

Virtual worlds in Journalism Education: creating effective distance and blended learning courses.

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Abstract

This report surveys the current state of development of e-learning and the role of Virtual Learning Environments. It is based on an extensive literature review, attendance at recent conferences and discussions with colleagues and experts.

This report contains the results and conclusions of an alumni survey into audio/video use on VLEs for journalism education. This reveals overwhelming support for VLE based media to supplement tutor based pedagogies.

The report observes that universities that embrace e-learning are often the same institutions that are innovating new pedagogic approaches. Those institutions are well positioned for the increasingly competitive market for Higher Education in the 21st Century. It is likely that these universities will be able to use virtual e-learning strategies to recruit student numbers they could not hope to house in their physical campuses by moving towards distance and blended learning in graduate, postgraduate and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision. This will disrupt the existing university recruitment ecology.

Any university that does not grasp advances in new technology facilitating e-learning and the potential pedagogic advantages thus created, risks relegation in the increasingly competitive delivery of Higher Education. Innovation of data rich content (high quality videos) is a key part of current innovation.

Background to project

This report was funded by a 2008 UCF Learning & Teaching Fellowship. This report contains the results and conclusions of an empirical survey into audio/video use on VLEs.

The aims of the research aspects of project: *To examine the potential for distance learning, blended learning and enhanced VLE of audio/video technology by creating a range of sample and evaluated packages for e-learning delivery. These will be used in the wider context of investigating pedagogies for nuanced e-learning in journalism education.*

Methodology included: creating instruction videos or podcasts, recording keynote and core lectures as either videos or podcasts which will be evaluated through alumni surveys; researching current use of pedagogies in e-learning, and a literature review.

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Survey conclusions (Survey is part two of report)

Students increasingly expect web 2.0 multimedia delivery and online material provides the increasingly important facility to time shift. It is hard not to conclude that universities that do not keep pace with the technology will also fall behind in the competitive HE market.

The results for this survey contribute to a growing body of evidence that data rich video content and podcasts are effective supplementary methods for course delivery. They support the view that video and audio content will become essential as the technology and VLE programming improves.

There were some principles for production and delivery that could be derived from the survey answers:

- Guest lecture videos should be edited to 30 minutes or less. Alternatively broken up into sections
- Automatic video recording without an operator are to be discouraged
- Instruction videos should be a maximum of 10 minutes
- A linked handout is useful to instruction videos
- If possible videos broken up into clearly defined elements or chapters
- Good technical quality is vital
- Instruction videos that show the tutor's own professional logic when scripting are valued
- Podcasts should be easily downloadable onto mp4 devices or available on a subscription feed.

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OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT LANDSCAPE

Changes in Higher Education delivery and the use of technology are so rapid that this report is inevitably only a snapshot of e-learning taken during the 2008/9 academic year. The report opens with an overview and some horizon scanning and quickly focuses down to discuss the author's observations on the relevance of e-learning to journalism education, and the development of VLEs. The specific aim of the second half of this report is to evaluate the use of audio and video material on VLEs. It also looks at the experience of various universities in delivering e-learning including best practice in distance and blended learning, e-portfolios and other new approaches.

The HE sector is experiencing seismic shifts. The impact of student fees, the credit crunch, a rapid expansion of university places, yet government capping and the threat of a contracting demographic for post secondary education students in future years are making for a highly competitive market and are taxing the minds of institutional policymakers.

The changes are so broad and rapid that senior and experienced academics have trouble keeping up with the questions let alone the answers. In the author's own discipline of media education there is a growing realization of the breadth of problems endangering the survival of many courses that once flourished.

If universities are having trouble keeping pace, many students are independently adapting to new technology to their own needs. As the organizers of the 'Learning from the Learner's Experience' conference in July 2008 noted:

*"There is growing tension between institutional provision of technology and its use by learners. This demands that we revisit initial beliefs and question widely held assumptions about the relationships between learning, teaching and technology. Establishing effective ways of listening and responding to learners will become ever more important with the increasing prevalence and impact of technology on society."*¹

¹ <http://web-dev-csc.gre.ac.uk/conference/conf37/index.php>

There are no simple answers or templates. Rhona Sharp of Oxford Brookes, in her address to the conference: *"If we are finding one thing, it is that learners' experiences are complex and individual. How can we learn from this? What recommendations can we make to institutions and teaching staff about the kinds of technology and their uses that have the potential to enhance the learner experience? There are not going to be any easy answers that xx% of students want this from their institution, and anyway, by the time they've found this out, the students have moved on."*²

Another speaker, Nigel Ecclesfield of Becta³ supported this view: *"In many ways learners are leading the way in using technology and we need to listen to them. They are entitled to the best we can offer them and we really do need a world class approach if we are to compete as a country in the future."*⁴

Ecclesfield is well positioned to comment as Becta has been tasked by government to make recommendations on utilising technology to enhance education across the board. It was clear from his address that e-learning going to be at the heart of the government's future strategies to improve educational attainment.

There is a great deal of innovation going on across the HE sector aimed at improving course delivery. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are the outstanding example of the use of new technology to enhance the student learning experience. In 1997 just 7% of HE institutions had VLEs. By 2005 it was estimated that 95% of institutions operated at least one VLE. (JISC 2005a)

Sharp et al were impressed at the response to the introduction of VLEs: *"We find that student response is overwhelmingly positive to the provision of online course information to supplement traditional teaching. Students make regular and frequent use of electronic resources with few reported problems of access. They particularly value flexible access both from home and on-campus."*⁵

So far VLE are mainly used on campus based courses. But that is beginning to change. Many universities are now seeking to maximise the potential of VLEs to make it possible to recruit students who will undertake their learning

² <http://web-dev-csc.gre.ac.uk/conference/conf37/eventdetails.php?wId=355&pId=1493>

³ Becta is the government agency leading the national drive to ensure the effective and innovative use of technology throughout learning. "It is our ambition to utilise the benefits of technology to create a more exciting, rewarding and successful experience for learners of all ages and abilities, enabling them to achieve their potential.

