

University of Helsinki
Department of Communication
Argonaut Study Program

Course: “New Media, Communication and
Peace in a Global Knowledge Society”

Professor: **Tapio Varis**

The future of eLearning.
A Short History of eLearning and a Look
into the Future of Computer Mediated Learning.

An Essay by Jan-Peter Kylli
jan-peter.kylli@helsinki.fi

**Swedish School of Social Science
University of Helsinki**

December 19, 2005

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Short History of Electronic Learning	3
Personal Experience with eLearning	5
Social Consequences	7
Truly Multicultural Learning?	8
Discussion	9
List of Reference	11

1. Introduction

In the scope of globalisation we have to ask whether there can be a global culture without global information. And, can global information exist in a world without global education. These are the questions that we as the privileged few in the rich Western world have to deal with. On the other hand you come up with questions of the right of access to education and international eLearning.

Contrary to popular credence, electronic learning – or eLearning as it's called – is not a new phenomenon. One can trace back its beginning to the 1980s and has in the 1990s begun to flourish. Today eLearning is gaining more and more significance within the realm of higher education. This essay gives an understanding of the history of eLearning and a look into the future of eLearning in European Higher Education with a look at some national programs within the European Union.

2. Short History of Electronic Learning

Electronic learning is not a new craze. As early as the 1980s Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) – also known as Computer-based training (CBI) – took hold. The idea back then was to make training programs which then would be used by students on a computer. CAI was and is very efficient in teaching the use of various computer programs. This because the student is at the same time looking at the program as the use of it is being instructed. Nowadays most off the shelf computer programs have some integrated CAI built in as a form of a tutorial for usage, for example in Microsoft Word or in Open Office Write. One may argue about how useful it is to have the Microsoft Word 'Helper' or the Open Office Write 'Light Box' for the experienced computer assisted communication (CMC) user. However hardly anyone can say that they do not play a significant part in teaching the inexperienced users how to use basic home PC computer programs.

Before CAI growth could take place, much advancement was needed. Enormous amounts of man hours were necessary to create a CAI program not to mention the hardware resources required to run the CAI programs and or applications. The 1990s brought about a change to this. The PC computing power was raised tremendously at the same time as they were being equipped with CD-ROM drives to enable most homes to have CAI teaching programs for use right in their own homes. Not to mention the drive to increase the amount of personal computers in the homes of people during that decade.

CAI lacks the direct interactivity of a learning situation. One could run CAI programs in computer classes with other students and a teacher but the net benefit of computer learning interactivity would be very low. In the 1990s various web based environments propped up to facilitate distance learning. There is WAN (wide area network) learning, online education (eg. through the World Wide Web), mobile learning (mLearning) among others.

One of the most popular programs for eLearning is an open source online 'just in time' instruction platform called the Moodle. It has a user base of ca 8,000 registered sites. In Finland, the University of Tampere among others uses the platform in its online instruction. The name Moodle originally stood for *Martin's Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*, but the developer *Martin Dougiamas* has changed the acronym to be *Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment*.

In online learning platforms – like the Moodle – students get assignments and complete them by the weekly deadline. The students are also encouraged to discuss the themes and issues of the course and to comment on each others entries. Right now the materials used are mostly online texts that are linked to the Moodle course site, but some courses use other web content form such as video or sound clips as well. In picture1 below you can see how a course page can look like in the Moodle environment.

As you can see it is not a very proactive and engaging view. In the future online learning environments like these will have much more capacity to deliver a large variance of

different media, like two-way audio, full-motion video-conferencing up to MPEG2 quality, television-quality netcasting and so on (Varis 2003: 99).



Picture1: A user interface of an open source managed learning environment, the Moodle (2005).

3. Personal Experiences with eLearning

I myself have taken some CMC courses through the Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences that has its base at the University of Tampere and uses the University's own Moodle platform depicted above in picture1. The courses I've attended attempted to provide a forum for discussion and debate while at the same time they try to get students to do the (sometimes rather boring and maybe too simple) assignments by using course references and the students own references.

In real life the course participants often submit themselves to just making the obligatory assignments without really thinking about the issues very deeply at all. On the other hand it might not be the fault of the actual platform, rather than the relaxed attitude of the tutors on the courses that is at fault.

In any way one can see that the future of CMC learning is interactive compared with its rather passive past. We have moved away from centrally controlled, almost textbook like tutorials and CD-ROMs to not so centrally controlled learning environments where there is some information provided within the online platform and the rest has to be actively sought after by the students. Do not get me wrong. I do not advocate closing down these learning platforms. I think there are many advantages in the whole thing.

Clearly the most obvious advantage is flexibility. One is not bound up by certain times of the week to be able to attend courses. The professor doesn't have to waste (?) his or her time giving two or three hour lectures to amounts of people between 50 and 500. He could just record or create a course material and use it modifying it on an annual basis to meet the current requirements. All that he has to do is then to oversee the progress of the course annually and with the help of tutors control the efforts of the students. Also the professors and tutors are not bound by place. I've had one course in Communication Science where the students were all scattered across Finland while the teacher worked from Singapore. In a way really fascinating example of how the world is really becoming smaller.

And the problem of asking questions is solved, too. In a regular course one has to sit with a 100 other people so the barrier to asking a question about something one does not understand or that one would like to investigate further the issues behind the mere grind of the generalised course content. But in a way it is really liberalising teacher resources.

Also this so-called time factor is beneficial for me personally. I have to support myself working quite a bit, and sometimes that makes attending classes quite difficult. Rent has to be stacked up against graduation and unfortunately surviving next months rent payments

triumphs over going to English class. In web courses I can do the course work whenever it suits me. Early in the morning, or late in the evening, I can log on and check the course assignments. This is making possible for me to attend more courses – and hopefully making it possible for me to graduate within five years, maybe just maybe.

