

Chapter 13

Ultraversity–Integrating Technology in Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

The influence of technology in our daily live grows unabated and exponentially; some see it as a culture in itself. It has been hailed variously as a universal panacea for enabling lifelong learning; a means of opening the doors to knowledge barred by the education gatekeepers. Recent research has revealed that the metaphoric barriers put in place to obstruct the use of the innovative technology tools for the purposes of engaging in lifelong learning, particularly with reference to adult education may not be due to the often perceived intransigence of adult educators, but to potential learners themselves. Recent research into adult uses of technology draw out interesting results, but do not take into account, nor acknowledge recent and successful wholly online undergraduate degree courses, based upon adult experiential learning in the work place. This chapter outlines one such degree course in the United Kingdom, Ultraversity.

ULTRAVERSITY-INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY IN ADULT EDUCATION

According to research conducted by Google, (BBC, 2006) browsing the Internet ('surfing') has overtaken television as a leisure time pursuit. There are now opportunities for individuals to keep in touch with world affairs, sports results, check tomorrow's weather, keep up to date with their favourite

celebrity's latest exploits, undertake research on virtually any subject, and thus engage in continuing learning, all made possible through utilising a plethora of Web-based technology.

Going on vacation no longer means being out of touch. Mobile phone technology has now evolved to the extent that a photograph taken of the Taj Mahal on a camera phone can be viewed within minutes by friends and family on the other side of the world—even to the extent of appearing within a blog (a web log), where visitors to that blog may

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contribute their own comments in response to the Taj Mahal posting.

Multi-function or smart phones not only have the same photographic facility, but also enable their users to surf the Web wirelessly (when the user is in range of a suitable wireless 'hot spot'), as well as conventionally accessing the Web through their mobile phone service providers, also permitting the smart phone user to be able to send and receive email, and navigate using GPS technology built into the phone.

Live outside television news events broadcasted from one corner of the earth to another are now commonplace, and make possible near instant reporting of sporting events. Viewers are also able to interact with such sporting programmes via instant messaging from their mobile phones, as well as watching these events on them. Even listeners to radio can participate in a live broadcast 'phone-in' via their mobile phones. However, the role played by broadcasters in facilitating distance learning and early face to face 'communities of practice' can be traced back to the Farm Forum experiment which took place during the 1930s in Canada, which supported not only the sharing of good agricultural practice amongst its listeners, but also stimulated 'community development activities' (Brookfield, 1986).

Previously prohibitively priced international telephone calls made via landlines can now be avoided via the use of free voice over Internet protocol technology-VOIP. As this software has developed, allied to the availability of increased bandwidth, this same software also permits free, one to one video conferencing.

These advancements in technology have facilitated access to information on an unprecedented scale. Despite this progress, Selwyn, Gorrard, and Furlong (2006) see barriers and hurdles to harnessing this technology within the field of adult education.

They identify one particular cultural issue that needs to be addressed, namely the perceived barrier between the technology on the one hand,

and society on the other, an obstacle that needs to be overcome before technology can truly be utilised as a tool for furthering adult educational opportunities.

This chapter will focus mainly upon issues relating to adults re-engaging with part-time learning in higher education, and focus upon a degree awarded by a United Kingdom based university. The chapter will take into account the constantly evolving culture associated with contemporary technology, particularly computer-related information communication technology (ICT), and using the example of the Ultraversity online degree, show how using online computers as vehicles to facilitate the learning process can assist in addressing some of the cultural issues associated with utilising technology within adult education, thus furthering the ideals of lifelong learning.

The emergence of these technological advancements in communication have simultaneously generated associated cultures-particularly amongst teenagers and young people in their twenties, where a must have artefact of that contemporary culture is an up to date mobile phone that enables them at the very least continue their social lives through utilising SMS and MMS technology, and for others the ability to connect directly to their favourite social networking website, where possibly the person who sent the Taj Mahal image discloses in Facebook that they will next be visiting Mumbai, and promises further images. "No contemporary cultural artefact embodies the genius and the disruptive excess of capitalism as clearly as the cell phone" (MIT, 2005).

Using the Ultraversity model as an example, this chapter will demonstrate how information communication technologies can be harnessed to personalise adult learning opportunities, and in so doing provides a model for possibly modifying the culture of adult learning in Higher Education Institutions.

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