

Dragons Den

Blog by Michelle Pauli

It's a busy stage for this plenary session: at least eight chairs are set out and both the stage and auditorium are filling up for this Dragon's Den chaired by Rachel Bruce. The Dragons are facing the 'entrepreneurs' and there is an air of anticipation as we wait to find who will take on the roles of Duncan Bannatyne, Deborah Meaden and Theo Paphites in this JISC version of the BBC Den.

Rachel outlines the idea: three pitchers will try to pitch an idea that's worth backing that will ensure that the sector can still ensure excellence in this time of economic change. "Not challenging at all!" laughs Rachel.

The Dragons: Heather Fry, Peter Tinson, Lorraine Estelle, Sarah Porter

The first pitcher, 'Bearded Dave' (Mark Stiles) kicks off. Welcome to the world of Big Education, he begins. The way the university system works now is that a university sells accreditation and so it carries out assessment. There are also some value added activities such as tutoring and access to expertise and feedback. Dave proposes a number of models, complete with funding models, that will transform the way that happens. They will be open to the free market and also cost effective.

David starts with the learner. Let's mandate OER, he begins. A student can learn the things they are interested in and go for assessment or pick a course they like and then they pay and register for assessment. On top of that, universities can provide value-added extras such as developing a learning plan or tutoring or personalised feedback. The point is that it could be done on a pay-as-you-go basis via the Learnster Card. The government will give them top ups - spend your £1000 on tutoring from the top bloke from Oxford or get more from elsewhere. When you use up the £1000 the government will put more on. When you finish, the amount you have used is totted up and the amount decides how much extra tax you pay - a graduate tax. 'An incentive for efficient learning!' Dave trumpets. A variation is work-place learning where the employer tops up the card. The result - massive savings with no reduction in quality. Lots of franchising opportunities, much more working from home and maybe even not so many teachers are needed.

The next pitcher is David Prosser from RLUK. Libraries within our institutions are the interchange where learning and teaching takes place. They provide an incredible physical space - they are humming with people during termtime. They are where we are creating the 21st century workforce. The library is also the hub for research in a physical and a virtual way - think about how busy the British Library reading rooms are every day, says David. Libraries are also the centre for disseminating research such as through digitised theses. 'We can take this further,' urges David. We need to focus on what we can do best collectively and what we can do locally. It used to be the case that a head librarian would boast about the hundreds of serials people have access to in their library.

Now, with serials, there is no point in trying to compete because with bulk deals everyone has access to everything. So that's a deal that's best done collectively and we need to be focused on and ruthless about that distinction. This kind of collective bargaining is already happening through JISC Collections and other collaborations and deals. But we need to go further. And then we can focus on what is best locally eg the physical space or the breadth and depth of collections or the way they help researchers. Doing that we can begin to use some of the shared services as platforms on which we can build local services to meet local needs.

'This is not an audacious, sexy idea,' admits David, honestly. 'But it's vital that we do it, and we need resources to do it.'

However, his buttering up of one of the Dragons with his praise of JISC Collections, does not go unnoticed by an eagle-eared Rachel Bruce.

The third pitcher, Yorick Wilks, goes immediately for the audience sympathy vote by describing himself as a 'harmless drudge'. He then gets them further on side by talking about his idea: 'warm furry handbags' or virtual friends, conversational companions - like old people's pets - that you can access on the web and use to 'debrief your life'.

Our web data is too big for us to manage, he says. Scientists can't keep up with the literature - hell, they can't even manage their own bibliographies. But what if they had a cuddly online companion to help them? It would know all about them and could use the internet. This companion would break out of the artificial intelligence knowledge that we put in and instead go on the web and seek out the information you need. It could prowls the literature, update your ontologies, keep in touch with your colleagues companions, it could even seek your research twin out there - the researchers that are most like you! It could track them and see what they're doing and see if it's somewhere you might want to too. It will also tell you jokes and sing to you while you're working.

Three very different ideas there - how will the Dragons respond?

David the Librarian is first to be on the receiving end of a Dragon grilling.

'But libraries are glorified coffeeshops now!' Sarah Porter steps in. 'Don't we just need a virtual library? People only go to libraries because the wifi is free,'

David comes back strongly and emphasises the number of people who still need to work with physical objects but accepts that the number will dwindle over time...he keeps talking but he seems to be losing the Dragons here.

