

Chapter 33

Evolving Online Learning: The Journey from Talking Heads to Ultraversity

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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom, the increased broadband speeds and the availability of mobile Internet access via 3G mobile phones and tablet computers, along with an ever growing number of free Wi-Fi hotspots located within urban areas becoming available, has meant that there are now more opportunities than ever to access online information. For the adult learner, technology considered innovative a decade ago to pioneering online communities of UK head teachers who collectively made up Talking Heads has now become commonplace, particularly in the guise of virtual learning environments (VLEs). This chapter sets out to show how the knowledge gained from those early communities of practice informed the development of the fully online Ultraversity degree, which in turn has been able to provide pointers to the possible framework for online learning provision in higher education. This is particularly pertinent for this sector of education in the UK, which is faced with raising course fees threefold. By making a greater number of university courses accessible online, available anytime, and from virtually anywhere, particularly via mobile Internet devices, an alternative and more affordable route to higher education in the UK and elsewhere in the world awaits to be developed.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-First Century technology perpetuates the revolution taking place into the myriad ways in which we are able to learn. An on-demand video accessible from YouTube viewed on a smart phone for example might demonstrate aspects of agricul-

ture, and in turn viewers can then generate dialogue and debate via the comments box underneath the video window in YouTube, making the viewing experience and thus the learning participative (Green 2012). Internet access enables such videos to be viewed at anytime, anywhere in the world (providing of course that the viewer has a suitable device for this purpose). This particular example of

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an online learning opportunity elicited comments from school students, who watched the video as part of their formal learning programme. Subsequently the students were able to contribute their thoughts, reactions and questions to the producer via the online comments text box mentioned previously. In this way, many other viewers would not only be able to view the video, but would also be able to follow the accompanying discussion. That same video can potentially attract a global audience, unrestricted by time zone, age or location.

Technology continues to open more doors to learning and thus provide further opportunities to share knowledge and understanding. Some of those same students mentioned above might well be motivated to revisit the same YouTube web page to not only view the same footage for revision purposes, but also in order to see whether others might have commented and thus added to their original observations. Here the imaginary line between formal and informal learning begin to blur, and becomes collaborative, growing the original knowledge available through the video, and enriching the learning experience. The ease with which information can now be accessed online via search engines has the potential to take the inquirer on a fascinating and usually illuminating journey in their pursuit of knowledge.

Internet technology has multiplied the opportunities for continued learning, and the speed at which new information can now be accessed may be illustrated by how quickly news reports from virtually any part of the world can be transmitted instantly to our computer screens or mobile devices. It is easy to forget that at one time during human history, a news item might not reach the population of a country until a carrier pigeon had flown a considerable distance from the news source, with a hand-written note of that news event strapped to its leg. Similarly increasing numbers of publications are becoming available online, although in the academic world this has led to a dichotomy of thinking; on the one hand, some senior academics want their work to be easily ac-

cessible to all, while on the other hand, publishers are being accused by those same academics of restricting access to that knowledge by levelling fees adjudged too costly for their students to access that information. (Gower, 2012)

This chapter will relate how one group of senior academics were introduced to an innovative and collaborative space on the web, were subsequently guided by their facilitators to form online communities of practice, and through their initial informal learning (and later the more formal learning process by way of online short course delivery) demonstrated the potential to their university facilitator colleagues for establishing a work-based, fully online degree course, designed to meet some of the many needs of adult learners who required a more flexible approach to higher education and formal learning than the more traditional routes to higher education provided. Specifically this chapter will cite examples drawn from the United Kingdom predominantly, since the commencement of this Millennium, and sets out to illustrate how using innovative and collaborative web spaces considered ground-breaking at the time, to enhance the professional development of newly appointed head teachers, demonstrated the potential for developing facilitated online degree course provision for adult learners. Given the significant milestone facing higher education in the UK, in respect of the impending threefold fee increase in course fees, due to the planned central government cuts in university funding, this chapter will suggest that the successful Ultraversity model for online undergraduate work based learning be considered as a financially viable alternative to the existing traditional, face-to-face model.

This chapter outlines the initial establishment of a pilot professional online community for school leaders (known as head teachers in the United Kingdom) in England. It demonstrates how the lessons learned from that pilot were incorporated into a national online resource, with the concept later transferring to similar online community projects in Scotland and Wales. The chapter then outlines

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