



ESRC Research Seminar Series

***Understanding the Implications of Networked Learning for  
Higher Education***

**Dissemination Event**

Venue: University of Sheffield, Stephenson Hall, Oakholme Road, Sheffield.  
Tuesday, March 26<sup>th</sup> 2002  
17.15 – 19.15 followed by reception

Today we launch a Manifesto: **Towards E-Quality in Networked E-Learning in Higher Education** on the basis of our shared deliberation, practitioner research and collective experience. Our vision is of a higher education where access and connectivity are encouraged and where lifelong learning is truly and effectively supported.

The Manifesto will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and the research community. Our intention is to assist with the development of policy on e-learning and to stimulate debate about current practice.

This Manifesto is now offered to the higher education community for debate and further development. We welcome your comments.

This Seminar Series has involved researchers and practitioners from Coventry University, Glasgow University, Lancaster University and the University of Sheffield, as well as invited guests from other institutions from both within and outside the UK. As the title suggests, our focus has been on the implications of the use of networked learning for Higher Education. The series has aimed to stimulate debate through the critical examination of relevant literature, current practice, and studies of teachers' and learners' experiences of networked learning. We have addressed three themes throughout the seminar series:

- Understanding the learner's and teacher's experience of networked learning
- Theorising the nature and status of knowledge, learning and identity in networked learning and relating this to the design, organisation and assessment of networked learning courses and programmes.
- Examining the implications of networked learning for restructuring education and changing the role of the teacher/tutor, with a special focus on institutional readiness and the management of change.

### **Convenors**

Professor Liz Beaty Coventry University; Dr Vivien Hodgson, Lancaster University; Dr Sarah Mann, Glasgow University; Professor David McConnell, Sheffield University.

# **Working Towards E-Quality in Networked E-Learning in Higher Education: A Manifesto Statement for Debate.**

The participants of the ESRC Seminar Series *The Implications of Networked Learning for Higher Education* (March 2000 – March 2002), assert that the opportunities provided by networked e-learning to enhance and add value to our practices must be refocused, or we risk an impoverished quality of higher educational experience.

This manifesto presents a vision of *e-quality* in networked e-learning based on our shared deliberation, practitioner research and collective experience. The vision is of a higher education where access and connection are championed and where lifelong learning is truly and effectively supported.

## **Preamble**

There has been an explosion in access to knowledge and information as part of the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Private and commercial interests have accompanied this proliferation of digital resources, which provide ever-increasing possibilities for interaction and communication across the globe. Some commentators see this as a threat to traditional educational institutions. Others see it as offering viable alternatives to the ivory tower with the potential to realise the ideas of various influential educators and educational thinkers such as Dewey, Vygotsky and Illich.

The advent of new ICT and the WWW has also encouraged new thinking by educational institutions including the view that open and distance learning is no longer primarily the province of specialist institutions. Increasingly, higher education institutions are looking at how new technology can support open and distance learning for their existing students and for potential new markets.

Much of the current political interest in lifelong learning may be a reaction and response to the so-called transition from the Industrialised Society to the Information Society (Castells, 1997).

Although one can argue that technology does not determine educational processes, it is equally difficult for educational institutions to script the impact that technology will have upon education practice and learning processes. Many commentators are, therefore, raising questions about the adequacy of current models and approaches to higher education.

The increased capacity for global communication, together with easy access to information rich repositories accessible via the Internet and/or WWW has led some educationalists to suggest that we need to change our teaching and

learning approaches. We need, they claim, to move from a predominantly instructional paradigm of teaching and learning to a more constructionist one. Seymour Papert has, for example, discussed at length the inherent complexity and rapidly changing nature of society as it becomes ever more digitalised and knowledge based. He claims that current education provision is based on an industrialised model of society. He believes this model of education no longer reflects the complex and constantly changing world that we now live in. He describes it as a production-line organisation of the product of school and argues that the idea of the linear curriculum is a manifestation of this. Papert argues that the new avenues of learning opened up by digital technology will oblige us to give up such a linear curriculum and the dissemination of knowledge (Papert, 1998). Papert is referring mostly to schools but his comments are, we would suggest, equally relevant to higher education.

