Futurelab conference transcript

Beyond the Exam: Innovative Approaches to Learning and Assessment

19-20 November 2003
Watershed Media Centre, Bristol

GridClub: assessing learning and fun

James Blomfield, Intuitive Media

James:
Thanks very much, I'm very pleased to be here. My name is James Blomfield and I'm the Director of Online Learning for Intuitive Media (see www.intuitivemedia.com). We're absolutely passionate about education, we are practitioners and we are committed to empowering teachers and students through the internet.

This afternoon I'm looking at GridClub, which is a project that we have collaborated with Channel 4 on.

[Video clip]

GridClub is a multiple media project, spread across website, online community and television, as well as printed materials. GridClub is organised as a public/private partnership run by Channel 4 and Intuitive Media. It's funded by the DfES in England, by SEED in Scotland and C2K in Northern Ireland. As a result of the funding, GridClub is **free at the point of use**, so it doesn't cost teachers, schools or LEAs anything to use.

GridClub is a key component of the Government's standards agenda: designed to encourage the educational use of ICT from school into the home.

What I'd like to do this afternoon is take you through three parts: firstly the games portal which you can find at Gridclub.com, secondly the online clubs and thirdly about the formal evaluation that was conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University.

My role is to manage clubs and mediators around the country - Northern Ireland, Scotland and England.

Assessment and 7- to 11-year-old access to the internet It might be a good idea within the context of assessment, to start with the audience, the 7 to 11 year-olds and our experience of working with this age group. Their access to the internet is absolutely pivotal when you're looking at assessment and what they can achieve. Primary school pupils are not as autonomous as their secondary school counterparts. They rely, as you probably know, on gatekeepers such as parents and teachers. There is also the issue of cost, ie, "Dad doesn't let me go on the internet until after six," or, "I have to be finished by eight," or, "I have to use the internet suite for half an hour on a Tuesday." There's also the issue of whose turn is it to use the computer, and we found that 7 to 11 year-olds are generally at the lower end of the pecking order so it's after big brother or sister, and after dads or mums have done the shopping.

It is also affected by adults' attitudes to learning, what they perceive learning to be, the teachers and parents and their attitude to safety and what they're going to allow children to do on the Internet. Just to make this real, I'd like to show you a small clip about kids talking about their experience.

[Video clip]

Girl 10: "I'm allowed to use the internet at home but I always have to use it after 6 because we get it cheaper, and allowed on it till 8 o'clock."

Boy 10: "At home I am allowed to use the internet as much as I want, but when Mum and Dad want to go on it I have to give it back to them. At school I use the internet when we come here [computer suite] on a Tuesday and play on GridClub."

Girl 10: "I really like going on the internet but I'm not allowed to go on non-educational games during the week, I'm only allowed on Saturdays and Sundays".

Boy 10: "I use the internet about once every two weeks. I'm not really allowed to 'game' or do gaming on the computer because my dad says that I am only allowed to do stuff like look things up on search engines and find education stuff on it."

I love the bit where the first boy says he has to 'give the internet back' to his mum and dad! And the second boy whose dad thinks if you're not searching the internet, it's not educational. So these are some of the constraints that our 7 to 11 year-olds have to work within.

1. Games Portal

Here are the GridClub games in all their glory. (Shows www.gridclub.com/games/index.html) Very difficult to represent 500 games on one web page but this is our stab at it. I'd like to show you some of the games because you've got to see the games and see how they're played. I'm going to show you two of my favourites.

The first is a brand new game on the site called *Imaginator*. (Shows www.gridclub.com/games/english/imaginator/index.html). This is really all about writing, to encourage kids to write and provide stimulus material for them. There's a writing kit, and you can create a story. There are eight genres including 'Adventure', 'Scary', 'Playscripts', or 'Romance'. This is the interface, so I can choose a background. I can choose some characters, I can drag the characters around, I can make them bigger, and I can turn them round. I can add some objects, so maybe a hat. I can add some special effects. How about some flying bats? I can write. There are ten possible scenes that I can give a title, and then I can start to write my story. Then I can preview what I've done and if I had more scenes then I could page through those. It's a writing tool for kids to create stories. They can publish those to the website or they can email to friends or teacher. That's the 'Imaginator'.