⁴ <http://web-dev-csc.gre.ac.uk/conference/conf37/eventdetails.php?wId=368&pId=1770>

⁵ Sharpe, R, Benfield, G, Roberts G & Francis R (2006) The Undergraduate Experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice. HEA

in the virtual world either in Distance or Blended Learning. Increasingly the physical location of a university will be secondary to the relevance and excellence of the course.

Distance learning

Distance learning is the provision of courses by institutions where the student does not attend the campus and achieves the learning experience in a range of ways including using VLEs. Students do not have face to face meetings with lecturers but the contact is through new technology.

What is blended learning?

In the context of the original aims of this project blended learning primarily referred to courses where the institution delivers part of the course virtually through new technology.⁶

But blended learning means different things to different people and new technology plays a part in each. Sharpe et al observed it seems to be defined in three different ways.

"From the institutional visits and the review of course evaluations, we observed that there were three ways in which the term 'blended learning' was being used. Currently the most common type of blended learning is the provision of supplementary resources for courses that are conducted along predominantly traditional lines through an institutionally supported virtual learning environment."

"Second, we found some, but far fewer, impressive examples of transformative course level practices underpinned by radical course designs. These often make use of technology to facilitate interaction and communication and replace other modes of teaching and learning. Third, we are aware of students taking a holistic view of the interaction of technology and their learning, including the use of their own technologies, although this is currently under reported and under researched in higher education."⁷

"To date, the differences and similarities between online, traditional distance and physical-based teaching have been little understood, leading to confused notions of the panacea of 'blend'. (Salmon, 2005, p. 202)

⁶ It will be stated is the term if used in a different or wider context. Where VLEs are used to develop the potential of campus based courses they will be described as "VLE supported". Blended learning will mean courses with partial residential element.

⁷ Sharpe, R, Benfield, G, Roberts G & Francis R (2006) The Undergraduate Experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice. HEA

Distance and blended learning have great potential for students who are in employment, have a young family, who are not time rich, but are technologically literate and capable of using their 'downtime' to undertake additional education. New technology facilitates the time shift where students do not have to take lectures or coursework at set times. The younger generation has little trouble using laptops, mobile phones and PDAs adapted to educational delivery.

Neil Winstanley is taking a distance-learning MBA course. Once, he might have been forced to wait until he got home before cracking on with his studies. Now, thanks to the march of technology, he can study on the move.

"I can download information on to my PDA and then, if I have a few minutes on the train or wherever, I can listen to it. Or, if I have 30 minutes free, I can log on and do some research. By living it, it lives with you," says Winstanley, 37, a Smith & Nephew product manager from Hull, who started his MBA at Warwick Business School in June.

Just as modern, global business managers expect to be connected 24 hours a day, so business schools have had to respond to the changing technological needs and expectations of their MBA students. In the process, they have embraced podcasts, vodcasts (online video clips), blogs, web boards, micro-sites, audio streaming - the list goes on.

From "MBAs: Teaching tools embrace technology", The Independent, 17 January 2008

A good example is the MA in Legislative Studies Online (MALSO) at the University of Hull which is taught entirely online and has opened a new niche market. It was created to respond to the needs of staff working in or with parliaments who were not able to take other forms of degree due to their work commitments. The course brings together students who have a very diverse range of experience including parliamentary clerks, officials working for international organisations such as the United Nations, politicians, journalists and civil servants at local and regional level.

Course leaders say students come from the UK, Europe and elsewhere in the world as far afield as Canada and Kyrgyzstan. The on-campus MA in

Legislative Studies recruits only one or two students per year. The MALSO has averaged six students per year and said to be on the increase. It is also a more cost-effective way of studying for the students as they save in accommodation and travelling costs and do not have the worries of visa/immigration paperwork that might affect their decision or ability to participate (JISC 2008).

e-learning: the concept

e-learning

The use of new technology to enhance learning is encompassed by the term e-learning. JISC define the terms as "*learning, any aspect of which is facilitated and supported by the use of information and communication technologies.*"

e-learning technologies include: computer-based (or web-based) learning activities and materials; virtual learning environments and other learner management systems; virtual instruments and simulations; computer conferencing systems (including audio and video conferencing); web-based discussion and collaboration systems (including chat, wikis, blogs); electronic white-boards and other face-to-face teaching technologies such as voting devices; mobile and wireless devices; computer-assisted assessment systems; e-portfolios and other electronic learning records.

e-learning – the key players

The government has poured a great deal of money into e-learning with the hope that it will be one of the enablers to the UK being at the head of the international education league tables by 2020.

There are a swathe of governmental, quango and non governmental bodies who have a remit in the area and process. The core players in the development of e-learning are:

A) Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)

JISC is the main player in the development of the use of technology in education which is funded by the government. JISC's *raison de etre* is to provide world-class leadership in the innovative use of ICT to support education and research. For the purposes of this paper the author only concerned himself with JISC's e-learning theme.⁸

⁸ JISC has seven other strategic themes: Network, Access management, Information environment, e-Resources, e-Research, e-Administration, Business and community engagement.

