The role of traditional teaching institutions in global virtual learning.

J. Dyer and, J. Jonson
TheCademy, Unit 2, Stansted courtyard, Takeley, Essex, UK

The phylogenesis of learning environments within the evolution of the internet and its global communities were noted not for their creation of opportunity for the individual learner but by the effective increase of productivity and widened participation by the institution. In other words, the design and objectives of most learning environments were orientated around efficient teaching and the 'effective teacher' rather than personalised education and the 'empowered learner'.

Research suggests that while virtual learning continues to be developed from within traditional institutions, conventional pedagogies and organisational rubrics will take precedence over learner-centered structures.

This paper looks at Notschool.net: A case study of a learning community created outside the strictures of traditional institutions which has been very successful with providing personalised learning for over 2000 disaffected young people. Working across cultural boundaries, this learning community enabled global learning in its simplest and most direct interpretation and highlighted the possibilities of a global community. It further suggested that 'global' learning is much less a barrier for the individual than it is for the institution.

This paper investigates the development of a new research project which seeks to inject the learned pedagogies and mechanisms of the virtual learning environment back into a bricks and mortar institution: Thereby challenging traditional foci of teaching and assessing the role of teaching institutions in the ever growing global virtual learning environment.

Keywords Virtual learning, personalized, Global communities.

1. Introduction

Current education systems around the world operate within a fundamental dilemma: That virtually every school age young person has to pass through a traditional 'bricks and mortar' institution whilst the global iteration of the Internet and the WWW is providing opportunities for virtual learning that far transcend the pedagogies and functions of traditional institutions in every aspect.
To 'pass though' not only means that the young persons experience is of buildings and classrooms, but also that their journey is managed by organisations and funding models that are inherently building focussed.

The birth of global virtual learning as a scion of virtual communities within the WWW is offering learners of all ages myriad opportunities for informal, collaborative and autodidactic learning outside any traditional boundaries whether they be geographical, temporal or pedagogical.

For the most part, rather than embracing the WWW and the Internet as a global resource, Traditional Teaching Institutions (TTIs) have sought to generate Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) that supposedly mediate the massive potential of the Internet into a format of access and community that benefits the learner.

By comparing the iteration of global VLEs against the paradigms of VLEs within TTIs, this paper seeks to assess the role of such TTIs in global virtual learning.

© FORMATEX 2006

2. What is a VLE?

The UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) states that a VLE is:

> "a specific piece of software that enables learners and staff to interact, and includes content delivery and tracking" (Becta 2005)

Greater detail by the same organisation states that:

> "'A VLE is a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources'. These integrated tools may be one product […] or an integrated set of individual, perhaps open-source, tools." (JISC 2006)

It appears that the references to VLEs focus upon the opportunity for TTI to improve their collegiate process and efficiency rather than significantly increase the opportunities for the learner. A search for other definitions of VLEs all orientate around the same "productivity model" by promoting process enhancement rather than creative opportunities.

3. What can the Internet offer?

It is easy to be over enthusiastic about the potential of Internet technology, but it is equally not unreasonable to start from the premise that anything is possible. YouTube and MySpace demonstrate how technology can provide an egalitarian community of content that is entirely user defined. Wikipedia gives a good example of information compiled, edited and monitored through equity on an enormous scale. World of War Craft has demonstrated how a virtual community can exist on a monumental scale and still have appeal to individuals as they share experiences:

> "With more than four million players World of Warcraft is the most popular online game or MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) and after just a few hours of play it is easy to understand its draw […..]There are also guilds to join, more formal groups of adventurers, that co-ordinate the abilities of their characters to take out the most powerful monsters and complete the most difficult quests." (BBC 2005)

There are a myriad communities of practice where many people share good practice, experience and support with one another where they are drawn together by an enthusiasm for a subject.

In all these examples, the members, contributors and participants involve themselves through an interest in a common subject, interest or experience. There are no delineations around age, geographical location or ability as you would expect in a school environment. These communities are generally open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for the participants to become involved when it suits them, for as little or as much time as they like.

4. Binding Traditional Teaching Formats with the Internet's potential.

In many commercial, social and academic circles, the Internet has being harnessed to radically change opportunity, process, perspective, audience and operation. Whole new organisations exist that could never have operated before, and many bricks and mortar organisations have found fundamentally different way of working online that either complimented or ran in parallel with their previous functions. Not so with the VLEs which appear to focus upon control, restriction and delivery to the extent that they add little or no value to the learner or consumer.

This perhaps is not entirely an Internet issue for education, but a wider technology issue:

© FORMATEX 2006

> "Depressingly, in education anticipating emerging trends has also been historically important so that we can confiscate the manifestations of those trends at the school door before they threaten to precipitate change. […] Education, rightly conservative with children's lives, is downright paranoid about technology, seeking to confiscate, assimilate, or smother it before any damage can be done!" (Heppell 2005 Quoted in Loveless 2001)

And rather than embracing the opportunities for creativity by learners….

> "we find those computers being sold into the classroom as a productivity tool to manage the registration and monitoring of these uni-aged classroom prisoners". (Loveless 2001)

The VLE is referenced as to exist within the collegiate process structure that necessarily prevents any sort of out-of-the box thinking.

Heppell, quoted by the University of Tasmania proposed the following set of dimensions for considering the differences between Creativity and Productivity.