Now, this is another one of my favourite games, this is called *Spin n' Groove* (Shows www.gridclub.com/games/music/spinngroove/index.shtml). One of the strengths of the project is that all of the games don't come from one place, they are commissioned from specialists and leading producers around the country including Desq, World Archipelagos, Cimex, D2, Big Heart, and Stardotstar, and I think we have some people here from Stardotstar this afternoon. This is something that they actually created with Big Heart. I love Spin 'n' Groove because first of all it's on the internet so anyone can play it. It's a collaborative game and up to four people can use it at the same time. Spin 'n' Groove is, in effect, a four-track sequencer; you see these circles are all different tracks. At the moment I'm on single-player mode but if you were in four-player mode, each person would have one of those tracks and you can choose from a variety of different kinds of music including 'Megamix', 'Classical', 'Chillout', 'Vocal' or 'World'. I'm into Megamix here; I can put in some drums. I can vary those. I can change the volume and add other things if I want to.

On the right is the 'Groove Gallery' where you can save the grooves you have created. You can browse other grooves that other people have recorded or you can email your favourite groove to a friend or a teacher. You can also add your groove to your favourites menu in your web browser.

There are over 500 games on GridClub.com and we know that there are about 1.8 million games played every month, so that's a lot of games and there's lots of research to be done

on what's happening when children are playing these games.

Here are some of our self-assessment and revision games. This is one called *SATs Magic* (shows www.gridclub.com/info/satsmagic/index.html). This is designed primarily for children in England although it has been used for support in Scotland and Northern Ireland as well. The idea of this is to help the children by providing a place they can go to find things out, to do some self-assessments, and they can try out different questions and can download test papers if they want to.

This is where they can create a revision plan to try to encourage them to think about their own learning.

There are lots of maths games as well (shows www.gridclub.com/games/maths/index.html). This one is called *Radius of the Lost Arc*; it's a pun, obviously on the film! Children choose a character and go through several levels that include mental arithmetic, estimating length in metres and centimetres, shape and space, and all kinds of maths tasks.

Here is something else that provides self-help for kids called 'Number Know How' (shows www.gridclub.com/games/maths/archipelago/help/index.htm). They can go into this and find out about different maths concepts and explanations. It's spread over four levels and it has a voice that you can listen to as well. *Number Know How* gives very practical help; it starts very simply and works up to more complicated material.

I wanted to focus on the concept of fear and learning within the context of assessment, and this is a clip of children talking about the fear they've experienced asking questions in class. In a moment I'm going to show a video of the teacher from the same school talking about class sessions.

[Video clip]

Group conversation between 10 year-olds:

Boy 1: But also last year what the problem was because Miss [maths teacher] was like, scary at the beginning, you didn't want to ask her if you didn't understand it.

Boy 2: No, I don't do that with Mrs [another maths teacher].

Boy 1: Me neither!

Boy 2: That's how I feel. I feel scared to go up, and like, they are going to have a go at you...

Boy 1: Because then no one else goes up do they, so you always think, oh no!

Boy 2: I'm the only one who is going to go up and you'll be the only one who doesn't know, and then they'll say... in front of the class...

Girl 1: "...you should have been listening"

Boy 1: And then you don't really learn properly...
I love the line about the teacher being, "scary at the beginning" and then mellowing up! I'm also interested in the value of that conversation and the value kids get from talking to each other as a means for understanding. I think it's absolutely pivotal. As one perspective on the use of ICT, I'm going to play you a clip of a teacher talking about how the use of some of the maths games in GridClub has alleviated some of those fears.

[Video clip]

Class teacher

"When playing the games in here, the content of a lot of them is directly linked to the curriculum without the children noticing. For example the maths games are really good and I actually use it as a class lesson as well as the children playing on their own. But they don't seem to mind when things are wrong, if the computer tells them they have made a mistake, it doesn't deter them, they are just more determined to go back and get it right next time. Whereas if this had happened in the classroom, and they had been told it was wrong, the chances of them actually wanting to do it again are quite slim. They seem to be motivated to try and beat this machine and get it right..."
I quite like this example because this is a teacher who is working with the technology to support pupil learning. In another clip she talks about how the GridClub games provide her with the opportunity for assessment; to observe what the children are doing and try and get a handle on their conceptions and misconceptions. But it's the social interactions that particularly interest me. As I said, I manage the clubs and we're very interested in the learning that goes on because of the games and around the games.