On the whole I have found the web courses really inspiring and I do believe that I have learned a lot by participating in them. These are still the early days of web courses and I do believe that they will not stay the same for long. I think that the participation problem and the demands put on the courses will rise. On the other hand there is a general trend with having more and more courses without final examination in the traditional sense anyway.

In my work at the Department of Education of the City of Helsinki as an administrative secretary I have started to see the first signs of web courses outside the systems of Higher Education. The city of Helsinki uses a platform called Fronter <<http://fronter.info/>>. There elementary school and even lower and upper secondary school students can participate in a learning environment that crosses classrooms across the city. The fact that web based learning can be non attached to

4. Social Consequences

One true benefit of eLearning is the broad scope of education that can be provided, for example language courses in otherwise rather exotic or rare languages. However, I would like to think that the reason why many people go on traditional language courses is not just to learn the language. There is a charm in of it self in going to the Municipal Education Institute on an evening course in Chinese. The fun of being created is real and collective, shared with others.

In CMCs the fun in shared experiences are very much individual. You don't have to do group work with people you don't like or learn to deal with people greatly different (different age, other socio-economic backgrounds, different views and so on) to one self.

And if you drop out you don't have to worry about bumping to your course mates in the Supermarket and having to explain yourself. CMCs are almost completely liberated from social pressures, or personal responsibility.

On the other hand one could take the stance that it doesn't really matter whether you are in contact with other people in person or only virtually. I have a quasi-virtual relationship with my sister in fact. Although we meet (once every year kinda), we email, phone, sma with one onether on a weekly basis. CMCs are really Connecting People.

5. Truly Multicultural Learning?

When one takes up the question of multicultural education, people are talking about integrating immigrants and so on. While it is very important to integrate the immigrants and various cultural groups within our borders, it is more prudent to take into account the need for a truly global understanding in our world of global problems.

One problem is globalisation itself. The concept of China Phenomenon is very popular in Finland if one reads the daily newspapers or listens to politicians and labour union representatives. What these people are talking about is the ever increasing shift of jobs from Finland to countries like China. Why is this? Ask any politician and you get the answer of how labour is very cheap in China. The answer one is likely to get is that the nasty Chinese people are dumping their wages to a level that Finnish workers cannot compete anymore. Companies pack their bags and leave Finland to go closer to the opportunities and cost savings of Chinese manufacturing.

The reality of the thing is not that simple, of course. The Chinese labourers have left extreme poverty in his or her home province for riches in the bigger cities and conurbations of the South, the East and in growing numbers even the Central parts of the country. Or is this guess of mine just a fabricated reality? Genuinely multi-cultural learning environments could be the cure to this problem of non-enlightenment.

6. Discussion

Interactivity was one of the buzzwords of the 1990s. CMCs and TVs would become so interactive, that you couldn't call people sitting on their living room sofas couch potatoes anymore. People could choose which programs to watch and at which times they want to watch them, not to mention the influence they could have on the content of the TV programs and websites, chats and so on.

What have we gotten so far? Well, we can influence the content of some TV shows in very limited manner and become active in some more or less controlled communities. The key word here is Controlled, I think. Maybe I was being very naive, but when I as a teenager first heard about Interactive Media, I was excited. We could exert real power over content decisions on TV programs and on websites. This hasn't really come to fruition. This is no real interactivity, as I see it anyway.

One good example is a one that I heard on RTV lecture in Communication Science. It was of the Finnish RTV program Suuri Seikkailu (Extreme Escapades in English). There they had a person of African origin as a contestant in this Survivor-like program. There was an open discussion forum open for all on MTV3's website where you could follow events and comment upon them. Mostly it was about how someone was sooooo cute and so on. However on discussions concerning this one person of African origin (who spoke perfect Finnish) racist comments became prevalent. THis slurs did not create an uprising of comments agains them and the TV channel did not attempt to curve the comments by filtering out them. Their solution to the problem was to close down the discussion forum. Instead of facing the problem head on, the organiser of the forum decided to shut it down. A sign of true interactivity in the society of the future, not really.

In the end it is a question of the willingness of people and the media to come together around interactive concepts. I hope its the way of the future.

One great example of web placed learning is the American MIT. The university puts all its web course content online, free of use for anyone to go and see. This is in the spirit of the web. Access for all, regardless of where one is hooking up to the web from.

In reality I really believe that web based learning could be one solution to life long learning. The easy access and not being constrained by certain times and certain places makes it ideal for those in the workforce to participate in web based learning.

In the future, I hope that universities could cooperate on a global scale providing web based learning to all for all with internet access. The discussions could get a totally new angle with people writing from their own perspectives. Or am I being too optimistic and not enough critical of my self?

I think that even with this course where we have participants from all over the world (or Europe), we get strongly culturally biased answers. People are talking about their own experience and that varies regionally a great deal. I see this more as an opportunity than an obstacle for positive development.

Anyways, I think that the future of web based learning is safe and sound. It has already carved itself a spot in the world and I do not really see any opportunity to get rid of it. However, developing the web learning environment will be and is a challenge.

List of Reference

Europeiska gemenskapernas kommission: 2005. Meddelande från kommissionen: Att modernisera utbildningen: ett avgörande bidrag till välbefinnande och social sammanhållning i Europa. SEK (2005) 1415. Bryssel: Europeiska kommissionen.

Moodle: December 19, 2005. Web adress: <<http://moodle.uta.fi/>> University of Tampere.

Varis, Tapio: 2003. Building higher humanity with a global university system. Varis, Tapio, Utsumi, Takeshi and Klemm, William (eds): *Global Peace through the Global University System [GUS]*. Pages 99-108. Tampere: University of Tampere.