The JISC e-Learning programme (October 2003 to March 2009) identified how e-learning can benefit learners, practitioners and educational institutions, and advised on its implementation.⁹

It aims to achieve an improved quality of learning through:

- Practitioners developing the confidence and skills to manage and facilitate e-learning in different contexts and with different pedagogical approaches
- A technical infrastructure that supports flexibility, diversity and extendibility
- Easy access to high quality, flexible learning materials
- Effective and responsive e-learning policies, systems and structures in place at local, regional and national level

B) Higher Education Academy (HEA)

The York based HEA says: "Our mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students. Central to the Academy's e-learning activities is the implementation of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) e-learning strategy, in collaboration with JISC."¹⁰ This builds on collaborative work with JISC, such as the Collaboration Initiative, and Distributed eLearning Programme.¹¹

Overview of key players' strategies:

⁹ <http://www.elearning.ac.uk/elp>

¹⁰ HEA outlines its aims as:

"Our vision is for students in UK higher education to enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world. Our mission is to support the sector in providing the best possible learning experience for all students. Our strategic aims are to:

1. *Identify, develop and disseminate evidence-informed approaches*
2. *Broker and encourage the sharing of effective practice*
3. *Support universities and colleges in bringing about strategic change*
4. *Inform, influence and interpret policy*
5. *Raise the status of teaching"*

HEA says of e-learning: "We acknowledge the need for a holistic approach to embedding e-learning in institutional activities. We aim to address the real needs of institutions and their stakeholders in order to facilitate the implementation of effective strategies and practices. To achieve these aims we are working closely with key stakeholders including the Heads of e-Learning Forum (HeLF), relevant Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)¹⁰, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Joint Information Systems Committee.

¹¹ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/elearning>

Using substantial public monies these organizations have funded a wide range of research projects to understand develop and provide empirical data on every aspect of technology and education. There can be little doubt that this work has been forward thinking and important and has been able to convey the importance of e-learning to the HE audience.

There is a huge amount of material online produced by the key players often in conjunction with pathfinder institutions and that reveals clearly innovation in e-learning is constant and needs to be tested.

In e-learning new technology opens up powerful ways of supporting students who are increasingly working within constructivist approaches to learning. There is compelling evidence that those universities that embrace e-learning are often the same institutions that are innovators of new pedagogic approaches. The implication is that such innovation positions those institutions well for the increasingly competitive market for HE in the 21st Century.

E-learning places the learner centre stage and a great deal of effort and research is going into maximising the learner's experience.

Finding the right model for e-learning is a dynamic process. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has driven the move into e-learning. It is clear from the literature that the core JISC team has tried to absorb the main learning theories – associative, cognitive and situated. Reading through the literature there is a stated move towards a constructivist synthesis, typified by the comment from a formative JISC document which asserts the principle that “there should be *constructive alignment* between theoretical viewpoint and pedagogical approach.”¹²

e-learning: innovation

One of the most significant JISC's research projects into e-learning is the Camel (Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning) project which produces numerous case studies. The project was initiated by JISC's Learning and Teaching Committee as it had been aware that there was a need to provide more hard evidence of the benefits of e-learning.

Funded by JISC this project was published at the annual JISC Conference in April 2008 and remains the cutting edge document on e-learning.

"The CAMEL Tangible Benefits of e-Learning project aimed to collate and share the tangible and real benefits to staff, learners and institutions of e-learning, through a discipline and academic department focus by using the CAMEL model devised by JISC infoNet and ALT. Its objectives were to produce: institutional case studies, with a subject discipline focus, which

¹² http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_designreading.aspx

identify tangible benefits of e-learning; and report on the CAMEL workshops and evaluation of the process, which aimed to identify any real or perceived weaknesses or threats of e-learning.

The final outputs are 37 case studies from 16 institutions.” (Camel 2008)

The Camel report is important so its key findings are quoted at some length here.

“The most fundamental point to come out of all of the case studies is that the appropriate use of technology is leading to significant improvements in learning and teaching across the sector and that this is translating into improved satisfaction, retention and achievement.”

“E-learning is facilitating the expansion of the sector without necessitating corresponding increases in the footprint of the physical estate and it is allowing broadly the same numbers of staff to educate a larger and more diverse student body. The kind of high quality, diverse, accessible, expanding higher education system desired by government and funders is no longer possible without e-learning. Continued investment and innovation in the field of e-learning is essential if the UK is to remain a world leader in education.”

e-learning: Benefits

“The tangible benefits identified in the case studies were wide ranging; from direct, easily measured benefits to students (for example enabling swift feedback on assessment) to those that are sometimes difficult to measure with longer term payback (for example, external recognition for students, staff and the university). The following section highlights key areas where we identified tangible benefits from the appropriate application of technology and gives a few examples of the benefits cited:

“The use of e-learning has undoubtedly widened participation in UK HE, be this participation by overseas students who would not previously have been able to attend courses in the UK, by professionals who need to fit study into a busy working life, or by the groups of ‘non-traditional’ learners who form the target of government widening participation strategies.

The report makes the following important observations:

“Those who have provided figures for student achievement appear to be recording improvements of around 10% in pass rates as a result of the e-learning they have implemented.” Across the board this might mean over 30,000 additional graduates each year and a subsequent uplift in the UK skills base.

“We have seen evidence that e-learning is enabling Schools of Medicine and Veterinary Science to take additional student numbers without having to increase their physical or staffing footprint. An increase of only 1% in student

numbers in these areas would be worth £11 million to the institutions concerned."

"There is clear evidence of improved student retention as a result of the improved personalisation and mentoring opportunities afforded by e-learning applications such as e-portfolio systems. We have seen these benefits demonstrated in areas such as Nursing with a high proportion of non-traditional learners where attrition rates are traditionally high. An improvement of only 1% in retention across the sector would, even at the lowest rates of funding, be worth over £132 million per annum to institutions."

