is potential to build the role of library staff to support advanced media literacy skills.
- Technology offers access to museums, libraries and archives 24/7 with access to inspiring resources.
- The development of technology is supporting adults to make connections between different episodes of learning. We know, for example, that the Who Do You Think You Are TV programme has led to an enormous increase in the number of adults accessing archives online to explore family histories.

### **Guy Claxton (University of Winchester)**

- Need to learn how technology or digital media can support unmediated learning.
- It is about the kinds of recreational activities that involve people for their own satisfaction, slowly getting better at working with material of different kinds. For example, gardening, painting, cooking or even sight-seeing.
- There is the resurgence of learning that involves 'making and doing' and practical skills.
- Richard Sennet's new book is called the 'Craftsman' in which he explores very subtly what the social and psychological processes are involved in the slow cultivation of skilfulness.
- In the US the 'Maker Movement' is getting people with physical skills, people who are able to make, mend and repair, to do... to manipulate rather than merely articulate.

### **OPEN SPACE DISCUSSIONS**

Several conversations were hosted on the day. Unfortunately we are only able to provide a snapshot of these dialogues.

## List of discussions posted

- How do we get informal learning into the mindset of formal educators?
- Technology and issues of exclusion are increasingly unpredictable and in no way conform to traditional and conventional notions of socioeconomics. People traditionally considered to be excluded in our society have much more interesting things to say and demonstrate.
- What are the merits and values and practicalities of removing or blurring distinctions between formal and informal, so that one can flow seamlessly into the other from both directions?
- What are the barriers in offering adults access to technology for learning?
- How can adult learning engage in IT, particularly with older people?
- How can our knowledge of informal learning in the workplace be used to inform the lifelong learning agenda?
- How can we use technologies in the higher education sector to support informal learning?
- What day-to-day examples are there of how, when and where older people learn?
- How do we use prior informal learning to promote formal learning?
- How can we make a 'people's university' for connecting learning? What would bring people to the platform and how could you build a community that can maintain the quality of knowledge-transfer?
- How can Web 2.0 tools support community learning organisations and networks?
- How can we ensure that people who are excluded from informal learning using traditional methods are not excluded again when learning is delivered by technologies of various kinds?
- How can we value people's previous experience so that they may be able to access higher education?
- What technologies are the easiest ways for people to start using and acquiring informal learning?
- What would happen if we gave adults access to the internet?

## Key points from captured discussions

- Support required to value experience in order to accommodate formal learning.
- Need to recognise the benefits of technology use.
- Benefits of engagement will motivate further interaction. Experience breeds engagement.
- Technology has the risk of providing 'surface' experiences rather than experiences of depth and meaning.
- Loss of critical thinking in higher education.
- If you ignite someone's interest you need to make sure there is a pathway for them to continue towards an experience of depth and meaning.
- Intermediaries, eg social workers, health workers, need to develop skills to engage learners.
- People are confident with new technologies in an informal setting but in a formal presentation setting they are much less proficient.
- Barriers are more behavioural than technological. It is an inherent fear to not wish to look stupid when using technology than the technology itself.
- Meeting someone online/doing distance learning/remote communication leads to less exclusion.
- Technology can add to social exclusion because it can eliminate real social settings.
- Inclusion not about getting broadband into every home, but accessible communal space where people can use computers. For example, Access Space in Sheffield.
- Not just about giving people kit - they need support in changing their behaviour.
- Media literacy skills – people have kit but do not know how to use it effectively.
- Need to work through intermediaries, peers and volunteers to support those socially excluded.
- Need to market the advantages of being an e-citizen.
- Relevance of content – not 'IT' but 'life'.
- Focus on purpose of learning/relevance.

- Need to change our models on how we think we learn.
- Issues of empowerment for non-traditional learners.
- [www.towardsmaturity.org](http://www.towardsmaturity.org).
- Challenge is engagement – fanning fires.
- Somerset Engine Room – providing all kinds of IT-based learning for free.
- Older learning is a different pedagogy.
- Too much emphasis of ICT for older people.
- Importance of U3A.
- Institutions like the OU could be truer to their mission if they found ways to support informal learning.
- Learning Trust – a US philanthropy group to invest in learning as an activity.
- Explore the use of technologies as used in existing hobbies for older people.
- Technology provides new modes of learning.
- 4,000 members of the School of Everything from teachers to enthusiasts. Not just about individuals but tools to cluster – location based.
- School of everything is not an agency but rather a pin board.
- Need to make more of the technologies already embedded in people’s lives.
- Cameras used in the V&A to do search and explore session with children and parents; getting them to go and find.
- Intergenerational learning.

## **PLENARY**

During the plenary each participant was asked to make a single comment about the day.

- Informal learning is organic.
- Informal learning is about people having their own learning goals.
- Open Space discussions translate well into dialogue around informal learning.
- The market is ready for informal learning but we need to start building environments that will help people to start their learning journey.
- Technology is driving an overlap between informal and more formal learning.
- There is an assumption that when the older IT-illiterate population ‘dies off’ the problem will be solved. However, in 50 years’ time younger people today will be equally technologically illiterate because the technologies will have changed even faster than they are today.
- We need to build on the current technologies available to make them good platforms for learning – joining in with the digital revolution.
- Need to be alert to the formal sector wishing to colonise informal learning time and space.
- We need to explore how Web 2.0 can encourage deeper and more meaningful learning.
- Please respond to the Digital Equity Action Plan published on 27 October.
- Broadcasting content is necessary but not sufficient. Need to mobilise people who can motivate and inspire use.
- Technology is only a means to an end.
- The role of the tutor in adult learning is changing with the advent of technology.
- If anyone would like to run a Silver Surfer’s Day event on 15 May 2009 contact Gill Adams at Digital Unite.

## **FUTURELAB NEXT STEPS**

As part of our research project, mapping the current landscape of adult informal learning and the role of technology, we will feed the intelligence gathered from this Open Space discussion together with desk research and a MORI poll, into a General Educators report due for publication in early spring 2009. In addition, we have also set up a Google group with the participants of this event so that their discussions may continue.