Recent commentators on higher education argue for the importance of its role in contributing to democratic society (for example, Barnett, 1997; Delanty, 2001). Such a view of the purpose of higher education suggests that its prime educational task is to foster active engagement in the pursuit of independent and lifelong learning, characterized by scholarship, inquiry, dialogue, problem-solving, creativity, criticality and collegiality, in an area of disciplinary discourse.

It follows that this purpose is best achieved not through a pedagogy based solely on delivery of information - however skillfully that information may be packaged. It is best achieved through a pedagogy based on constructionist views of knowledge which requires students to engage with ideas and develop skills and capabilities within a scholarly community where knowledge is actively constructed and framed as provisional, and where future learning through research is an aspiration.

This view of the purpose of higher education as a contribution to the maintenance and development of democratic processes, alongside the change in models of curriculum required by the shift from the Industrialised Society to the Information Society, both suggest a key role for Networked E-Learning.

The way we use technology to support and/or provide learning environments reflects the educational assumptions and philosophy underlying design and has implications for the quality of the student learning experience.

There is little doubt that e-learning can develop in versions that impoverish, as well as those that enhance, educational provision. Some early versions of computer-assisted learning were little more than programmed learning technology driven by the machine. In the same way a limited vision of e-learning sees it as a means of achieving economies of scale in the delivery of conventionally constructed course materials. This view, which implies the need for little more than an industrial scale instructional technology, would surely be a mistake, although it appears to be the starting point of some cost/benefit

analysts. Our approach begins at a different point, with an analysis and appraisal of what is afforded and what is constrained by the new e-technology.

We believe that the technology used to support networked e-learning affords two significant capabilities:

- 1) Its ability to support distributed collaborative interaction and dialogue
- 2) Its ability to support access to information rich resources.

These two capabilities have so far, in our opinion, been considered unequally. Where only one of these is concentrated on alone, we believe this will lead to the impoverishment of the higher education experience. The academy is above all else a community of scholars. It is not a repository of information. The phrase 'Networked E-Learning' contains the conjunction of these two assets, offering a quality learning environment where connectivity and process is as valuable as the substance and focus of the connection.

In offering this manifesto we want to rebalance the debate on e-learning. We want the current dominant focus on information rich resources to shift towards greater attention to the processes which support interaction and dialogue. This re-balancing will provide a closer alignment of the possibilities offered by e-learning with the aims of higher education. It offers the perspective of learners collaborating to reconstruct and refine knowledge for their own purposes in a global community where everyone has a voice. It profoundly rejects the view that there is one right view which dominates and champions a creative culture of academic freedom which for the first time is multicultural and shared.

On the basis of our experience, practice, research and ongoing discussions, we propose the following manifesto for the practice of networked learning in higher education. In the spirit of our seminar series, we offer this as a contribution to thinking and practice in this area, and invite your views, comments and responses to it.

## **The Manifesto**

### **1. A working definition of Networked E-Learning:**

Networked e-learning refers to those learning situations and contexts which, through the use of ICT, allow learners to be connected with other people (for example, learners, teachers/tutors, mentors, librarians, technical assistants) and with shared, information rich resources. Networked e-learning also views learners as contributing to the development of these learning resources and information of various kinds and types.

## **2. Learning, teaching and assessment**

Networked e-learning as envisaged in this manifesto requires models of learning that are based on participation and not ones that are based on transmission.

This requires as much emphasis on learning processes and learning to learn as on subject knowledge.

Educational values which contribute to quality in learning and teaching environments are those that seek to encourage dialogue, exchange of ideas, intrinsic approaches to study and engagement. It is this that we need to support through networked e-learning.