Although the author does not intend to cover e-assessment in this paper it is worth noting the Camel report says that probably the most readily quantifiable cost savings were identified in the area of e-assessment where automated marking of exams for large cohorts of students now takes seconds rather than hours. It cites Leeds Metropolitan University which has implemented e-assessment on its Applied Technology and Finance programme and marks for a cohort of 350 students are available within three hours of the completion of the exam whereas in previous years the process could easily take 120 hours of staff time (equating to a cost of up to £3K per cohort).

"E-learning can be shown to have a range of benefits for learners with special needs. Learners with a known disability currently make up only around 6% of the HE student population (source HESA 2006¹³) as opposed to 11% of the FE population in England (14% in Scotland) and 18% of the working age population of England. It would thus seem a desirable objective to double the participation rate of students with a disability in HE. Even at the lowest rate of funding this represents a market worth £796 million to the sector.

"E-learning offers opportunities to open up new markets both at home and overseas. Whilst global markets mean increasingly fierce competition for students, e-learning can facilitate diversification of the offering."

e-learning: the lecturer experience

Improved learning and teaching practice is a major driver behind many of the developments and 84% of the case studies reported improvements in this area. Quotes from participating lecturers on this subject include: *"have a constructivist approach to learning and teaching that, on the one hand expects the student to take responsibility for their learning, but on the other a responsibility on my part to provide a range of teaching support to enable this. Aside from recognition of different learning styles I am also acutely aware that today's learning environment is far more demanding. The pressures of loans, debt, work, family commitments and a changing student*

¹³ http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1166&Itemid=141

demographic combine to make the traditional face to face contact limiting as the sole mode of delivery.” University of Glasgow (HATII).

“We increasingly felt that students were not always preparing exercises in advance of the class, nor were all of them prepared to participate in discussion... We therefore decided that linking each lecture with an associated exercise, and referring to it both before and after the students had completed the exercise would reinforce the lecture-based learning.” University of Exeter (Economics).

One of the biggest problems facing implementation of e-learning in universities has been the resistance of staff. This can be for a range of reasons from reluctance to engage with new technology to the belief that it is just another educational fad, through to concerns about additional workload. For institutions chosen as part of the Camel the project seem to have inspired many previously sceptical staff:

“Participants commented that the project had altered their perception of the tangible benefits of e-learning and made them consider both the quantitative and qualitative aspects as well as the varying perspectives on benefits according to different stakeholder viewpoints. Whilst the project participants gained most value from the process of critical reflection itself, they also valued the end products, i.e. the actual case studies.

One participant noted that *“some are easier to quantify than others but mostly there is more evidence than I thought”* while another said it had given them a much greater understanding of how to measure such things noting that *“previously it has been a bit of a pie in the sky.”* In some cases there were tangible benefits that had not occurred to the tutors involved until they had gone through the process of analysing the benefits with *“critical friends”*.

Tip: A University of Westminster lecturer Russell Stannard has created an open website for lecturers with ‘how to’ videos of different aspects of HE Web 2.0 use. He won the Times Higher ‘Outstanding ICT initiative of the Year 2008’ for developing the site.¹⁴

e-learning: implementation

One very telling observation from the Camel summary: *“Institutional strategies are useful in providing a long-term vision and top-level support for initiatives that improve learning and teaching but they are rarely the key drivers for innovation. Many innovations are still the province of the individual striving to improve their teaching practice and the learning opportunities for their students or solve some of the problems that they face. Institutional strategies are enabling the developments to take place rather*

¹⁴ www.teachertrainingvideos.com.

than being the drivers themselves. Many of the case study authors report that time invested in these projects is personal time.

"Some implementations, for example e-assessment, appear at first to be driven by the need to support a growing number of students and the need to save time but closer reading of the case study shows that the commitment by the lecturer is due to a professional interest in improving the quality and timeliness of feedback - assessment for learning.

"Strategic support is nonetheless necessary at least to demonstrate that innovations in teaching and learning are important to the university. Such institutional approaches can however be counter-productive when they translate into "quotas" for some form of e-learning. Academic culture is notoriously hostile to having things imposed in a top-down manner and participants noted the often "mulish response" elicited by such directives. The most successful approaches are those that are driven by the desire to improve learning and teaching practice and where the institution provides the tools and the support to do this.

"If the sector is to avoid being in a position of constantly playing catch-up, we need to do more analysis of the kinds of technologies learners are using and the virtual social environments students engage in as part of their everyday lives. All academics need exposure to current technologies and some ideas about how they can be applied to learning and teaching. One participant in a Camel project noted that 'Technology horizon scanning seemed too wacky and far-off to be of relevance to me until I participated in this project. I now see the value of thinking about this.'

Tip: There is a useful assessment of e-learning benefits - see JISC 2008a

JISC's horizon scanning publication '*Learning without boundaries*' suggests attention is now moving to m-learning – the use of mobile technology for learning. M-learning includes the use of mobile phones, portable media players, PDAs and iPods.

"Universities and colleges will continue to work in fiercely competitive markets, regionally, nationally and globally and will have to exploit innovative mobile technologies within their corporate strategies.

"The widening participation agenda will increase diversity among the student population, with more students coming into universities without formal qualifications. Increasingly, they will have substantial part time jobs in order to fund their education. The issue of retention will consequently be significant, and technology-based solutions will be required to deliver learning and support wherever students are, whenever they want it. Efficiency will be a major driver for the continued implementation of large scale technology-supported learning."

