

Futurelab conference transcript

Spaces, Places and Future Learning: Using innovative technology and practice to re-imagine learning spaces

1-2 November 2006

Rich Mix, London

Hang out your learning

Alastair Clark, NIACE

Alastair:

My name's Alastair Clark and I sometimes do presentations involving technology, and I also go white-water kayaking. I'll let you guess which I find the most scary. OK, this was the title for the presentation that I kind of came up with about six months ago: take lessons from the way that e-learning's been adopted in adult and community learning environments, where learners often only attend class for less than 4% of their waking week. I just wanted to say something quickly about what I mean by adult and community learning. Our organisation, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education, was contracted by the Learning and Skills Council about four years ago now, to move forward their strategy for promoting e-learning within adult and community learning. Now I don't know if there are people here who actually work in that field. Is there anybody who works in the field of adult and community learning? I thought that might be the case. Could you put your hand up if you're an adult? Thank you. Could you put your hand up if you've learnt anything? OK, fine, well that will do. So you know a bit about what I'm talking about, even if you don't work in the area.

Learning spaces is the theme of this event. Most of the work that happens in adult and community learning actually happens in other people's spaces that we borrow: community centres, schools in the evening, all sorts of other places. And actually, some of the luxuries that have been talked about earlier in the conference are just not open to our kind of work. We have to put up with the environment that's been created for other people. What we can do, however, is create virtual environments, virtual environments which really are right for our learners. And I think that's really what I'm going to try to deal with today. Hopefully there'll be opportunities for you to talk and also to interact. I suspect I'll plant a few ideas, rather than come up with some serious conclusions at the end, because I think there's more stuff in here than 35 or 40 minutes actually allows.

OK, well, I've done my teacher training, as you probably have, and I thought I'd better have some aims: to explore how e-learning has been used to deliver personalised learning experiences to part-time adult learners, and to explore how e-tools can be used to enable learners to track their progress and evidence their achievement. So it's actually about the big P word, and looking at how people can actually know how much it is they've actually learnt. These are some of the things that we've been looking at today, and I probably ought not to lean on more buttons than one. The P word and the D word: we'll have a country walk; we'll look at a kissing solution; we'll look at swimming, and we'll hear the RARPA rap, and we'll look at something called Organised Self-Directed Learning, if we have time for all of that. Intrigued? Stay on. That's me, and that's our website, and that's how you spell my name.

People come across this document: Harnessing Technology. Just let me know if people are familiar with that? Thank you, some people here are, great. This is the Government's Policy Document on E-Learning, published about 18 months ago. It has lots of words in it, and here are just a few of them: "Every learner has a personalised space that supports their individual learning needs by September 2008". People are changing the date, and fiddling around with the exact wording, but that's actually a very significant target, and actually says something about what e-learning can be offering people. I know - because I wasn't here yesterday, but I came to the evening meal and asked the question of several people - that there was talk about the P word, personalisation. I don't wish to spend a lot of time

looking at definitions, these are just a couple of phrases that I picked up: "Learners can personalise their learning, selecting, accessing and using appropriate engaging and challenging digital media; and practitioners can tailor learning materials and experiences to better support the individual needs of each learner". The other word is the D word – the differentiation word – this is certainly very much alive and well in the area of adult learning, looking at ways in which people's learning experiences can be differentiated by both topic and interest, and also by level, so that people really can choose learning experiences which make sense to them. I tried to sort of synthesise these Ps and Ds together, enabling a choice of style and method of learning, work to individual goals, and making sure that the context is relevant. A lot of stuff here, but it's probably the kind of things that we're all very comfortable with, and certainly I've heard this kind of stuff said earlier today, certainly in relation to schoolchildren as well. This is the difference: I was sitting in a very inspired presentation one day, being told what wonderful things could be done online using a learning platform with FE students, and I came up with this theory. You may disagree with my figures, but I reckoned that for most people, if you're awake for 16 hours a day, seven days a week, that's 112 hours that you're awake. If you're a full-time student in FE, you might be studying for 20 hours – whether you're awake for all of that time's another matter, but you're kind of assuming that people are awake while they're in class – that comes to about 17.8% of their waking time. Somebody who's learning – this is four hours a week as an adult – may only be learning for 3.5% of their waking time. And that has very serious, significant consequences for how we need to be smart in adult and community learning about using technology. We need to find the right applications, and we need to use them in a poignant way. OK, this is the little walk I'd like to take you on, because that's all the high level stuff. I'd like to introduce you to a group of students. Any guesses what they're studying? Map-reading. That's great. And what do they want to learn? Well let's see what Dawn's got to tell us.

