

Open Mic Session – Thunderbolts & Lightning

Blog by Michelle Pauli

There's no doubt about it - visually, this session wins hands down. Enter room 0-04 and the first sight is an incredible, colourful graphical representation of the morning's Thunderbolts and Lightning session, half filling a wall of the room.

Here's Myles Danson's photo of the [work in progress](#) (on Twitter). And here's this morning's [finished product](#).

Will this afternoon's session be as bright and beautiful? Let's find out.

Myles Danson explains what it's all about: high energy, interactive five minute pitches of the thunderbolts hitting higher education right now. Lawrie Phipps is in charge of giving the five and three second warnings - when the bell goes the speaker stops. Participants listening to the thunderbolts must also rate the rants on a scale of 1 to 5. Four speakers will go one after the other, then there will be a short panel discussion with the speakers. David Flanders promises to fill the role of Jerry Springer and manage the comments and questions in a fair but provocative way.

First up: **Rufus Pollack** from the Open Knowledge Foundation and Cambridge University. Do we know what open data and content is? A delegate gives the right answer - publishing raw data and letting other people use it. Creative Commons is not always compatible eg its non-commercial licence. We need to be able to break data up - it's crucial to scaling but what if you can't put it back together again? You don't want to have to go to each person to ask permission to put a dataset back together again. What Rufus means by open data is: Freedom to use, re-use and re-distribute. It needs to be available and it needs to have the right licence on it. Go around to every project, he urges, ask if all the data that goes in or out is licenced. It's the single most useful thing you can do! Your data will live on, even if you don't or your project doesn't because it runs out of funding. It's simple to licence - open data commons licence.

David Flanders asks if 'open' is well defined in our community.

No! It's not well-defined, says a delegate. It depends what you're talking about - data, licences, standards... Another comments that these licences exist already - you don't need to reinvent the wheel. You just need to fight the fear.

Ross Gardler from OSSWatch and Apache takes the floor next and asks "why is our centralised funding model completely broken?" He gives the example of Apache as a distributed environment. How much does it cost to run? In terms of per committer: \$61 per year, per committer. Sakai Foundation is largely centrally funded and

costs \$4,400 per committer. But what if you're specialised? Ross gives the example of the Genome sequence. It can all be open sourced as re-usable components. But what about quality control? If number of users is a fair test of quality then Moodle, the nearest competitor to Sakai, beats it outright. What about innovation? How can we be sure we are addressing the needs of the community as a whole? That doesn't happen from on high, which relies on the people at the top knowing what the right thing to spend the money on it. But if it's bottom-up you get directed innovation rather than managed innovation. "If the JISC Elevator is about this then it will be brilliant and I applaud JISC for trying it," says Ross.

Richard Jones is next and talks about how Bucks Uni is going through a process of change and brought in a consultant to do the transformational project - new buildings, new projects, turning the ship around. It cost a lot and they have now moved on to their next million-pound transformational contract. Could JISC be the broker in this?

Delegate asks if it's too multidisciplinary for JISC. Richard responds that institutions are investing in shiny boxes rather than people.

Paul Walk comments that consultants are often used because they are a step removed and can make the difficult decisions. Would JISC be too close? Richard replies that, yes, we need an outside view but not so far outside that we're spending lots of money unnecessarily for the benefit of consultants not universities UK.

Pat McSweeney, next, talks about the Southampton Learning Environment. New VC threw everything up in the air - fewer depts and less admin staff. What happened is that teams were created, in charge of revolutionising what we do. One is the team that's all about how content is delivered to teachers and learners - how does the learning interface with the stakeholders. Not much use having a portal. Need to put power back into the hands of people who can see the direct benefits of making the change, the people who it is important to have that power. Gives the example of using linked data to be able to see what's going on in different rooms in the institution at any time. Information about timetable, course material etc written to an open standard, all the end points are linked together and made flexible and easy to get end points so that all the systems fit together and in a public way so students can see, for example, everything someone has written and when they are lecturing and where. If publish everything in a way people can access then they can use it how they wish. Need to get the infrastructure together and it won't be quick - 3-5 years.

Time for the panel discussion and Rufus is asked by David for his "favourite" and declines ("it's like Paris in the Trojan war!"). But he does make a case for micro payments, and publishing smaller bits of more simple data. Ross argues that microfunding only works if already have open source and open data to build that on. Always a need for micro funding. Richard agrees with open and with VCs collaborating not competing. Pat applauds the JISC Elevator - less time writing bids and more time writing code!

Delegate says that it depends how micro is micro funding: "I can't do anything with £5000!" Paul Walk says it's not so much about the pot of funding but the amount of interest from users, you get redirection of resources to make it happen. The 5K is just to kickstart it. Ross says it's about collaboration - may be able to do something with 5K and then can work with someone who brings in another 5K. Graham Klyne asks, what about maintaining continuity of staff and capability if the 5K comes and goes. Delegate replies that it's a disaster. A 200K project can run for two years and get into it. For a 5K project you spend half the time writing the bid.

Next set of ranters step up to the front.

Steven Young is first, from Oxford University. Video-conferencing is his topic. His university has rooms with nice screens, cameras etc and they work but they get old and stale and will need to be refreshed. There are minimal staff to maintain and run it. They charge people to use operator time if they need help using it (£50/hour). Solution is that it makes a little bit of money, people who do not know how to use it are encouraged to train themselves.

David: should there be a better service model? What's your primary concern?

Steven replies that people can always use Skype on their laptops etc but the facility is useful as lots of people can participate in the meeting.

Graham Klyne: would you be better scrapping it now and putting in something that people can easily use?

Delegate: the more people who use it the more people who will want it to be replaced when it gets too old?