It then proposes an interesting blow by blow account of what a day might hold for the m-learning student of the future (see document).¹⁵

e-learning: new pedagogies

Coinciding with the emergence of e-learning has been the move away from didactic styles of teaching to social constructivist forms of learning.

The following two comments give a sense of that shift:

*"The usual meaning currently given to 'flexible learning' is that 'students' are able to undertake a course of study face-to-face or by distance education. However, no matter what way a course is delivered..... the learning is very much teacher directed as opposed to student-directed. We suggest that a shift in thinking will enable the control of learning to shift more appropriately to the learner. Furthermore it will enable a far more creative approach to learning, no matter what the context".
(Hase & Kenyon, 2000)*

*"Research shows that active learning is much better recalled, enjoyed and understood. Active methods require us to 'make our own meaning', that is, develop our own conceptualisations of what we are learning. During this process we physically make neural connections in our brain, the process we call learning. Passive methods such as listening do not require us to make these neural connections or conceptualisations."
Geoff Petty. Teaching Today, August 2008¹⁶*

A good deal of research sponsored by JISC and HEA goes into establishing what an effective learner is.

At the JISC conference Helen Beetham, a consultant in e-learning in the JISC e-learning programme talked about effective e-learners.

"Many learners use wireless and mobile devices, communication technologies, social software and online information services to help fit learning into their lives.

- *Some learners are effectively blending formal and informal, online, face-to-face, collaboration and individual learning.*
- *Some learners are skilled in content creation, through using tools/technologies such as blogs, wikis and podcasting.*
- *Many learners use wireless and mobile devices, communication technologies, social software and online information services to help fit learning into their lives*

¹⁵ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/boundaries.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.geoffpetty.com/activelearning.html>

- *Some learners are using sophisticated strategies for finding, evaluating and re-using information.*¹⁷

For more on the learner's experience read: *In their Own Words: Exploring the learner's perspective on e-learning*, published by JISC.

While there is a shift away from the didactic there is still an argument that there is a need for the passing down of knowledge acquired in the workplace. After all, students generally do not have experience of the workplace whereas lecturers on vocational course usually do. That balance will also shift as universities shift to more CPD courses. In that case both the tutor and work based student will have a more balanced status.

The speed of change in the workplace now means that the tutor often has little practical experience of the new convergence workplace. The increased use of situated learning helps place the student in the contemporary workplace reality and cognitive apprenticeship is a priority in the workplace. The tutor's role moves to more one of support than cutting edge knowledge. Tutors are now finding situated learning feedback helps keep them up to date with modern practice.

The challenges

Undergraduates: There are numerous examples of e-learning being implemented and a number of funded research projects. HEA has a very detailed 2006 report on the sector that is worth looking at¹⁸

An important point it raises: *"The importance of transformative course level designs was identified in Chapter 2 as one of three characterisations of blended e-learning. Throughout the review, studies repeatedly identified engaging in course design or redesign as critical to their success. This was particularly notable where studies described a blended course which had been developed in response to a real and relevant problem at the course level."*

In its conclusions the report says: *"The following recommendations highlight issues which institutions in our sample, and published practitioners and researchers have themselves identified as being important to the institution:*

- *Terminology is value laden and worthy of negotiation at the institutional level*
- *Institutional rationales for blended e-learning should be contextualised and specific*

¹⁷ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/events/2008/04/conference08/changingstudentexperience.pdf>

¹⁸ The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice by Rhona Sharpe, Greg Benfield, George Roberts, Richard Francis.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/literature_reviews/blended_earning_full_review.pdf

- *There is a need for more systematic institutional monitoring and evaluation of blended e-learning*
- *Establish institutional systems for dissemination of good practice, such as internal conferences and journals. Such systems need to be complemented by less formal, social dissemination practices. Institutions should attempt to establish and nurture communities of e-learning developers and practitioners to act as social repositories and disseminators of case studies of institutional practice.*
- *Staff need support in designing blended courses for diverse groups with a focus on whole course redesign to embed the innovations of individuals.*

"The purpose of eliciting and highlighting the learner experience of blended e-learning is to improve that experience for our future learners. It is clear that students need support in learning effectively in technology rich blended courses. JISC are proposing further research into the undergraduate experience this includes: Research which follows the learner experience of blended e-learning over time, such as over a whole degree programme; more purposive sampling of specific groups which are currently under represented in the literature, including disabled, mature, working, part-time, and international students

JISC and the other key players have done less in the postgraduate sector and none in the media MA sector. In the face of a growing recruitment problem universities are looking at new ways of delivering postgraduate courses. In their recent assessment of the future of MA media education¹⁹ Wensley and Wardle²⁰ drew up a check list for designing new courses:

Design Principles:

- Accommodating the educational needs of today's learners.
- A planned, reflective and continually challenging approach to self-development.
- Harnessing new technologies where appropriate.
- Connecting with work-based activity, and building on life experiences.
- Learning goals and routes may be negotiated.
- To engage professionals in a life-long engagement with creative education.

The MA media sector, aside from universities in the largest urban areas with existing media hubs (primarily London), is experiencing a downturn in

¹⁹ : Media Education Summit Bournemouth September 1-2 2008

²⁰ Wardle, Jonathan and Chris Wensley (2008) Pedagogy: Employer engagement in Media Higher Education: Media Education Summit Bournemouth September 1-2 2008

recruitment. Along with many other universities Bournemouth is trying to find new relevant ways of delivering courses.

Bournemouth and CEMP have been innovating new relationships with employers. Using this model the Media School at Bournemouth University has devised a new MA Media course aimed at working with employers for CPD. It is supported by a cross disciplinary team which includes media and business staff.

