

## Futurelab conference transcript

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

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Rich Mix, London

#### Extending the learning community

Steve Thompson, Community Media Animator

##### Steve:

In my work I use technology failure as a technique because, when it goes wrong for me, the learners love it because they're, oh wow, it goes wrong for you too. And the world isn't falling apart because it's gone wrong. Because it does quite a bit. The children I work with, some of them are 60 years old; it's right across the board. I'm going to show you some examples and typically I've probably put too much in here and I'm going to overrun.

I'm going to talk about digital villages. It's a term I've heard and it could apply to many different things but I use the term to refer to a learning space that is the entire community. So what is a digital village? Well, I figure, in my work, it's this and I think one of the most important things about most human behaviour is storytelling on whatever level, all kinds of stories, using all kinds of different media. And specifically these are the things that we do in these digital villages and this is how we do it. I tend to use these; there's a lot of free and open source software and the reason for that is because I find myself working in a lot of centres where Microsoft Word had been put in and nothing else. And the creative stuff that I like to do, the tools aren't there. And immediately you're looking at a licence x 10, so by using free and open source tools, it means you can give people the very tool that they've just learned to use to take home so it becomes sustainable and replicable and there are some very good open source tools out there to be had. So where are they? And I said initially I'd talk about Skinningrove and Hunwick, but since I said I'd do this they've been popping up all over the place and everybody wants to do it. So I'm going to limit it to just four because each of them has something different about them.



And let's go to east Middlesbrough first. This is a project that began last summer, an exercise called Planning for Real. This community is high or low, depending on your viewpoint, on the social deprivation league table. They're very high, which means that they're very low. And what you see in the picture here is the headcam and again it's using something, not for what it was designed for, but in a way that gets people's attention. It's a £30 headcam fixed on to the little girl's head there and the lad next to her in the backpack has a laptop.



So she becomes a roving reporter with a headcam on her head. Let me show you what this shot.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/media/TS32/files/1124296022.mov](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/media/TS32/files/1124296022.mov)]

I find it interesting how readily people of any age will emulate media. That was that little girl being a media person as in News at 10. "There's a person going about his own ordinary daily." The 'Planning For Real' process had the kids build a model of their community which is part of the community consultation exercise. My part in this, which had not been in this exercise before, is the digital media aspect of it. They build a model of their community and then the model goes on tour of the community and people come in and they place cards on the model of things they'd like to see changed about their community. But, in this instance, we gathered digital media of them talking about their community. If it was kids it was off camera; if it was adults it was to camera. The kids went out and collected images for the website; every camera came back with that core on it of stuff they didn't like. So this project was starting up again – that was one community – but there are now six communities in east Middlesbrough and it will be interesting to see how this develops, whether or not an urban community could become what you call a digital village, using digital media to express themselves. (See [www.ts3.org.uk](http://www.ts3.org.uk).)

And now we go north to Hunwick. Hunwick is quite a rural area and the focal point of this project is the primary school there, who wanted to reach out to the community and get the community involved in their school.



So the notion of the digital village was the way to do it and they promoted the idea of the digital village and people came in to the school and we ran what we called a web weekend where, over the weekend, we built the Hunwick.org.uk website. And it's very interesting because lots of big people came in and sat on very small chairs but there's loads of laptops in there. There's no kids in that picture but there were lots there. And they collected digital scanned photographs relating to that community and they've built quite an extensive image gallery of Hunwick and also scanned stuff from the art class. So their whole personality went into this website. The headcam came out again. I must show you this: you'll be able to see this on the web. That lad went out and shot an hour's worth of video which, to some

people, is like an art house movie and to others it's like watching paint dry. But he went and visited his mum and he went all round the village, so you see the whole village on the headcam. I didn't tell him this but, every time he approached somebody, he covered the camera and said, missus, do you mind if you go on camera. I thought that was incredible that he understood not to put someone in shot until he'd asked them. They've built a timeline of images from the entire community, going back to 1870, to this kind of picture of school images. All the ex-pats are coming in and saying that lad on the back, left-hand side, that's me and I now live in Canada or wherever. In this particular image the lad on the front row on the far right-hand side is somebody of note; it's actually the lad on the bottom left-hand side of this picture. And this brings home to me that the fascination of every community has lots of stories and they love to tell them and the website's a great way of doing that. These are some of the pictures I pulled at random from that timeline.