Networked e-learning provides the opportunity for developing innovative assessment practices in which teachers and learners collaborate in the assessment process.

Networked e-learning is not a depersonalising experience. The careful integration of course design and innovative assessment can create as intimate an educational experience as a face-to-face encounter.

## **3. Changing the relationship between teachers and learners**

In our view of networked e-learning, the relationship between teachers and learners is based on collaboration and co-construction of knowledge rather than on that of expert and acolyte. Such a view of the relationship between learners and teachers is one that is supported by the idea of the learning community. Networked e-learning can contribute to the establishment of virtual learning communities and enhance existing face-to-face learning communities.

The implementation of rich forms of networked e-learning also requires support for and the legitimisation of work done by academics towards the sharing of practice through both case study accounts and networks of practice.

If networked e-learning is to become a rich and robust educational practice providing quality learning environments, practitioners need to engage in critical and reflexive evaluation of their own practice. Any shift in tutor role as proposed here needs to be supported through professional development. Such professional development should mirror and be consistent with the principles underlying networked e-learning.

## **4. Supporting democratic processes, diversity and inclusion**

Networked e-learning has significant potential for widening access and participation in higher education and for promoting social inclusion.

Networked e-learning allows for the possibility of new forms of communication,

language and discourse. Such new forms of communication have the potential to be more open and supportive of inclusive educational practices. It promotes use of a wider range of resources, both material and human, directly relevant to learners' own intentions and interests. It offers the potential for dialogue with a broader range of people and in a form which allows different styles and preferences to be supported.

Potentially peer learning can be supported in a way which fosters inclusion and democracy in a learning community.

It offers opportunities of wider collaboration between academics, between academics and professionals, between people across cultures, between learners, and between learning and those who can support their learning.

Networked e-learning enables the vision of non-gate-keeping universities and the facilitation of synergy between disciplines. It offers a glimpse of a world in which intellectual property rights with respect to teaching and learning materials become irrelevant and open to all.

A culture neutral curriculum or design is impossible. If teachers are to mediate learning they must find common ground with the learner. Globalisation has the potential to facilitate movements and dialogues between cultures and shifts in notions of fixed identity or communities. Networked e-learning provides the opportunity to examine such issues of difference at the same time as providing a space in which to engage in the networked learning culture per se.

##### **5. The need for a networked e-learning policy.**

We believe that policy for networked e-learning should be based on explicit educational values and research.

Networked e-learning needs a policy that recognises changing roles and thus different costing and resourcing structures. Networked e-learning does not require less resources – it requires a different blend of resources. It requires both full technical support as well as curriculum design support.

Policy for network e-learning should be based on explicit educational values and constantly reiterated by reference to research findings, particularly from the various strategies and methods that have been gathered together under the rubrics of evaluation and practitioner research. Learners and tutors should feel free to engage openly with each other in a collaborative and supportive environment. This raises issues of privacy, surveillance, individual rights and data protection, which need to be addressed explicitly by institutional policy, and agreed locally by all parties.

## **Final comment**

We invite comments and responses on this Manifesto, which is intended as a contribution to forthcoming debate.

### **ESRC Seminar Series Participants**

#### **COVENTRY UNIVERSITY**

Liz Beaty  
Len Bird  
Kathy Courtney  
Glynis Cousin  
David Grantham  
David Jenkins  
Andy Syson

#### **GLASGOW UNIVERSITY**

Klara Bolander (now at Karolinska Institutet)  
Sarah Mann  
Erica McAteer  
Maddy Sclater  
Sue Tickner

#### **LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**

Mireia Asensio  
Peter Goodyear  
Vivien Hodgson  
Chris Jones  
Claire Massart  
Chris Steeples

#### **UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD**

Sheena Banks  
Nick Bowskill  
Jonathan Foster  
Vic Lally  
Teresa McConlogue  
David McConnell

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## **References**

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