MBA Media (Executive)

- Delivered via residentials with support online
- Core Business with media case studies
- Recruited 12 students from the Broadcast Industry (Sky, UK TV, Flextech, BBC, Telegraph)
- All in their 30s / early 40s
- All cite networking cross-discipline approach as important.

Bournemouth is also looking at other innovative methods of delivering CPD courses:

Credit Bearing Short Courses

- Each 'course' is 20 M level credits
- 30 different courses to choose from across 5 pathways
- Each course lasts only 6 weeks with two days of face-to-face
- Each course costs around £700²¹

It is worth noting how central new technology is to delivering this new model.

Distance learning: best practice

All the evidence from the research projects funded by JISC and others suggest that distance and blended learning will play a greater role but they need to be implemented very carefully. Otherwise they can create as many problems as they cure. Implementation into courses needs to be done with a deep understanding of the changing pedagogic perspective.

Methods need to be devised so that the remote student feels connected to the teaching staff. While it was not the major focus on this project the author attempted to ascertain what constitutes effective use of elements of e-learning.

²¹ Wardle, Jonathan and Chris Wensley (2008) Pedagogy: Employer engagement in Media Higher Education: Media Education Summit Bournemouth September 1-2 2008

The use of effectively managed synchronous and asynchronous online technology like forums has allowed the creation of distance learning communities with students undertaking the same course. This has overcome one of the greatest difficulties faced by traditional Open University students who were on non campus based courses – the feeling of isolation from other students.

The author observes that evidence suggests that successful distance learning courses have to be administered very effectively and with a good deal of self discipline by the course staff. Careful benchmarking needs to be run in parallel to innovation.

There are some interesting papers on best practice in distance learning, see for example Beldarrain, 2007.

Jonathan Wardle of Centre for Excellence in Media Practice CEMP observed that part-time distance courses claimed to recruits that it would only be for two days a week but lecturers would require essays to be delivered on other days and other administration of the course ventured outside the two appointed days. Wardle says their research showed this was stressful for students as they were often trying to cope with work and family life in addition. CEMP have been involved in the design of a new part time course where students are required to interface with the university through virtual contact for two specified days a week.²²

The use of video, audio or other material should be carefully placed within the learning context. While it is clear that in most vocational based distance learning courses there has to be some level of instruction from lecturers. The growing body of evidence suggests that didactic elements of a course need to be kept to the minimum while the students own personal learning strategy developed.

It is also clear from the evidence on distance learning that students do need to feel they have a personal tutor through whom they connect with the institution, even if they are also supported by a community of other learners.

²² Wardle, Jonathan and Chris Wensley (2008) Pedagogy: Employer engagement in Media Higher Education: Media Education Summit Bournemouth September 1-2 2008

An e-learning success - Derby

A good example of the potential of e-learning to develop distance learning is a Camel case study at the University of Derby.

The case study describes the development of a fully online BA Business Studies degree. The aims of this development were to allow greater flexibility for home students juggling work and study commitments, and for international students, to study for the degree remotely – and to study within flexible time scales. The degree is now hosted on an institutional VLE. Reported benefits include increased student recruitment and retention, and student satisfaction with the offering.

An e-learning failure – Derby

But another, very ambitious, distance learning experiment by the University of Derby failed.

“The case study describes the development of a fully online MSc degree in Strategic Management. The aim of this development was to increase student recruitment in sub-Saharan Africa. The degree is hosted on an institutional VLE. Few benefits are reported, as severe technical limitations affected the implementation – particularly bandwidth issues. Staff satisfaction with this development was also problematic. The case study has serious implications for top-down management approaches for the development of e-learning initiatives and it also emphasises the need for an awareness of the technological environment in which the e-learning initiative is intended to operate.”¹

Another example of successful distance learning comes from the University of Hull. *"The MEd in e-learning programme was designed to provide professionals from across the world with the opportunity to interact with others in a range of education and training contexts and roles through a wholly-online Masters programme. The intention was to ensure provision for individuals unable to travel to Hull and to develop provision which would deliberately not simply attempt to replicate classroom-based teaching but exploit the opportunities and added value which the VLE offered. Participants are encouraged to work independently and collaboratively as they explore core issues involved in the design, development and implementation of e-learning with specific focus and emphasis placed on their professional working context."*

One participant remarked: *"Having access to professionals from other areas of education, with all the experience, know-how and information that they bring to the course not only makes the course interesting but gives me insights into my own ways of working."*

A comment from the course tutor: *"The External Examiner for the programme has highlighted the particular benefits students derive from the inclusion of collaborative assessment tasks, and noted the positive impact on their achievement. The use of the Merlin Portfolio, increasingly in combination with external, largely Web 2.0, tools, facilitates and enhances the collaboration which is possible on the programme and ensures both secure submission of joint work, and provision for access to the complete moderation process, for programme staff and External Examiners, all within the same online environment."²³*

There is now a good deal of literature about best practice. One 103 page HEA guide points out. *"As staff are called upon to build blended e-learning environments, design activities and tutor and support students through them, it will become increasingly important that we have evidence on which to draw as we make these decisions. There are already recommendations that will inform our decision making such as the work on the affordances of media (Laurillard, 1993), the burgeoning field of design for learning (see Beetham and Sharpe, forthcoming) and strategies for online tutors (Salmon, 2002; 2004)."²⁴*

Certainly new technology is going to facilitate non residential or partial residential learning. During the research for this fellowship the author engaged in a real time live session using the Elluminate whiteboard.²⁵ This was a highly effective method for a group of students to engage on an orderly online discussion supported by visual material. (See below) But it is

²³ The CAMEL Tangible Benefits of E-Learning Project - Final Report 2008 pg 50

²⁴http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/literature_reviews/blended_elearning_full_review.pdf

²⁵ Elesig on line session 4 July 2008

vital that the technology is carefully benchmarked for suitability and compatibility.