If you go and visit you'll find lots of fascinating photographs. As part of this process as well they wanted to get the parent and child working together approach, so we had a thing called Family Faces where the children came in with their parents and scanned images and created some media. And there's a couple of examples here. Delucy is a combination of the two names, the child and her mother.

[Video clips - see external links: [www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/hedley.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/hedley.wmv) and [www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/edmundsun.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/edmundsun.wmv)]

And we did several of those. So moving down the coast to Skinningrove. I've been working with Skinningrove for quite some time now, going back to 2000. And that's Skinningrove. The main feature of Skinningrove, it has what was a beck, now designated a river, running through it. On the website there are about 30 hotspots linking to different major items. You can click on somebody's house and they'll come up and talk to you. Now they won't talk to you, you'll hear them. If you click on the beach they have a magnificent bonfire every year and there's a link to their bonfire website there. And also up on the hillside, those aren't houses; those are pigeon creels. There is a massive interest in pigeon-keeping in Skinningrove. The school in Skinningrove is no longer there but the community have bought it and it is now their community centre so they learn in the school, but children aren't taught there any longer. Children are taught there but not through formal education; they come in and do stuff. Now this was an important thing that occurred not long into 2000. The beck flooded the village and these are photographs at the time. The only photographs were taken by the people in the village because they're a little bit difficult to get to and, as it says there, the pictures the media couldn't bring you. And they shot some video. This wasn't originally digital; this was just shot on a VHS camera, the old analogue things. So there they are taking charge of their own media and reporting on a pretty catastrophic event. But it also brought the community together and made them strong and they used their website to campaign for river status for that beck that runs through the middle because that affords them greater protection with the powers that be. And it is now a river where it was a beck, so it was pretty catastrophic but it did galvanise the community. And not long after that they had cause to celebrate and be a little bit more cheerful.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/pub.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/futurelab/pub.wmv)]

What's happening there, that's Skinningrove winning the world's first ever online pub quiz.

It was between Timms Coffee House down in Skinningrove and the Black Bull in Trimdon and the victory was made all the more sweet because of the team leader in Trimdon (PM Tony Blair). Now last time I showed this somebody said that they'd probably lost because he refused to answer any questions. So there is another story to this and I'm not here to tell this today but that really puts Skinningrove on the map and they hosted training sessions from across the country for people to come and learn how to use the software we later developed to run online quizzes. It doesn't have to be in a pub; it's great when it is. But it can be between a community centre, between different classes in a school – and we do that up in Teesside – and we've got the software to do that. And that's online. (See [www.tvcm.co.uk/comchall.](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/comchall.))

I took this screenshot of the Skinningrove website yesterday so this is the most recent thing. These guys are posting stuff on the website all the time; this is a blog using open source software and this is them reporting on something going on in the community at the moment which is called Doorstep Green, which is developing a green area in a largely derelict area of the village. And the other thing they've embraced is digital storytelling, and digital storytelling is something that I've heard lots of people talk about but it can exist in different fashions. So here is a story in nothing more than text and images but it was like a book. And the story is of the Sylvania running aground on Skinningrove beach about 100 years ago.



And when it broke free of its moorings it left an anchor embedded and at low tide one day they took it into their minds to go and dig it up and bring it in. And there it is in situ in the village.