[Video clip]

Dawn:

I'd like to gain more confidence, to the point where I can actually plan a walk, and actually lead the walk, without getting nervous about it; to actually confidently do that.

Instructor:

So a lot of it's about confidence.

Dawn:

Yes, yes.

Instructor:

It's about being really, really in tune with all the maps, then we'll...

Dawn:

Yes, and having friends who are walkers makes me feel a little bit insecure, because they know... you know, they're very confident, and they'll say, oh, let's go off here, let's go off there. And I do have the opportunity to plan a walk over Christmas, and I'm very excited, and I'd like to be more focused.

Instructor:

Right, OK.

[Clip ends]

Alastair:

Recorded on a PDA at the beginning of the class, while everybody else was actually present, and then subsequently chopped into small pieces. And she had the opportunity to listen to that a couple of times later on in the course. Obviously those are her course aims, rather than her clear objectives, but her objectives in terms of specific skills grew from

that, and she was actually able to document those. Anyway the others all have a story to tell; we don't have time to hear it, I'm afraid. We're going to go on to how we actually constructed a learning experience for these people. We were using a learning platform called Moodle. Have people come across Moodle? Gosh, yes. Do you know, every month that goes by and you ask that question, there are more nods; it's becoming definitely very, very well known; an open source learning platform devised originally in Australia, but now very widely used. And now within the Moodle it was organised by week, but also we had a clear understanding of different types of resources. So there were resources which were relevant just for the staff, so that they were up to speed with what they needed to be able to do; there were the core activities, which really everybody on the course needed to be engaged in; and then – this is I think the interesting bit – the extension activities or the personalised activities, where people were actually doing things which specifically related to them. OK, this is where I come to my able assistant. Do you have a mike? OK, there's a prize here. You know that moment, when you think somebody's going to come round, and you're really embarrassed? Well, don't be embarrassed. Leap out at him, because you might win the prize. Tim's going to bring this round, and he's actually going to ask somebody to fish one of these activities out of the bag. While he's doing that, Sanjeet very kindly over here has agreed to be the person who hangs them up. Could you tell us what you've got, please?

Male audience member 1:

Preparing for inspection: information for staff; issue number one, 13 weeks to go.

Alastair:

So it's a document preparing staff for inspection. Thanks. If you could pass that to Sanjeet, please. Did you get a prize with it?

Male audience member 1:

I haven't got any prize yet.

Alastair:

Oh I'm sorry. Bad luck. OK, so Sanjeet, that's definitely information for staff, so put that at the bottom. Have we got somebody else to pull, please?

Female audience member 1:

This is a booklet on the story of access in the Peak District.

Alastair:

Thank you very much. So if you give that to Sanjeet... That's great. OK this is a booklet that tells a bit of the history of how the right to roam was originally fought for back in the 1930s. That wasn't a core piece of activity, that was actually an extension activity that some students decided they wanted to get involved in. OK, next one, thanks.

Female audience member 2:

OK, we have a web blog about maps.

Alastair:

OK, so it's a blog, a web blog. Thanks very much. If you could collect that... Actually again, that was something which not all students engaged in, so it's just an extension activity. Some people weren't engaged in that. Next one.

Female audience member 3:

What a surprise, some nice Cadbury things.

Alastair:

Oh, we have a winner. Hooray! OK, what happens here is, you hold on to the chocolate buttons, but you have to tell us what the other bit says.

Female audience member 3:

It says: Forum.

Alastair:

So it's an online discussion forum. OK, thanks. If you give that to Tim, and pass that to Sanjeet... The online discussion forum was for everybody, so that goes in this section here. And do we have another one?

Female audience member 4:

I didn't get a prize, but we've got audio self-assessment.

Alastair:

OK, thank you very much, let's put that one down. That's the bit you've actually already heard, the self-assessment done on an mp3 player, or a little PDA. We'll have one more, Tim. That was everybody, that was a core activity.

Female audience member 5:

This says Islamic compass.

Alastair:

OK right. So somebody actually discovered that there is something called an Islamic compass which points you to Mecca, and actually there's a whole set of information which helps you first of all find out the magnetic variation of the particular place, but also the angle. So that was a piece of extension work which people did in their own time.