There is a good guide to implementing e-learning at:
http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/InfoKits/implementing-elearning/printable_version.pdf

INNOVATION

Everywhere you go in HE forward thinking individuals are innovating new approaches to assist student learning.

Vodcasts:

At the April 2008 JISC conference Chris Hall, a Learning Technologist at the University of Swansea, who talked about the creation of *vodcasts* for archaeology undergraduates. The vodcasts (images supplemented by an audio track, created using iMovie) gave students a tour around historical artefacts in Greece. The next stage of the project is looking at putting together a *construction kit* to help lecturers create their own vodcasts, rather than rely heavily on the central support team.

E-Portfolios

One of the most exciting developments in the e-learning field is the e-portfolio. Of all the developments the author was struck very powerfully by the potential of e-portfolios. The author proposes that a high quality e-portfolio system could be a major selling point to attract new students. The author observes that an e-portfolio is particularly useful to students involved in the media, design and visual arts. Some universities are implementing e-portfolios but they are still rudimentary. Existing e-portfolio programming has not yet achieved the potential sophistication but it is not far off. One can imagine a student's final year work including their best work presented to best advantage utilising video, CAD, CGI and other formats. It could work as well for the broadcast student as the photographer as the fashion designer as to a visual artist. Students can blog through their sites in an informational and visually rich environment.

In March 2009 the University of West of England (UWE) seized the entrepreneurial opportunity and launched an e-portfolio site aimed at all media students called Foliomatch.²⁶

In the e-portfolio environment each student effectively has a website that is structured to help them present their work to the best advantage. This can

²⁶ www.foliomatch.co.uk

be multi layered, where the student can control the space to allow different levels of access varying from the student themselves, other students, tutors, online viewers through to potential employers. The production of a student portfolio to demonstrate professional development is made much easier by using an e-portfolio, though this will need to be capable of easy content management of rich data formats.

The University of Wolverhampton was able to use its e-portfolio system to evidence the managed off-site study time activity in order to meet the Nursing and Midwifery Council theory hours' requirement. The particular package used supported the learners' meaningful and reflective conversations about professional practice. The e-portfolio system has proven particularly valuable to cohorts of non traditional learners on "family friendly" routes aiding not only their retention but also their professional development: *"By sharing ideas and group problem-solving, the family friendly students appear to be miles ahead of our full time route students in terms of their development."*

Tip: There is a useful JISC guide to e-portfolios.²⁷

Illuminate

The author had an opportunity to use a programme called Illuminate in an Elesig online multi party conference. Illuminate is a sophisticated but user friendly programme that facilitates VOIP real time forums and is clearly highly effective and well thought and lends itself to distance learning. It's very simple to use and the company have thought it through so that people can queue up to speak. You can add notes/drawings that will appear on everybody's whiteboard.

Anyone considering online conferencing particularly tutor-lead forums should have a look at Illuminate.

In their publicity Illuminate describe the platform as *'the classroom of tomorrow'* and state: *"Our 'No User Left Behind' philosophy means that we designed Illuminate Live! to enable all participants to have that same great experience."*

"Illuminate Live! is built specifically for live, multi-media, many-to-many collaboration. Whether you have two students—or two hundred—Illuminate Live! enables world-class communication, collaboration, and education that transforms teaching and learning."

Our unique Collaborative Communications Framework ensures that all students are in sync, regardless of computer platform or Internet connection

²⁷ www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits and <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/effectivepracticeportfolios.aspx>

speed. Our No User Left Behind™ technology means all students, even those with disabilities, get a richer, more interactive learning experience.”

For further information: <http://www.illuminate.com/illuminate-live/index.jsp>

Simulations

The use of simulations, developed from video gaming and GCI technology offer powerful training tools for the future.

The University of Strathclyde is just about to publish a three year funded research project into the use of simulation. Its stated aims are:

"The SIMPLE (Simulated Professional Learning) project will create the second iteration of an environment for professional learning – an open-source, open-standards transactional learning environment (TLE) – and will engage in large-scale evaluation of the implementation of this environment. In the process we shall use the innovative gaming technologies developed by our project partner, Futurelab, together with their experience in design and evaluation. We shall also work with our other partner and co-funder, UK Centre for Legal Education, in the dissemination of the environment within the discipline of law.

"Professional and vocational courses are taken by well over 50% of the full-time undergraduate population in HE: SIMPLE has the potential to enhance such courses, and deepen the professional experience of students through use of simulations. Our project will design the open-source, open-standards version of the TLE, implement it across a number of disciplines within the University of Strathclyde and three law schools throughout the UK, will evaluate student learning within the environment and disseminate the results of the evaluations. After the duration of the project the TLE will be available to other professional and vocational schools in HE and FE.

"The project will contribute to the Innovation strand of the JISC e-learning programme in many important ways – for example,

- it will provide a highly innovative learning environment for professional learning across a wide range of disciplines that will use the design and application of gaming technologies*
- the evaluation of application design and implementation will enhance our knowledge of aspects of successful wireless and mobile learning*
- the cross-curricular implementation within an institution will be a springboard for further and wider implementations across curricula and institutions in HE and FE.*

At present, there is no widely available open-source, open-standards web-based simulation engine for professional learning. Over the last five years our TLE, which is a virtual simulation environment for professional learning in

law, addresses this issue, but has been constructed using proprietary software.