It's Yorick's turn now and he's challenged on where the savings in his idea are. 'Efficiency!' he responds - just think about all the time you would save that you currently spend rummaging around for things. That's just for

scientists - the idea could be a real money spinner if these online furry friends are marketed to the old folk as replacements for the pets who never talk to them.

'But where's the business plan?' sighs Estelle. Yorick struggles. 'I'm a researcher, I don't *do* business plans,' he protests.

Sarah tackles Dave. Students love their teachers, they love to be with them, she asserts. Why will learners want this?

'This will drive quality up. People can still go and see each other but if students stop going to see a given person then that tells us enough about quality. Students will flock to excellence and it will drive quality.'

The temperature in the room seems to have suddenly dropped. Lorraine gets a quick laugh with the suggestion that parents won't like it - think of all those students who would have gone away to university and will now stay at home for years...

A flaw in Bearded Dave's Learnster Card is also picked up 'When has a centralised IT initiative ever worked?' asks Sarah, to further laughs. 'Isn't there a risk it will become the Fraudster card?!

Heather challenges every pitcher to come up with the downsides of their ideas. There is a long pause...

Dave replies first and acknowledges Lorraine's point that it's the loss of the nice social experience of going to university. But, he says, can we afford that any more? David thinks it's the fear of a lack of autonomy in institutions and some may react badly to that. Yorick thinks that companions might eventually contain lots of information that you wouldn't want to fall into the wrong hands, and they might, in fact, increase isolation as they are virtual. But he has a solution for that - you need to get the companions to talk to each other behind our backs and set up dates and other meetings.

Now it's the audience's turn.

Lawrie Phipps wonders if Yorick and Dave could get together and create a Teaching Companion? Yorick answers that attempts at that haven't been very successful so far but might get better.

Pamela from JISC thinks the Big Education model is great, but wouldn't it be cheaper to outsource it to China or India?

'We-ell,' replies Bearded Dave, cautiously, 'we do have to be careful about quality...and if we have the local model then we do have to deal with the local dimension. It has to be approached carefully.'

Graham Klyne tackles David the Librarian. It's not obvious to him that librarians actually help to get things online as more things got put into Southampton's repository when the users did it themselves rather than waiting for the library to do it for them.

'We may not need 170 libraries in the UK with 170 repositories - that might be one area that needs to be centralised. Is that a local service or a centralised national service?'

Bearded Dave gets a question now. 'Won't it turn education into a popularity contest? Won't everyone shoal like fish to the light of celebrity'

'Maybe celebrity delivers,' shrugs Bearded Dave. 'If students are being frugal they will ensure that they get the results they are paying for. The chaff from the wheat will be sorted very rapidly'.

Rachel asks David the Librarian for concrete ideas on what should be done locally and what nationally.

'I'm fizzing with ideas!' he responds, to laughter. If something is electronic and there are no costs in reproducing it then it should be available to everyone. If it's a physical artefact, like a Shakespeare First Folio, then it should be available at the local institution. But we need more digitisation of those physical objects to make them available everywhere.

It's Dragon Decision Time!

Lorraine hedges her bets and says she would like to back them all. 'Oh come on!' says Rachel, channelling Jeremy Paxman. Lorraine plumps for Bearded Dave.

Sarah dismisses Yorick because we don't need ever more research although she likes the furry friend idea so she'll give him £50 for that. David the Librarian gets the brush-off as well. She goes for Dave and cheaper education.

Peter also goes for Bearded Dave as he likes the idea of Pay As You Go education as it might be education for all.

Heather follows her fellow Dragons and says she can't see the innovation in the library idea as it's not so different from where we are now and can't bring herself to abolish the university as we know it so can't go with Bearded Dave. But on a personal note ('I'm getting on a bit and forgetting things and I could do with a nice companion when I get put in an old people's home and no one's talking to me!') she can see benefit in the Companion so she puts her money there.

Over to the audience and hands are raised for each pitch in turn. The results:

Bearded Dave and Big Education: 33 votes

David the Librarian: 21 votes

Yorick and his Companions: 63 votes

The Furry Friends have it!