Quick survey of the room finds that very few people use institutional video-conferencing rooms, nearly everyone uses Skype on a personal laptop.

Steve Hitchcock from Southampton wants to talk about open digital repositories. I *know* it's so last year, he says, but argues that it's still too hard for people to put things in repositories. We need to reposition our filters for digital rather than print. It's got to be changed so that it's easier for authors to deposit rather than getting admins to do it. Deposit MO is a JISC project to make it easy for people to deposit. Answer is to embed a deposit button in the apps that people use, even if that means putting one in Microsoft Word. But what if deposit turns out to be a distraction? Well, at least it will have provided a channel of discussion. Let's get the stuff in there and then let those on the outside be the judge of what's relevant.

Graham Klyne: namechecks Ben O'Steen and refers to his 'curation by addition' blogpost

Delegate: says a digital native pdf can take THREE MONTHS to get from his desk to the repository. What are librarians doing?

Delegate: deposits do not only need to be research deposits

Delegate: are you turning the repository into a wiki?

Eddie Gulc from the Higher Education Academy is next and asks if anyone knows what his institution does... It's about creating the best experience for the learner and raising the profile of teaching within HE. One issue is recognition for teaching staff. How can you make it more of a level playing field between research and teaching staff?

Marcus Winter from the University of Brighton, steps up to plug his projects and tries to fit them into the bigger picture of the funding crisis. Unis need to attract overseas students for the fees and for the international connections. How to attract them? One way can be to offer the best possible environment for them and we know that one of the main reasons for them to study abroad is to learn the language. So his team has developed mobile app for informal language learning - Cloudbank - they can learn while out and about with their mates, picking up cultural stuff, it happens incidentally and informally. It addresses isolation issues, content is editable and can be pulled into any learning management system. "We're evaluating it at the University of Sussex - you can give it a go, too," says Marcus.

David: are international students the way forward? Is it the right model? How?

Delegate: offering free spaces (scholarship model) generates free advertising - any evidence around that?

Delegate: can we expect the premium on overseas students to remain - should not build business models around the assumption.

It's panel time again and, for the audience, recognition and OER seem to be the top topics. Should we be tracking OERs? With recognition, is it a discipline thing where book publishing matters more in social sciences?

Steven Young responds to the reaction to his video-conferencing talk and says that he may have come round to the audience's way of thinking that cheap can be good and easier is better. Eddie Gulc says he's interested in ideas around how open can help with recognition.

Five minute break now for everyone to have a stretch and then it's Paul Rock, Terry McAndrew, Sarah Porter, Balviar Notay in the hotspot.

Paul Rock starts by asking the participants about their digital cameras and the size of the images they can take now compared to their early cameras. Unstructured data is all around us and is valuable. 90% of the unstructured data we have is untouched after 90 days. Paul demonstrates Planet Filestore by getting volunteers to throw pens back and forth - those that do it often do it quickly but it takes a lot of energy and concentration. It demonstrates how we use high performance data storage for all our data storage but the stuff we only need occasionally we could keep in eco storage - slower but that doesn't matter if you don't need it very often. That's Planet Filestore.

Terry McAndrew kicks off by talking about how when he started university computers didn't exist. It's good to forget things from time to time so that you can refresh your memory and social networks. But now with short term contracts that knowledge is lost because people think everything they know has been downloaded digitally. It should be about quality, not quantity. The king or queen of Twitter at this event will not be the person who tweets the most but who tweets the best. Would people please get to the point and not send lots of links. We need to define Academic Web 2.0 skills so that people keep their own information and it's harvested intelligently. People will invest in their own space. We need informed micro-funding. We need good project management attitudes. How is the selection process going to work with JISC Elevator? If it's the community then it will work.

Sarah Porter steps up and claims that she could go off on numerous rants but decides to plump for the fact that we need a collaborative university network, not a competitive one. Could share physical resources, including campuses - why do people have to move away from friends and family to go to university? It's about using the spaces they've got - knowledge is out there on the network, not in a physical space. Can we break the link between someone sitting in a room and the accreditation process? Let's use the resources that are out there in the network and have more of a seamless, collaborative model. It may be the only way we can sustain things in the future. Do we have a sustainable model at the moment? No.

Delegate: stand for Parliament, Sarah! Change the system, I don't think there is anyone here who disagrees with you.

The only thing stopping people doing this is accreditation, says Sarah, and that's what needs to be changed.

Delegate: how do we change that competitive environment? Parliament is where the real change will occur.

Balviar Notay is next up and talks about activity and usage data. It's upstream but how does it affect us in the institution? Recent Economist article about how businesses like Amazon and Tesco collect and use business data. Should institutions use data like this for the community's benefit? It could be used to improve the user experience. There are opportunities in this area and JISC is doing some work. What are the technical issues, do we know how to use it and mash it up, do we understand the legal issues, should we be looking at the local or national level?

Panel discussion and Paul picks up on Sarah's points about community, Terry adds to the agreement, Sarah says that, in the community spirit, she liked all of the talks. Balviar picked up on the green ICT argument on the basis that if we don't have a planet then we can't do anything at all. Green should be in every programme.

Delegate points out that community and collaboration does not mean that universities don't compete with each other and with universities around the world for students, staff etc. Another adds that it's about defining where to compete and collaborate.

Sarah responds that we do need competition as it drives up quality but we're competing on some of the wrong things eg we have become hung up on physical space. There are things we could share.

Graham: why do shared services often cost so much more, though?

Delegate: Britain won the Olympic bid because it could benefit community. That's where competition works.

And, on that note, the bell tolls, the thunderbolts and lightning fade away and it's time for tea. Come back tomorrow for the debate on how to [weather the storm](#).