



Are we ready for the post-digital age?

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ABSTRACT

We are told that the post-digital age is approaching – where digital technology will be both completely embedded in our everyday lives and completely ‘taken-for-granted’ by its users. But are our HE courses fully prepared for this next stage of our technical and social development? We may be making significant advances in learning and teaching but what about other key systems like curriculum design? If they are not keeping up with the pace of change then this could stifle or frustrate any advances we can achieve in learning and teaching.

Keywords: post-digital; technology; curriculum design

Microphone on

This piece is being written just before the November 2014 SEDA conference which aims to address the following fundamental question – how should academic development help higher education institutions move into the post-digital age? ‘Academic development’ is interpreted broadly here to mean all curriculum innovation and not just the work of educational developers.

To be more precise, this piece is being dictated into a laptop courtesy of Dragon Dictate 4, and this software illustrates some of the key issues we are facing. For those of us who can remember the pre-digital age, this dictation process is a little less than magical. As a very early adopter of speech recognition technology, I remember the pain of dictating multiple sentences to set up the software, waiting for the PC to process it overnight, having to speak like a Dalek in order to leave the necessary pauses between words, and having to add an extra processor board to the PC to get it to work in the first place. The software now works very effectively straight out of the box on virtually every PC or laptop. And it has been touted as the ‘next big thing’ at regular intervals for the last 20 years. But, in my experience, it has not achieved significant penetration into higher education, with either staff or students. If anything, it has only achieved penetration in areas where it could do more harm than good – some disability and study skills services do recommend this software to students with significant language issues and may be doing them a disservice. Effective use of this software does demand a reasonably sophisticated command of language before you start.

A key point here is the complicated relationship between technological development and social practice. New technology will only be applied effectively if it is properly understood *and* if it can be easily integrated into our social practices. Speech recognition is an example of software which, despite significant advance in its functionality and ease of use, is often poorly understood. It is not being used by many people who could benefit from it – it does not fit their existing social practices. Whether new toys like Siri and Cartona will take us to the tipping point remains to be seen.

The nature of post-digital

Different authors have different definitions and perspectives on the post-digital society and there is not room to explore these here. But suppose we concentrate on a few characteristics which have some degree of consensus:

- ever-increasing access to (and accessibility of) information across all subject disciplines
- increasing and multiple ownership of devices which allow us to remain connected to the Internet
- technology both embedded in an increasing range of objects (as in the Internet of things and recent announcements of wearable technology) and taken for granted by users
- rapid and seemingly ever-increasing rate of change.

Are we ready for the post-digital age?

These characteristics both require and enable us to review and reconsider fundamental teaching practices. Relevant examples include experimentation with the flipped classroom and attempts to incorporate particular devices into mainstream teaching (as in Simon Thomson's keynote to this year's Solstice conference – <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/solstice/conference2014/keynotes/>). As one lecturer explained to me last week: “As I deliver a lecture, virtually all my students are exploring what I say on their devices as I go along. I *have to* change my practice to take advantage of all this technology.”

Good news from SEDA

The SEDA conference programme suggests that both academic developers and academics teaching academics are innovating in ways that support these post-digital characteristics. For example, the keynotes, in order of appearance, urge us to make better use of open educational resources (Grainne Conole), use a flipped format to encourage debate on different interpretations of ‘post-digital’ (Helen Beetham), and raise issues from the Change Agents Network, a partnership of staff and students working on institutional change in higher education (Mark Kerrigan and Peter Chatterton). The workshops, posters and presentations range from applications of specific technologies (Twitter, blogs, nVivo, concept mapping etc.) to changing processes (flipped classrooms, online CPD etc.), and on to broader institutional implications (digital university visioning, UK Quality Code etc.) – see at http://www.seda.ac.uk/events/index.php?p=14_2&e=450&x=1.

The but clause

Given this evidence of significant innovation, can we be happy that we are moving forward into the post-digital age? What if other essential university systems are not moving forward or adapting with the same urgency? This is one of my major concerns which I can illustrate briefly with the example of curriculum design.

How ‘fit for purpose’ is your curriculum design?

The JISC Programme on ‘Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design’ provides both a range of case studies and recommendations for future actions:

<http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/40489793/Institutional%20Approaches%20to%20Curriculum%20Design>.

For example, the T-SPARC project at Birmingham City aimed to improve the dialogue within course planning teams and between planners and validators, using technology to develop a “more streamlined end-to-end workflow.” Their ‘Rough Guide to Curriculum Design’ (revised in March 2014) contrasts their process with more traditional planning processes – see at <http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/36560187/T-SPARC%20Project>.

Other projects in the programme used different technologies, and this changed over time. For example, the Viewpoints approach (the project from Ulster, also featured in the SEDA Conference Programme with an update on its use at Westminster) moved to a process using printed cards in structured workshops.

Judging by recent conversations I have had with managers and teaching staff in institutions across the UK, this sort of innovation is still unusual. And there is widespread dissatisfaction with our current planning processes – summarised by one senior manager as “not fit for purpose”. The current process can also generate significant stress, especially if it is part of major institutional change – summarised by one course leader as “some of my colleagues are cracking up.”

The dominant approach to curriculum design still seems to depend on the time-honoured sequence of formal meetings leading to validation event, building documentation which is often not valued by its producers. As one course leader suggested somewhat cynically – “my dominant aim is to produce documentation which can survive till the next major review in 5 years’ time.” This process and timescale may have been appropriate back in the 1970s but is surely now well past its sell-by date.

For me, the emerging picture is of parallel universes which are sadly disconnected – a creative sandpit of innovation in learning and teaching contrasts with the bureaucratic porridge of curriculum planning. Surely these universes must come together if we are to move coherently into the post-digital world.

And finally

Any chain is only as strong as the weakest link. Innovation in learning and teaching will only achieve its full potential if it is effectively supported by other institutional processes. Other processes are lagging behind – many of our curriculum design processes seem to be stuck in the 20th Century. And we could also question many of our other systems like assessment. Marks are not numbers, no matter how much we play with statistics. But that is another story for another day.

Biography

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