But they've told the story on the website as well and the point I'm making is that they wouldn't necessarily learn to do digital images, blogs and stuff like that, but they want to tell the story so to tell the story they've got to learn the stuff to do it. I find poetry in Skinningrove and lots of places, not necessarily world shattering, deep poetry, but the

common or garden poetry that tells a story. And they've put this up on the website and this poem tells a story about pigeon shit. And just remember that because that story is going to come up again a little bit later but in a different medium. But the interesting thing is that it may not mean anything to us but it's myth, folklore and legend in that community about Tommy's escapades with his pigeons. Here's a couple of people from Skinningrove, Tommy and Barry, and they said that they were the world's slowest typists so did they really have to type stuff into the blog?



So I introduced them to Audacity, which is open source open audio software and they started to record stuff which became, we call it, Radio Skinningrove. I'm going to play you a piece.

[Audio clip - see external link:

[www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1144091882.mp3%22](http://www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1144091882.mp3%22)]

They're not only the world's slowest typists, they're also the world's slowest speakers but that was their first show. And the paraphernalia there, I have to tell you, that's what they used. It's from the Pound Shop. It's a £1 microphone, not this one, another one. And the other piece I'm going to play in a minute, the Community Media Association asked me to go and speak to some people from South Yorkshire to introduce them to the notions of using media in this fashion. And they said, as they did on a previous occasion, could you bring some real people. And I thought, so what am I? And I took Barry and Tommy and it really made an impact because Barry and Tommy aren't used to doing that kind of thing so it's very honest. And the people in Barnsley that we were visiting then could see that these were people exactly like them, using media. And so in the hotel room that night we made another show to play them the next day, again using the £1 microphone, and I think you'll see a marked difference. Now, it could be the alcohol that was consumed; I would like to think that I trained them up to perform a little bit better.

[Audeo clip - see external link: [www.stmedia.org/audio/barnsley.mp3](http://www.stmedia.org/audio/barnsley.mp3)]

I say, that was a better presentation, wasn't it? And there's no fear of the technology; they just do stuff. Now, I've accidentally moved on to this a couple of times. Like I said, I work with children who are definitely children but I also work with children who are adult children because people can be children right through their lives. I know I am. So after we'd done a bunch of stuff they said, well, what shall we do now. And I said, well, I could run some animation classes for the kids, if you like, and they said tell us about that. So we quickly made a blu-tac person, and I hasten to add that the backdrop of the UK Online sign is purely coincidental and if it appears that there's anything derogatory being said about UK Online it is unintentional. Because the guy supplying the audio track asked me to take it down off the site; he said this is a sacking offence. You might not see it that way. But anyway we made Mr Blu-tac and produced a little piece of animation.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/Mr\\_Blu\\_Tack.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/Mr_Blu_Tack.wmv)]

There you go, look out Disney. So they said "stuff the kids", we're doing that. And I thought, well, fine. Why should having fun and doing animation be the sole domain of kids? And the kids get this stuff at school. So we ran some sessions and we produced some animations to work with teams of people and they showed quite a bit of ingenuity. I want to show you one of the animations made during those sessions.