At present, the TLE consists of the following:

- Map and directory of a virtual town (Ardcalloch) which is used as the project context, and provides content for specific simulations. The virtual town provides the implicit simulation world of the transactions undertaken by students.
- Virtual professional workspace
- Monitoring and mentoring capabilities
- Communications routes between simulated characters, students and staff
- Teaching, learning and assessment templates, including curriculum guidelines
- Development and integration of other e-learning approaches with that of the TLE

"Postgraduate students on a professional legal education programme, formed into virtual firms, use this sophisticated online environment to carry out entire legal transactions on behalf of virtual clients – for example purchase and sale of property, litigation in the Sheriff Court, and winding up the estate of a deceased client.

"The TLE has thus been in constant development and use in the last five years. During that time we have evaluated many aspects of it, and expanded its use to incorporate a number of virtual transactions, and we continue to do so.

"We hold that the TLE can be used by any professional discipline within HE and FE for education, training and assessment, and within any professional grouping in society generally. As it stands already, it represents the first iteration of our strategy to transform the nature and effectiveness of professional learning. It is so for a number of reasons. It enables problem definition to begin with construction of the problem space. It can support what we call open-field problems (where learners construct their own solutions or transactions), or bounded-field problems (where learners follow strongly pre-set procedures and transactions).

Above all, it can be used to generate problems and problem-based scenarios that:

- *Are clear and clearly defined, or are deliberately defined as having fuzzy goals or unstated constraints*
- *possess multiple solutions, solution paths, or no solutions at all (no consensual agreement on the appropriate solution)*
- *possess more or less manipulable parameters*
- *are either typical problems for learners, or problems where there are no prototypic examples*

- *allow for uncertainty about which concepts, rules, and principles are necessary for solution*
- *contain relationships between concepts, rules, and principles that are wholly consistent, or inconsistent*
- *require learners to make judgments about the problem and defend them*
- *enhance substantial reflection and collaborative learning; or can be performed by singletons.*²⁸

Another research project at the University of Southampton funded by JISC is due to end by August 2009.

"This project will develop an interactive learning environment based upon gaming and simulation technologies to deliver training in construction site risk assessment for more effective health and safety management. Risk assessment is a particularly challenging and difficult topic to teach and has implications for a variety of domains. Through this project we will address these issues by combining and harnessing learning technologies in a way that fits the human cognitive system."

This approach could be readily transferable to training journalists to handle high risk situations.²⁹

Discourse with lecturers who have experienced distance and blended learning suggest that normative pedagogic approaches do not necessarily transfer and that most lecturers will need training and reflection on best practice for remote tutoring.

Wikis

Wikis are dedicated web pages which groups can interact with to achieve a common goal by adding or editing content. They are very effective for a group to work together to solve a problem or create a piece of team work online. They enable not only the creation of the artifact but also the discussion of the process by the group. Wikis lend themselves to monitoring by tutors who can see which group members contribute to which degree.

The closing keynote of the 2008 JISC conference was presented by Angela Beesley, the Founder of Wikia. Where Wikipedia serves to be an encyclopedia, Wikia is planned to be "*the rest of the library*". Wikia Search is their next big project, though this will take some time before it is really effective. Angela also gave an insight into the future of Wikis.

According to Angela Beesley³⁰ who is also the Chair of the Advisory Board of the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organisation which operates

²⁸ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearninginnovation/simple.aspx>

²⁹ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/aboutus/foi/bid14southamptonuniversity1.pdf>

³⁰ Angela Beesley, JISC annual conference, Birmingham April 2008.

Wikipedia and other wiki-based reference works the advantages of wikis include:

- Open to correction and improvement
- Everything is reversible
- Changes are transparent
- Poor content is flagged
- New : stable versions

The particular advantages in education are:

- Collaborative writing
- Sharing research
- Course plans
- Peer review of students' work

Whereas wikis are predominantly text based, the future might be different.

- Richer formats e.g. video, images, diagrams
- Semantic web, leading to more structured data sets
- Introduction of "*stable versions*" [of Wikipedia pages]. In turn, this will make the information more reliable.

Observations

We are only in the pioneer days of how data rich and sophisticated visual presentations will transform education. The technology that already exists for the video gaming, television and film industries will eventually become financially viable for education institutions. Simulations, reenactments, multi screen presentations exploring decision making options will revolutionise the student experience.

Although nearly all Higher Education institutions now have Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), innovation is still at an early stage in many universities. Development of e-learning in the HE sector is diverse and variable. Some universities have embraced the challenge and are forging ahead with implementation with full management, staff, student and resource support. Many other universities are exploring the possibilities of e-learning with limited institutional resources even where the institution has stated pro e-learning policies. Implementation in those institutions tends to be piecemeal. Finally some universities have hardly begun and are making limited use of a VLE site.

But there is no question that e-learning is the future. New technology opens up powerful ways of supporting students who will be increasingly working in the learning models often influenced by social constructivist theory.

The author suggested in the original proposal that other institutions with journalism degrees, some have an interest in distance and blended learning but it is still largely embryonic. This was true but is changing. Some non Arts and Media based Universities and courses (especially MBAs) are firing ahead with blended learning.

While the author observes that there is a shift to constructivism, his personal experience suggests that different people have different ways of learning. While the constructivist emphasis on student directed learning, there are some students who benefit from the more didactic style and other students from other methods. It is the author's belief that tutors need to offer a range of learning possibilities on courses allowing students to utilize the one they feel most comfortable with.

Faced with a crowded HE market universities need to make the best use of their reputation and circumvent the difficulties of location by making much greater use of distance and blended learning programmes.