OK, I think we have enough. Could I thank my assistant, or could you thank them? OK, there's more. And the more looks a bit like this. So there were a whole range of resources. I think the important thing is that of course, it wasn't a washing line, it was actually an online resource, but the washing line at the three levels proved a very useful way of us indicating which resources we were putting online for the staff, which resources were essential for the learners, and which resources were extension activities and which developed as a result of what the learners were interested in. We had the little thing about access. Some of you may know that there have been some ongoing changes in legislation about the countryside and quite recently there was an Act of Parliament called the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, which allowed people to roam on lots of wild country. There was actually a debate on the forum about how that's being implemented, and whether people were using it responsibly. So people were actually engaging with those facts in a very discursive way. OK, this was another use of the forum, but this was definitely personalised, because that story of access, one of the learners was particularly interested in that and decided to do a piece of study on it, and use the forum as the way to share that. And frankly, with 3.8% of their waking week meeting together as learners, they would not have had time to share the richness of the history about this. Some of you may very well know, there's a lot of very emotional history about that right being fought for, and that was very well represented on the forum.

The story about the Islamic compass, somebody else was very interested in that, and we've already touched on the way that that was researched. The maps that we used on the course were mainly Ordnance Survey maps, but this is actually a specialist map for the sport of orienteering – and we have people from Sweden here, I think, yes – a sport that came from Sweden. So there was somebody else who looked into that. OK. The subject matter is less important than the principle of the way that people were actually using the forum to explore and then share with each other. This was a bit of a downer for the group, because on one of their walks they came across what should have been a footpath and turned out to be a fence. It was a blocked path, and they were outraged at this, and the forum, which is at the bottom there, became very busy with people discussing over the weeks what they should do about it. Eventually somebody found the e-mail address of the Rights of Way Officer, and they decided that rather than send one e-mail, they'd send three. They thought it would be really rather more powerful. And they got no reply, and

they got very angry about it, so they sent extra e-mails. And then somebody actually phoned up, to discover that the person was off ill, and somebody else was very apologetic, and there was a whole discussion, a saga that emerged there about this blocked footpath. But it was all shared on there. This lady Lynne then went to a second-hand bookshop, and she found a War Office Map-reading Manual from the 1950s, and decided it was far more informative than anything that was going on in the course, and that she would take sections of it and post those to the forum every week - pointing out that in the 1950s, one or two terms were slightly different - but in principle the practice was much the same. You can see the smile on her face with that book - she treasured it, really she did. And I think that was really quite special. She was not taking the information from the tutor as gospel truth, she was actually going out and finding another source of information, and creating her own version, and in the end, her skills were a combination of that manual from the 1950s, and what happened on the course.

Have people come across wikis? What does wiki mean? Quick, quick, quick, thanks. This was a wiki that the group put together on how to plan a walk, and what was particularly interesting is that you could read it and hear the voices of different members of the group. For example, some of the slower walkers were very keen to point out that it was important not to go on for too long, have too long walks, and other people who have a particular interest in different types of landscape made sure that those were featured there. As a result of doing the wiki they produced a leaflet, which was produced in considerable numbers and distributed, so there was actually an artefact which came out of that collaborative learning, and I think as an example of social constructivism happening there, with people working together, discussing and then producing something, I think was quite interesting. Another artefact was the book on walks that was only produced by three people, and if we'd had time to hang that up, that would have gone on the top there, as definitely a differentiated activity. But those three produced that.

[Video clip]

We came out on the group walk, and found the area was blocked, and a number of us all e-mailed Derbyshire County Council, and persevered when we had no reply. And finally we had a message from them, after about six months, to say that now there was a kissing gate in place.

[end of clip]

Alastair:

A bit of a success, really. Why is it such a naff video, do you think? Well it was done on a still camera, actually. But there's no one in shot, really. Any thoughts as to why that might be the case? The gate was in shot, wasn't it? Yes. Any other ideas? No, there was a lot of people there. Nobody wanted to be in shot. They all said they're perfectly happy to actually record this and be heard on voice, but other than somebody who was just slightly off shot, they all said they did not want their images. And I think this is a really important point about the collection of digital assets, because for those people telling their story was important, doing it in an audio manner was fine, but actually having their images on screen talking, they were very unhappy with. And that's a sort of theme that we may come back to.

You might like to consider - I think this is really what I've been hoping that you've been thinking about - how e-learning can contribute to differentiated and personalised learning experiences. And if we don't want the long words, how could we use e-learning to make learning make sense for our learners, so that it is actually responsive to what they want to do? I thought I might just try and see if I could mesmerise you with this. I don't know if it's working. I'd just like very quickly, if I may, to touch on the issue of using technology to allow learners to track their own progress. And we have in adult education a system which is called RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement), and the sorts of practices that you've seen of encouraging people to use very quick and easily accessible

methods to record their thoughts on a course are very much part of this. Steve over here helped us create this.