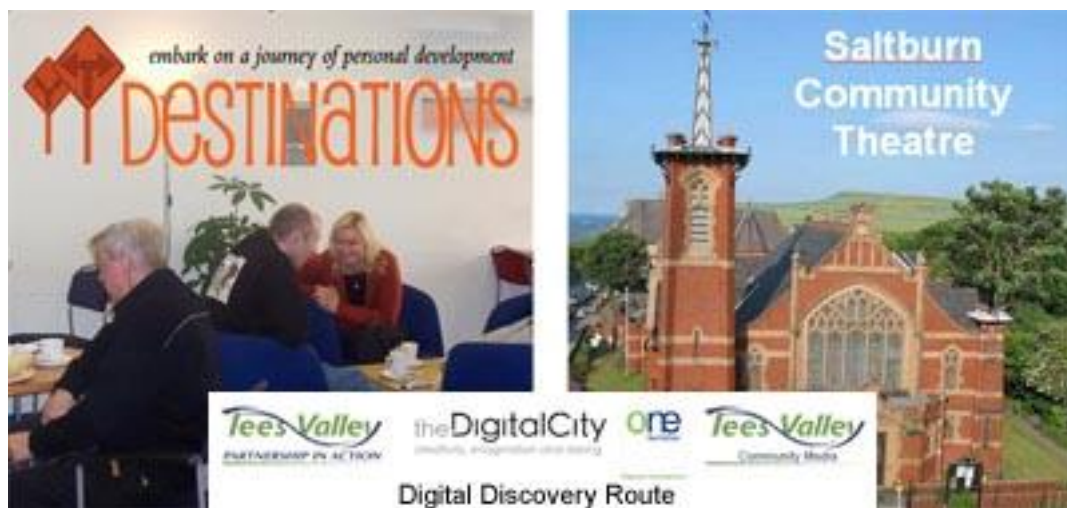
[Video clip - see external link: [www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1149188764.wmv](http://www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1149188764.wmv)]

And that does tell us two stories of Skinningrove. There are ironstone mining, former fishing – there's not a lot of fishing now – but that was what the community was about. So this story is very much about the community and we're going to go to Saltburn now. Just remember that animation because it's going to crop up again a little bit later, as is the pigeon shit, if you'll pardon the expression. Saltburn: there are two locations involved in the activity in Saltburn and during the summer we put together a team and ran a webcast from the Saltburn Folk Festival.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/folkfest\\_0001.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/folkfest_0001.wmv)]

And the interesting thing is that the team involved in that, just ordinary people, functioned exactly like the BBC, going out and shooting the venues, bringing them back to the main centre where we were streaming the stuff from. Others went out with digital cameras and built the picture wall, uploaded pictures which went into this picture wall, hundreds of them, just a few here. They look like that all year round in Saltburn, by the way.

And these are the two centres in Saltburn that are engaged in this work.



This is the Saltburn Community Theatre where we used these laptops in the hall and produced some digital stories, and just showed them how to use digital audio first, and then how to use Windows Moviemaker just to drop those pictures in and amalgamate images and audio. And one woman didn't actually have any pictures to create a story with and she found on the laptop some of the work that Skinningrove had done so she used those images to create a new story. And I think it's quite interesting.



[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/pam.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/pam.wmv)]

So those images from a different story were appropriated for this story. This is another story posted by someone else, and you remember how I told you that teachers were the hardest people to teach? This is quite remarkable because this is a teacher and she actually went home and did the stuff before she'd even been taught how to do it. She intuitively was able to put something together.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/VIEWSWITHTITLES.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/VIEWSWITHTITLES.wmv)]

Who wants to move to Saltburn tomorrow? I'm drawing to a close. And the other venue is an internet café and it's also a place where formal learning takes place. I don't deliver the formal learning. I'm not allowed to go in places where UCPD's being taught because it's too loud when I'm there, I've been told. And this is university courses down there in Saltburn and I was approached last year about these courses. There was a 45% drop-off rate and could I come up with any ideas to maybe get some retention in the people there, maybe support them or increase the numbers through the door. So on the open day last year I went down dressed as Santa Claus and the intake was up by 25% after we'd done the sessions. I can't claim I increased the numbers single handed but I may have helped.



And I like the thing about this: digital imaging is alright as something to learn but if you have an application, a reason to do it, then that makes it great. And these people have done a bit of this but this is using layers and selections and quite advanced techniques, and

they all did it, no problem. So the next open day was Easter and the School of Computing said – has anybody guessed it? And I've still got the e-mail from the School Manager of the School of Computing authorising the expenditure on a bunny outfit.