This is the GridClub Clubs page (shows www.gridclub.com/clubs/index.html), where the children get into the clubs. The clubs provide a secure online environment. Children have to register through their school and their activity online is mediated by professionals. GridClubbers can publish their own work as well as taking part in online debates and conversations. I manage a team of mediators around the country, in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, and I think that gives us a unique insight into the way 7 to 11 year-olds use online communities. It also enables us to support different curricula and educational approaches.

Let me show you what a club looks like. We're in the process of launching a brand new platform for our clubs and this will give you an idea of the essential elements. There are all sorts of different clubs; including computer games, sports and 'Kids' Council'. This is the 'Animal Attic', our animal club. This is the space where they can upload own work and pet pictures. We want them to feel that they control it. Here are a few examples: "Your favourite bird, reptile, what do you like best, the lizard or the snake?" There are lots here... "Rabbits rule, or do they?" "Fur, should real fur be used for fashion? I think it's cruel, what do you think?" GridClubber Emma replies, "I think it's just plain murder, to have a fur coat, you're murderers!" These are real issues. Kids can communicate using email. They really enjoy the communicative element of the clubs as well as building their own web pages.

What we've also worked on are GridClub summer schools. Last summer there were over 60 events. These were out-of-school events, in libraries or sometimes in schools that were open to us over the summer holiday. We've broadened our attitude to out-of-school use of computers and sometimes have included in-school but out-of-lesson-time computer use as well. As you can see, there's a GridClub 'Kids' Council'. Every year children are invited from every part of the country to come and meet their MPs and talk with them in the Houses of Parliament debating chambers. They also thrash out their manifesto. The manifesto is great because it states things like "no adults are allowed!" It's their manifesto; they own it. Rather interesting sticky here from Sara, "This is the first time I've been interested in the internet". I think purposeful activity can bring about totally different outcomes.

To give you some examples of peer learning: (see PowerPoint slides). These are interesting because the children use HTML, so some of the members have spotted something that someone else has done and they want to do it as well. Matthew asks, "Can you put a hyperlink on the note that will take me there straightaway?" Sam replies, "Look at my scrolling". Matthew asks again, "Sam, will you tell me the code to get that blue thing, leave it on my site? Please, please, please". Someone was talking about Logo earlier, and use of HTML is a bit like that. You give them the rules, they'll just play with it and often they will bring stuff in which the mediators haven't told them. They just picked it up from home or taught each other.

Some examples asking for help in the clubs: "I need to learn about electricity for my exams, help"; "Help me to learn about sounds, light and electricity"; "Will you help me to find stuff about electricity?"

These are nice because, within the clubs, they allow children to play teacher or to actively help or facilitate, and that's empowering for them. It's empowering for the children who know they can ask any question without fear of retribution from their teacher, and it also empowers other members of the community to help as well (ie parents and learning support assistants).

In the past we had a problem with our clubs being too remote from the games and we see a lot of value in bringing the clubs closer to them. We see a lot of value in the children's talk about the games. In this example (see PowerPoint slide) Joshua, is explaining how to play a history game and he's giving someone the instructions. He says, "Play it and enjoy". He's put a bit of extra in there to say enjoy in red.

We're often asked, normally by sponsors or by funders, what is the value of the clubs? What are children learning in these kinds of informal online conversations? I think that if a child is explaining how to play a game, they're probably exercising higher order skills. It puts them in a position of actually creating a narrative for themselves and their friends: and when they unwind that narrative there's lots of learning going on for the participants concerned.

GridClub Evaluation

We were very lucky to work with Manchester Metropolitan University on their formal assessment of GridClub and we're very grateful to Professor Bridget Somekh and her team who put it together. They were part of the same team that worked on the ImpaCT2 study and we have Professor Colin Harrison here today, who led that. It's quite a big challenge, set to them by the DfES, to assess what's going on, and the educational value. They came up with a conceptual framework of *learning indicators*. This was a framework for observing and valuing children's learning and they intended it to be used by teachers, parents, children, the evaluators and us, to give everyone a shared context, some common ground, to talk about what was going on. The evaluation team worked with key informant schools and young evaluators.

