

Horizons for Learning

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Que Será Será. . . whatever will be will be (tra la la). Do you believe that? It's true that the future is a very slippery subject. Try to pick it up and it runs like Corfu sand through your fingers.

There's two main ways of looking at the future: one is through informed processes and the other through inspired guesswork, closely associated with sticking your neck out. Similarly there's two main ways of forecasting the future — one through scientific analysis and one through artistic or literary inspiration. Both need knowledge and wisdom to creep any closer to something I'd describe as 'creating' the future. The late science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, the author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, managed a fusion of the two components, and he turned out to be one of the most accurate forecasters. What's more he said "The future isn't what it used to be" — an ironic statement of course, containing wisdom and a warning. For slightly more down to earth inspiration, take a look at the Media Zoo at Leicester: www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/mediazoo or visit our Second Life Island called "The Media Zoo."

I think that educators of the end of the first decade of the 21st century are in a hugely privileged and influential position to create the future — no less. That's you and me. The opportunity to participate in changing the learning world is really a rare one, and so I hope you cherish it. We face challenges. Every disruptive technology has always been dynamic, sometimes a see-saw. Sometimes we see an apparently unexplained 'tipping' point in which the early adopters begin to move aside as the innovation is mainstreamed. Meanwhile tensions are likely as the frontier is civilized, between people who like teaching just the way the way it is and those who have hopes of what it might become. . . you're all familiar with this phenomenon!

Everyone in the educational sector must surely want to get ahead in the learning game. Seeing the horizons and setting sail towards them involves taking a few risks: handling uncertainty, forecasting and planning. I believe the educators of the 21st century have fantastic amazingly fabulous resources at their fingertips and a highly motivated and diverse student body *and this is our moment*.

The argument of my talk at the conference is that in forecasting the future for education most of the predictions will be wrong in terms of timing and of detail but right in terms of — let's call it “spirit of the direction.” And what's more that if we can vision them, we can action them, and we can make changes for the good of learning. And every small change we make towards where we want to go has an impact. Therefore whomever you are — technologist, teacher, a researcher, professor, administrator — it's up to you to create the future

The reason we find it so difficult to achieve effective forecasting is that most people's thought processes are linear, whereas the complex world of education in the 21st century has complexity, adaptability, variability and let's admit it — crazy multiple logics. Forecasting the future involves not only in looking at potential directions, but also choosing carefully between alternatives and deliberately letting others go.

The failures to effectively forecast future developments typically fall into two main kinds: the very pessimistic and the very optimistic. There are also those who think everything's going to happen to everyone very soon, and others who think they can ‘park’ their concerns because it won't happen in their lifetime. Many people who are trying to exploit a novel product or service for their hopes and intents tend to overestimate the short-term effects and underproject the long-term wider impact. There's a word for this common phenomenon: macromyopia. Macromyopia happens because new ideas and technologies feel ‘normal’ and ‘obvious’ to trailblazers. Innovators tend to look at the early success of something for a smallish and specific purpose and tend to assume it will ‘scale up’ in the same way (if only others would see the ‘light’ . . .). They cast few glances backwards. They are focused on what they are building and contributing and rarely see the often much bigger and longer terms ramifications. Is this you?

The developers and providers of a technology add their own ‘hype’ and promote their products because of the investment they have made, adding to the confusion. I still occasionally see a stand at a technology conference. “Come buy: everything you need for e-learning.” (Oh no!)

In most cases the pioneer of a product or technology achieves some early success in a narrow way. The big win may come later by incorporating the new technology into an existing product or service and creating a best-of-both-worlds solution that appeals to a much broader range of people and applications — could this be our ‘blended learning’?

We know that that the roadways towards productive learning through new technologies are littered with expensive wrecks. Clearly we must learn from past mistakes if technology for learning is to have a future. I think many of the lessons

of avoiding technologies as drivers have been learnt, but sustainable planning for flexible and uncertain futures is also not yet in evidence. Scaling up plans will need to include a mature systems approach to addressing technical barriers, building institutional capacity for pedagogical changes and technology: education partnerships.

Visions of the distant future tend to be shaped and influenced by what we know now: the experiences and of course the prejudices. Everyone's an expert on education — especially those like its staff — who have been its biggest consumer. Are those of us privileged to be working in amazing times in the early 21st century likely to get forecasting the future more right than those who have come before us? I say yes. Can we see the horizon more clearly? I say yes! Each of us has a role in the construction of whatever futures do come to pass. Humans have never before had more influence over the futures of our environment, our biology, and indeed, of all life.

Why this optimistic view? There is an inherent promise to speed up creativity, repurposing, collaboration and contribution from all — and distribution to multiple channels. We will have technologies with the power to create new and more engaging, happier, mobile, flexible learning in the future. The opportunity to create easily something new and worthwhile doesn't come often, so I hope you will take it. The barriers to entry for staff and students are very low. Get ready by trying it out now!

For me however, there is no doubt that whether a particular form of technology intervention will add real long-term value to student learning or merely prove disruptive and diversionary depends mostly on how the educators imagine, design and integrate its potential. There's no one vision or value — they can be entirely your own. In 2005, I wrote about how all of us in universities needed to strategize to exploit learning technologies for “taking off in powered flight,” rather than merely flapping around. I believe its time has come. Get in the cockpit, colleagues — don't miss this opportunity!

Our future needs to include research on whether learning with, through, around, above and beyond technology will result in more creative, engaging and feasible plans to address the needs (demands?) of 21st century learners. Of course the success or failure of innovations always depends on a combination of factors at work. But in most cases the problem is not inferior technology: it is understanding the benefits and needs of mainstreaming, which require policy and business decisions, and, in education, unpicking and ‘re-engineering’ the complex relationships with existing practices.

I think it's time we followed our learners. Don't be dazzled by the technology but take a look at what loads of people are actually doing with technology in education and their level of engagement — joy even. Then examine the business and learning model to see if it makes sense and can scale up to a meaningful size.

There's even space for personal preferences in our Webbie world. What's your future like? Here's mine. . .

When I'm an old woman, I shall carry,
Six different iPods — and none of them will marry,
Standards for compatibility or service integration,
Communication with me will depend on your imagination.

I shall spend my pension on silly downloads and updates,
That will render my technology completely incoherent,
I'll exceed my monthly data transfer rates & message limits,
Abandoning responsibility for my 'free voice' spirit.

I shall sit on the pavement and obstruct normal business,
Until I get a mobile connection that has been built for easiness,
I will take any free media from shops and from papers,
Installing them all with no identity shapers.

If I don't know what day it is — why should I not
Forget my password and bank sorting code?
And disperse my personal data amongst six youthful avatars,
Shared in Second Life — as contingency against disasters:
Where dress codes permit the wearing of silk sandals,
And summer gloves with reckless abandon,
Where no one worries about wearing slippers in the rain,
And there's instant transport from terrain to terrain.

I shall put false but convincing entries into Wikipedia,
For who else should profess to the new media?
I will make up for the sobriety of my text based youth,
With podding indulgence that may border on uncouth.

I shall copy software under the authority of my blue hat,
Which clashes with my dress and the licence dictat,
So maybe I ought to practice some of this now,
So that those that know me can easily show.
That whilst I carry six iPods for Internet use,
My behaviour is not that of recently learned abuse,

That I have always had a proneness for the disruptable
Not suddenly that I'm old and starting to wear purple.

(The poem is from Salmon and Edirisingha (eds.), *Podcasting for Learning in Universities*, 2008, Chapter 16).