[Music - RARPA rap]

Alastair:

I think it was a bit tongue in cheek there, actually, saying that some of the words that were being thrown out in all the documents sounded a little bit gobbledegook, and actually what this needed was to be brought a little bit down-market. And certainly we looked at using a whole range of these types of devices to allow people to track their own progress and achievement. I'm going to buzz through some of these, actually, to get to the interesting bits. RARPA isn't rocket science, and if you don't work in the adult and community learning sector, you'll just say, this is good practice, and of course it is. Having clear aims at the beginning, having good initial assessment, working with learners to identify appropriately challenging objectives – that's the personalisation bit, where they're deciding exactly what they want to do, offering formative assessment, and then end of programme assessment. And I'd just like to quickly give you a few examples and thoughts on the way that technology can be used particularly for the formative assessment. Just have a listen to this.

[Music – examples of guitar playing at several stages in a course]

Alastair:

That's a guitar student, week four... and week eleven. Right, OK, that's quite impressive. I think that one tells a very clear tale. This one I'm not quite so sure about. It was a swimming class, and they argued very strongly that they couldn't take bits of paper into the swimming pool, for people to sit and start ticking boxes and writing learning objectives. So they actually took images, using a digital camera, obviously taking care to keep that dry. Now it's a long time since I learnt to swim. My personal view on these is that the images probably mean an awful lot to the person who was engaged in this, and that floating face down in the water probably was a very significant stage for that person in their learning. But I think we need to be told that. I think there actually needs to be some text, or some audio, which just kind of gives that additional explanation. Because just by itself I think it doesn't tell the whole story.

OK, this is just the use of a web blog, and Tim's going to play the part of a student of Italian cookery.

Tim [reading from student blog]:

We made spaghetti bolognese, using mince, fresh tomatoes, onions and garlic. Students from the next door class came in at the end and all had a taste.

Alastair:

So the first blog entry is a very specific piece of information about how the course actually took place. But you're still on, Tim, because the next day the student logged on and was a bit more reflective.

Tim [reading from student blog]:

I stuck closely to the recipe, and the sauce was less runny than I usually make. I like garlic so I used a lot of it, but the people in the group said they liked the taste but were worried their breath would smell. So I will need to take account of that next time I make bolognese.

Alastair:

Thanks very much, well done. So that's the initial record of what happened, and then a very swift reflection. Sanjeev's very kindly agreed to be the tutor and read the tutor comments.

Sanjeet [reading tutor comments in student blog]:

This really was one of your best dishes yet. Your decision to be stricter with yourself about

use of the recipe really paid off. I would not worry too much about the garlic complaints, people should expect it in Italian cookery.

Alastair:

Thanks very much, OK, so that's a comment from the tutor. Actually this blog includes some peer review as well, so this is another student logging in with something to say. Steve.

Steve [reading from peer comment in student blog]:

I did like your spag bol, for once I think yours was better than mine. A bit of parmesan would have just finished it off, though.

Alastair:

Thanks very much, OK. So you've got four blog entries, all of which tell part of the tale of the success and the way that person's moving on. This we'll just have a quick look at. This is not a learner drawing. This is actually in Cheshire County Council, and it's the tutor's demonstration video, to show how they may use video to track the confidence of people in a drawing class. They decided that they didn't want just to record the images that people had drawn, they wanted to notice how people were going about the drawing. And on the first one you may notice that there was a lot of rubbing out, a lot of rather tentative drawing. This is supposed to be half-way through the course. This is a simulation, and this is supposed to be at the end of the course where the person is certainly drawing with a lot more confidence. There we are. My personal view on this is that it's kind of hammed up in order to demonstrate the practice. I'd be much more convinced if I'd actually seen this used with learners, because I suspect you'd have to be recording an awful lot of their drawing in order really to get the evidence that showed the progress. But I may be a sceptic, and they may have ways of collecting that in a way that's manageable.