And what they created during those sessions was some multimedia Easter eggs.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/Movie.wmv](http://www.tvcm.co.uk/cmc/uploads/Movie.wmv)]

And now we've got to the point where we have a club, so these are people undertaking formal training, but also attending a club on a different evening of the week. Luckily, Adam on the far right-hand side there offered to be a teaching assistant so he's looking after them tonight. It will be interesting to see what they blog up. So what happens during this club is they get support with the coursework that they're doing, ie help with homework, practical applications for the things they're learning. If they're doing desktop publishing they can actually add what they've produced to the blog; if they're doing digital images they can put them into the gallery or they can apply all of these skills and combine it together into the digital stories you've seen, or animations, whatever, a reason to be learning something because there's an end product. And they blog about the development on the club website. But, most of all, they have fun and that seems to be a big element because it's oversubscribed and they all come every week. I won't play this because it's a piece of audio that they did last week which is not very good because they're just learning to do it. An interesting thing is that these two venues are interchangeable because some of the work that the club produces will be exhibited in the community theatre which has a film screen, a full-sized screen and some of the sessions that the theatre group have done have been done in 'Destinations', so they're interchangeable.

I'm just going to finish off by taking you back to Skinningrove. This is the poem you saw but now in a multimedia environment. It shows that they've learned new skills and have a thirst for more as well. They've created a club called Skinnimation and they're creating an animation of the Skinningrove myth of the Skinningrove Merman. It's clear from this that they haven't quite learned about copyright yet, for which I apologise. I'm going to show them the one where that lady appropriated their pictures for her story and then, if they're outraged, I'll explain to them about copyright, or at least permissions. So, to conclude, this is the animation from Skinningrove called Tommy's Plight. By the way, that's Tommy. Do you recognise him from the other picture? It turns out there was a Plasticine model maker in Skinningrove to rival Wallace and Gromit.

[Video clip - see external link: [www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1149187589.wmv](http://www.neukol.org.uk/media/skinningrove/files/1149187589.wmv)]

I wanted to take you to the end so you could see that out-take because this is interesting, about the ingenuity of people doing stuff. The models fell over because they were too heavy so, remember what I said about their interest in pigeon keeping? During the meeting to discuss the new production on Disney-like scale of the Merman, they decided that what they would use would be dummy pigeon eggs, which they use during the breeding season, which are the right shape and size of a head but, like all the other heads in Skinningrove, they're hollow. And then they'd apply the features and they've now got a model which

doesn't have the same weight in the head and they've figured it out for themselves, amazing. So that's it from me. Thank you.

**Chair:**

Thanks very much, Steve. I think we've got the workshop for the next conference sorted: it's definitely going to feature Plasticine and £1 microphones. I think we have a few minutes for questions if there are any for Steve.

**Q:**

Just out of interest, can you tell us what practical and potential employment opportunities are coming out of these kinds of experiences?

**Steve:**

Possibly none whatsoever. Thankfully I'm not charged with that task. The whole process is around the notion of digital inclusion and it would be like saying if I learnt to drive I would get a job and you wouldn't. But if you learned to drive there is a skill that would be applicable and would help you get a job. So if you gained digital skills, if you grow as a person, if you're more confident, all these things that happened within these sessions, then those persons become more employable. What they don't have is this creative use of digital technology which might be life-enhancing for them. But luckily it's a long time since I had to tick the box how many jobs have you created, and that's not my role and I'm quite happy that it's not. But, if somebody gains some skills or at least some confidence to help them go ahead and do that, then that's great.

**Q:**

The outcomes they've produced are clearly very good. But is there any more formal assessment of those skills that they've learned?

**Steve:**

No. But the place I showed you in Saltburn, quite a few of them have gone on to that place to take on the UCPD and take on more formal use of those kinds of things and learn a little bit more, that piece of paper that people talk about that they would be able to get. So this kind of work is largely informal. It goes down in reports, the east Middlesbrough stuff is part of the neighbourhood renewal process. The Hunwick thing was part of a project that Becta put in place and that was reported upon. And down there in East Cleveland, which is Saltburn and Skinningrove and a whole bunch of other places, we were aware of the progression route of people going on to more formal stuff.