

## **The pedagogic potential and challenge of digital media: institutional and sector-wide considerations for enhancing the student experience through digital voices (0191)**

### **Overview**

Drawing on research from the Media Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG), the paper explores the pedagogic potential of digital media for enhancing and extending the student experience and the attendant challenges it presents for institutions, practitioners and policy makers. The paper discusses data that point to the change management challenges, dilemmas presented by valuable emerging technologies and the critical significance of institutional infrastructure in enabling academic innovation more generally. The collaborative approach of MELSIG is described, as is its emergence as a growing and diverse community of practitioners and researchers collectively exploring the transformational potential of digital media technology. A case is made for the role of SIGs as agencies for educational transformation able to support institutional agility.

### **The MELSIG Initiative**

Initiated as a project funded by the Higher Education Academy, the Media Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG) was established in 2008 by the University of Chester. By mid-2011, over 700 practitioners had participated in SIG events. A defining feature MELSIG has been its growth as a community of educational developers, learning technologists, academics and students with a common interest in exploring the educational benefits and transformative potential of podcasting technology. Pedagogic enhancement, the student experience, and exploration of the educational potential of the recorded voice have been fundamental concerns since its inception.

The SIG has used a 'hub and spoke' model (Nason and Wooding, 2006) as the preferred organising structure, with the 'spokes' enabling the core group to connect regionally to related organisations, interests and expertise. This open communal and collaborative philosophy and approach (Holmes et al., 2001), focused around digital technology and pedagogy, reflects what the SIG has increasingly come to signify.

### **Enhancement of the student experience with digital voices**

How the student experience of learning can be enhanced through the academic and student generation of digital media in a collection of techniques that can be referred to as Digital Voices provides the context for this paper. The notion of 'voices' in this work is as much about the capacity of academics, students and learning support staff to respond to emerging digital media technologies and pedagogies, as it is about technology or even pedagogy *per se*.

Collectively, the SIG has demonstrated how the recorded voice can be used to promote dialogic, learner-centred pedagogy. Such approaches accommodate the value students find in each other, in the people who teach them, and in those who are more peripheral, yet potentially significant, to the student experience of the

curriculum. This aligns with the unique selling point of a higher education: the social, interactive and personally engaging experience it affords.

Students' relationship with the real world also provides a context for this paper. In an age where employability and graduate attributes affect curriculum design, authentic connections between the curriculum and the world beyond university have never been so important. However, opportunities to experience that world through visits, placements, work-based learning and sponsored degrees are coming under pressure due to the current austerity. Media-enhanced learning can help to address such dilemmas. For example, the paper proposes that what we once understood to be the formal curriculum, constrained by given times, places and expectations, is changing. The richest spaces may exist in an extended understanding of the learning environment characterised by the diverse and asynchronous voices of tutors, students, peers, experts, 'publics' and others; a way of thinking that can help to shift the learner's centre of gravity, and so that of our institutions too, to the wider world.

### **Institutional perspectives on the sector-wide potential of digital media**

However, there are many challenges deterring innovation. Findings drawn from research conducted in the SIG's national and regional events over a three-year period are used to explore this. A major dilemma now facing post-compulsory education is brought to the fore: how do we, in post-compulsory education, adjust to the challenges and opportunities that new and emerging technologies present? Indeed, how can the potential of digital media and their role in assisting pedagogic transformation be realised institutionally? SIG members, through presentations, publications, framework development and a range of communal activities have described a complexity that their institutions face in responding to the changing world. Leaders and planners must find ways to address this complexity, not least in the area of support for digital media.

### **Change management and alignment challenges: infrastructure; technology; pedagogy; student and staff development**

The paper argues that the change agenda - for national policy-makers and opinion leaders, national enhancement bodies, and institutional decision makers - includes the need to recognise and plan for a pedagogic paradigm that is aligned more closely and organically to the potential of emerging technologies such as digital media and to the changing needs, behaviours and expectations of learners. As institutions look ahead and contemplate the significant funding constraints that confront institutions, careful thought needs to be given to the resourcing and infrastructural implications of all this. It is argued that institutional strategies for learning and teaching and the deliberations of national enhancement bodies and fora, need to factor in radical reappraisals of organisational, technical and development agenda to ensure agility.

Data gathered from 'challenge card' activities, surveys and focus groups conducted at MELSIG events, support these arguments. For example, data from workshop sessions entitled 'Supporting the use of digital media: the importance of institutional infrastructure', provide insight into what diverse practitioners see as necessary to support and facilitate educational podcasting and to enable academic innovation in general. Data indicate how ill-prepared many institutions are and where the 'infrastructure hot-points' may be. Findings highlight how our institutions typically display many critical weak links due to historical organisation, technical commitments and outmoded approaches to development. They indicate that our understanding of

infrastructure needs to be broad and joined up and how increasingly institutions need to take account of what is happening beyond the university. To make the most of new and emerging technologies to enhance learning, it is not only our students and teachers who must be digitally literate, but the institutions themselves.

### **SIGs as agencies for educational transformation**

The paper concludes by arguing that rapid responses to opportunities afforded by today's technology are needed to ensure that institutions are able to enhance pedagogy and to develop student competence and confidence as Digital Age graduates. The MELSIG initiative bears witness to the opportunities available for achieving widespread pedagogic transformation in our institutions. To achieve meaningful transformation, education needs new ways to develop knowledge collectively, to mutual advantage, thus addressing both the opportunities and challenges of the Digital Age. SIGs, it is argued, offer agency in achieving this. Such initiatives, and the communities of practice that can grow from them, provide a good model for how the sector can promote and sustain educational innovation, transformation, and change.

### **References**

Holmes, B., Tangney, B., FitzGibbon, A., Savage, T. and Meehan, S. (2001) 'Communal constructivism: students constructing learning for as well as with others'. Proceedings of SITE 2001, Florida.

Nason, E. and Wooding, S. (2006) Hub and spoke model for high technology platforms. Rand Europe Memorandum for the Department of Health. Available at: [http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/idcplg?IdcService=GET\\_File&ID+7755&Renderition=Web](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/idcplg?IdcService=GET_File&ID+7755&Renderition=Web) , last visited, 16/4/11