So there's a book called Signalling Success. It takes really these two-fold approaches: make learners feel that they're actually in control of any data that's collected, it's not collected about them, it's collected for them; and fit the whole business of evidence collection seamlessly into activities, don't force people to be videoed, if that experience of being videoed is something that is going to traumatise them for the rest of the session and distract them. It needs to be embedded in the activity. We call this Signalling Success. We tried to look at personalised and differentiated learning. I wanted just to tell you about some work we've been doing with colleagues in the Slovenian Institute for Adult Learning, where they have invented this wonderful term, which seems like a contradiction in English: centres for organised self-directed learning. Now it seems a bit of a contradiction, but actually I think we know what they mean. And they're actually talking about people directing their learning, but with the right kind of organisational support. How do we achieve that? Thank you for listening.

Tim:

Alastair, we do have possibly time for a question or two. Questions for Alastair please?

Q:

You've shown us a lot of ways in which we can collect evidence of learning and people can demonstrate progress. Some people would say though – and I'm not one of them – but some people would say, well how do you moderate that? How do you actually get agreement across centres that certain evidence that's been collected is valid evidence, is reasonable evidence, demonstrates the learning that's expected?

Alastair:

OK, yes, I understand the question, and I think it's particularly relevant where you're talking about accredited courses, where there's a level that needs to be moderated. The RARPA system was actually devised specifically for non-accredited courses in order to replace the final assessment that exists there. So the philosophy of RARPA is very much distance travelled, rather than arrival at a particular level. And that potentially is the real

personalisation about this, because if you define the learner's individual objectives at the beginning, then so long as people have made satisfactory progress towards that, then that is good learning. Two of the other learners who we could have listened to if we'd had time, one of them specifically said, on this course the most important thing for me is to learn about compasses; and his wife said, the most important thing for me on this course is not to have to learn about compasses. Now those people both had a legitimate place on that course, having defined perfectly reasonable objectives for themselves. Then the job of this system... the system is moderated, rather than the actual data, OK? And the system has to be verified by the LSC and is looked at by inspectors. But the actual data itself is personal to the learner.

Q:

The course you talked about was about map-reading and learning to read maps, and you're working with adults, but a lot of the tools you're using, like blogs and wikis, I'm sure some of them had never met before. How much of the course got taken up with having to teach them how to use the tools to actually participate in the course?

Alastair:

Yes, I understand. So what we're talking about is working with people who may be, to use that term, digital immigrants, people who haven't grown up in a digital world. And I think that's a key point, because it's very important that people who come to learn a particular subject, whether it's Italian cookery or map-reading or even basic English, feel that they're making progress in the topic that they've come to learn, and that somebody hasn't actually said, well before you can do anything, sit down, you have to have three weeks on ICT. I totally understand that. I think there are techniques for doing this, and the biggest challenge is to keep everybody together, because usually there will be a proportion of people who are comfortable with this, and there are some who aren't. I think that this is an area where the tutor does need to use sensitivity, because it will not be the same for every group. But there are certain techniques which can be really powerful. Actually printing out on paper a blog can be an important way of engaging people who are not already using the blog, and let them see, a) the kind of content that other people are producing, and actually to validate... It's a strange world, but still putting stuff on paper occasionally can actually validate stuff which exists digitally. Not every blog every week, but just at an early stage. The other thing - there are no simple answers to this - but peer support can be really powerful; if there's an acceptance within the group that this is something you help each other with, because you need to do it in order to get to the greater good, that really has been seen to be very, very effective. I don't think I've completely answered this question, because I think it's a big one that really needs to be dealt with subtly and individually.

Q:

Hi, I don't know very much about adult education, actually. It's really quite a simple question: how widespread do you think this sort of approach is? I'm aware that there are a whole different load of providers of adult education, I suppose, I've heard of the WEA, I know about council provision and that kind of thing. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the landscape, and how it fits into it.

Alastair:

Yes, sure. I kind of avoided all that background, because it would have taken a bit of time. Basically the landscape is this: that each of the 150 Local Education Authorities in England has some involvement in adult education. The law's slightly changed, but essentially they either deliver it directly themselves, or they contract it out to someone else. In addition, there are voluntary organisations, like the Workers' Educational Association and others, which deliver. In terms of how far this approach is adopted, from September of this year, the Learning and Skills Council made it a requirement of funding that there was a RARPA process in place. They didn't say how people should apply it, but the documentation has a very interesting phrase, which is: ideally this is applied in a paper-light manner. In practice, a lot of people do it with tick-boxes and big documents that are individual learning plans. In reality the fit for purpose approach is, I think, closer to what we've talked about here. But I

don't think paper's completely out of the window.

References

RARPA: www.niace.org.uk/Projects/RARPA/Default.htm

Signalling Success publication: www.niace.org.uk/publications/S/signalling.asp