Now, the learning indicators shouldn't be seen as discreet because the children's learning is clearly personally coherent and is not fragmented. Rather the learning indicators provided just a way of looking at a variety of different leading pedagogical approaches and getting some value out of that. They focused on six in particular:

1. Learning to learn

2. Developmental assets

3. Communities of practice

4. Fun and play

5. Being and becoming

6. Flow

So to the first one: **Learning to Learn**. This is taken from Guy Claxton's Learning To Learn Map, and I should really hand over to him, I think, because he's sitting here listening! This approach is based on the learner's preferred learning styles and also the learning organisation and how it works. I'm sorry I haven't got some more time to talk about the different approaches but I want to feed back on some of the outcomes from the evaluations

team.

They said that GridClub proved to be a very positive environment and that children could demonstrate resilience, reflection and resourcefulness. They said that they could participate in an online environment that offers visual, auditory, spiritual and emotional learning styles. They also said that children could participate in a learning organisation that offered motivation and meaningful rewards.

The second learning indicator is **Development Assets**. This was something developed by the Search Institutes and it's a comprehensive list of internal and external factors that affect children's development. It reads a bit like a 'rites of passage' with lots of important milestones. So the external factors would include family support or care in schools and the internal factors would include a commitment to learning and maybe some social competence. The evaluators said GridClub would provide assets that might not otherwise be available to children. For example, relationships with other adults, empowerment, being valued by the community, positive peer interactions, commitment to learning, a willingness to take responsibility, social competence and a positive self-identity.

I'd like to share with you one of the mind maps that the evaluation team collected (see PowerPoint slide). There were a whole series of mind maps that I think are incredibly useful for getting a glimpse or a snapshot of a child's understanding. This one is by Cathy. As you see in the top left-hand corner, there are positive attitudes to learning, good social skills; she's talking about communicating with people and down here evidence of social competence. She's talking about helping other people. Very interesting. I love her, "thumbs up to learning," down at the bottom, and finding countries in the GridClub Atlas.

The third learning indicator is **Communities of Practice**, based on the work of Lave and Wenger. The emphasis here is the learner rather than the teacher. The evaluation team found that once children have progressed from using the games to the clubs, GridClub could enable interaction between children independent of adults, adult moderators participating as role models, children feeling a sense of belonging and children learning from one another. I think that would definitely be the case.

The fourth learning indicator is **Fun and Play**. We had a very interesting talk yesterday from Mark Prensky and this whole concept of fun and how it contributes to learning, whether it's synonymous to learning or whether it's just something like flow that encourages learning to take place [see www.marcprensky.com]. The evaluators found, using this learning indicator, that it was possible to find evidence of almost all children having fun when using GridClub, children perceiving that using GridClub was fun and which features of GridClub made it fun. They noted that parents and teachers had made an explicit link between having fun on GridClub and learning.

Here's another mind map that evidences the importance of fun by GridClubber Jacob. He includes 'happy' and 'joyful'. It's a very positive attitude to learning. What I like about it in the context of fun is at the top he says, "I'm a bit unhappy," between the two nodes where there's a link between cool and the computer, password 'very hard', because he had difficulty remembering and entering his password. That's another issue, because not all parts of fun are just easy. This is an example perhaps of 'hard fun', some aspect that he had to learn, but he was happy to master in order to use the clubs because he sees value in them.

The fifth learning indicator is **Being and Becoming** - a number of commentators have written on this, notably James and Prout, and address the concept of children not being incomplete adults but actually being rich and dynamic in their own right. The evaluation team found that once children have progressed from using the games to the clubs, they could act with considerable independence and be almost universally treated with respect. I would put that down to the fact that they were engaged in real activities and were able to improve their self-image.

I'm running out of time so will finish with a teacher talking about the self-image of her pupils and also relating to community of practice.

[Video clip of teacher]

"There's a definite feeling of GridClub in our school as a community, because it's used three lunch times a week, and after school, as well as the children reinforcing what they've leaned at school at home. The children love coming in here, working as a group together, because their ideas bounce off other children, and they will like to tell each other which games to play and how to do them. They also enjoy telling the adults who work in the computer room how to play the games and frequently the adults actually ask the children how to play the games because we haven't got time to look at them all, and the children seem to have the ability to learn the games much quicker than the adults. So it makes the children feel like a very important part of the learning community of the school."

Thank you.