Creativity	**Productivity**
quality assurance	Quality control
learning tools	Teaching machines
Standards	Standardisation
participative (people)	interactive (ICT)
Creative	Predictable
building community	delivering content

Heppell, Quoted website, University of Tasmania 2004

Heppell suggests that the difference between a creative education system and a productive education system reaches right the way to the employable outputs:

> "Countries […] emphasising creativity ahead of predictability and using ICT as a learning tool rather than a teaching machine will ensure a domestic supply of citizens making high value economic contributions to future national income." (Loveless 2001)

Conversely;

> "Countries who pursue the seemingly safe, but actually economically reckless, route of quality control, consuming a predictable curriculum with teaching machines delivering learning productivity but little creativity will find their workforce engaged at best in the low value jobs exported by other nation's burgeoning digital industries" (Loveless 2001)

From this analysis, it would be preferential to find keywords from the previous section defining VLEs relating to creativity; learner centred, participative and community. Sadly, the majority of the keywords are acutely "productivity" oriented.

5. Notschool.net. An exercise in creativity and learning freedom. (Johnson et al 2004)

The Notschool.net research was a proven asynchronous on-line learning community of young people who have been outside of traditional education systems in the long term. Notschool.net looked at ways of

© FORMATEX 2006

re-engaging disaffected young people back into learning. The Notschool.net philosophy was to remove all barriers to learning.

The on-line community was established in 2000 and reached the end of its fifth and final research phase in March 2006 when over 2200 young people had taken part in the project. (Duckworth 2005)
The Notschool.net structure was created to research an effective programme of reengagement for these disenfranchised young people. To this end, all processes and every part of the learning experience for the students was created from first principles looking at the most effective implementation of constructivist learning pedagogies. In this way, the entire VLE could be constructed to facilitate the creative dimensions discussed above without constraint by traditional or existing organisation constraints.

The effective principles of the Notschool.net model can be seen mapped against Heppell's creative criteria:

5.1. Quality assurance

Ensuring that the systems put in place to give the students as individuals access to every aspect of the community was always available and operational. Ensuring that every learning pathway selected by a student was facilitated. Notably, all of these measures in place ensured the system worked for the students – not that the students conformed to the system.

5.2. Learning tools

Investigating and constantly re-evaluating the functionality of the software running the community to ensure that, as far as possible, every learning style and every communication media was supported to allow the maximum potential for the young people.

5.3. Standards

Learning gains, accreditation models and negotiated learning pathways are quality assured to ensure that standards of excellence are achieved. The routes to these successes are not pre-determined in line with standardisation and this ensures that standards are associated with personal achievement and not failure.

5.4. Participative

The construction of the community focussed upon giving the members (the students) the opportunity to reach any subject area, discussion area whether formal or informal without prejudice. Similarly, the young people could skin their own access to the community so that what they felt was important could be accessed easily without having to negotiate through an adult-determined hierarchical structure of content, subject area or curriculum stage. The students were encouraged to explore the whole community of other learners without expectations based upon their age, gender or literacy level.

5.5. Creative

Without predetermined teaching journeys and success or failure points, the students were able to be far more created about their own approach to the subjects that interested them. They were encouraged to lead the decisions about the pathway that they wished to follow and to be responsible for finding the opportunities in this pathway for learning gains and personal developments.

5.6. Building community

All the students were 'researchers' to reflect their autonomous nature. Traditional names such as 'student' or 'pupil' imply an enhanced dependency upon teachers and 'the system' that dis-empowers them. Trained teachers in the community were referred to as Mentors to reflect their role supporting (mentoring) the young person through their learning journey rather than teachers prescribing the journey. Furthermore, such designations were not advertised in the community. Neither were student's age

© FORMATEX 2006

groups. This created an environment where all the participants whether students or adults could meet within any area of the community and formal learning relationships based upon shared interests of good practice. The significant result of these actions is that a true organic community can be created based around genuine relationships whether they be between individuals or groups; subject centred or socially motivated

7. Conclusions and further research

The development of the WWW and global virtual learning arenas is engendering a multitude of communities of practice that allow individuals to plan, control and capitalise upon their own informal and formal learning. TTIs have, to date, been unable to embrace these opportunities seeking instead to create VLEs that replicate the process driven 'productive' form of formal teaching.

What is crucial to recognise at this point is that whilst a creative approach to learning can include and recognise informal learning styles, a productive approach necessarily excludes informal learning gains. In simple terms, a TTI can only have an effective and active role within global virtual learning if it can embrace creative learning. Whilst it maintains a focus upon productive teaching, it will automatically exclude itself from such opportunities. At this juncture, such traditional organisations will fail the students that it seeks to empower for the work place and the global community. At this point, the role of the TTI in the global cultural marketplace is questioned.

The successes of Notschool.net suggested that the translation from a productive bias to a creative bias can not only work for an organisation, but can effectively support learners in their informal and holistic learning journey. What is relatively unknown to date, is whether TTIs can make this radical leap to ensure effective teaching and learning into the future. TheCademy is in the process of instigating a research programme that will seek to inject the learned pedagogies from Notschool.net back into the bricks and mortar of a number of TTIs to test the flexibility of the existing system and to analyse the extent to which creative and informal learning truly can be embedded in such Institutions. The outcomes of such a programme will have far reaching implications for the future of schools as we know them.

8. References

Becta 2005,	http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=248
JISC 2006	http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/InfoKits/effective-use-of-VLEs
BBC 2005	http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4294122.stm
Loveless 2001	ICTl, Pedagogy and the Curriculum: Subject to Change, Loveless and Ellis, 2001, Routledge
University of Tasmania	http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/ilwebb/Research/ICT.htm
Johnson 2004	Compiled from Internal Evaluations, 2004, Johnson, Dyer, TheCademy
Duckworth 2005	Compiled from external evaluations by Duckworth, J. 2005 TheCademy

© FORMATEX 2006