JISC Online Conference explores learning in transition.

The sixth JISC online conference taking place on 22-25 November 2011 focuses on how further and higher education should respond to a changing learning landscape.

Kim Catcheside
The educational landscape is changing… How will colleges and universities navigate this unchartered territory? Can digital technology help?

Sarah Porter, Head of Innovation, JISC
What learning environments should we providing? How do we design a curriculum that works online? What should we be doing about open educational resources? Is that something to invest in? What are issues around that? What are challenges, what are the benefits? What should we be doing abut those things? And what about pedagogy, do we really understand that in a digital environment?

Kim Catcheside
How can technology support and enable collaborative initiatives in an increasingly competitive environment in which Higher Education is more consumer oriented?

Bill Rammell, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Plymouth University
We have had a very good track record of sharing, of working in partnership, and I think in principle that's what we still need to do. But the caveat is that we're moving into a much more competitive environment where – both potentially and in practice – universities will be competing directly against each other for student numbers. And what we need to ensure is that in that competitive environment, we still have the trust and the confidence to be able to work in partnership and be able to share with one another.

Kim Catcheside
Meanwhile, despite the evidence, not all policy makers are convinced that digital technology is the way forward. …

Mark Sharples, Professor of Educational Technology in the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University
Educational technology is partly about the future of technology, it's also a great income earner – education is a multi-billion dollar income earner to the UK – and thirdly it's our investment for the future. It's the way in which we can enable the next generation of learners and students to become part of an international community, sharing their knowledge with other people, but also as entrepreneurs developing educational innovations that will then be marketed and shared worldwide.

Kim Catcheside
A range of innovative educators working with digital technology are reimagining what the best learning experience could be … Ewan McIntosh is the Chief Executive of No Tosh, a company which helps to design creative learning in schools.

Ewan McIntosh, CEO, No Tosh Ltd
Universities and colleges and further education institutions are on the whole – and there are some notable, wonderful exceptions – are about content delivery. Now in an age of Ted.com, You Tube, there are many proponents now looking at what they would call the flipped class room – for example, the likes of John Bergman in the US who's a science educator who with colleagues decided why are we spending 20 minutes presenting and then rushing through the fun part in what's left of that class room hour or 50 minutes? Why not instead get students to watch the lecture at home before they come, and then, when they come as a group where there is that social, human element of learning, we actually do social human stuff – which is not presenting from the front of the room.

Kim Catcheside
Hello and welcome to Jisc On Air. I'm Kim Catcheside and in the lead up to JISC's Online conference later this month, I'll be focussing on the issues at the heart of Learning in Transition, its core theme. As we've heard, some of the keynote speakers at the conference share their vision, and their own experiences along with their concerns in relation to technology-enhanced learning.
To begin with, let's consider the Online Conference itself…

Mike Sharples
I think the concept of an online conference is fascinating. How can you create the sort of community that you would have at a face-to-face conference? How can you create that online?
The presentations are the easy bit. It's how you can then sustain a community of people to be able to engage with each other around these key topics and to continue that afterwards.
We know that lectures are a pretty poor way of learning, they are inspiring but you don't learn that much. We get students to take notes… what you can do in an online conference is engage in a conversation, the notes are not just going down to your pad, they're going to other people and they're responding so you've got another channel of communication that's not separate from the presentation but is augmenting the presentation when that goes well.

Kim Catcheside
And providing as useable and engaging an experience is a priority for Sarah Porter…

Sarah Porter
I think we do get more interaction; we do get a better depth of discussion. We're using a number of different environments to help people to have as rich an experience and as human an experience as possible. You know, we find actually that this format is very good for senior

people because they can give up the time for a couple of hours whereas they couldn't give up the time for, say, three days or five days to travel.

Kim Catcheside
The focus on the human experience, on community building is a major concern, and for delegates who are participating in this Online conference for the first time, it might take a bit of getting used to, but it's an accessible, engaging format…

Mike Sharples
I think you can expect excitement – and a certain amount of trepidation! I remember the first time I took part in a video conference; I was absolutely petrified because I thought I was on TV. Now video conferencing for me is pretty routine. And partly it's taking the time to have a bit of informal chat so you don't go in in a nervous state, and partly it's realising you do have a lot of technology skills. We know how to use a mouse, how to press a button line as well as have a willingness to respond.

Kim Catcheside
What we've heard are also some of the arguments for technology-enhanced learning: this enables people in remote places to participate, delegates can attend when it's convenient, listen back when they have time, interact, hear and, in some cases, see each other while avoiding costly travel. As *a part* of the learning experience, it can increase interaction and participation of students…

Sarah Porter
For the learner experience, we've got to be really careful about how we integrate that with the face-to-face interaction. I think we make assumptions that all kids love technology; they don't, you know, they like people. Well they like everything, don't they? They're as different as we all are, so let's make sure we have equity of options so it's not all forced down a digital route.

Kim Catcheside
The question of what students want and need, and how they get it in higher and further education, is at the core of the Learning in Transition debate.
The idea of the student as partner is fast gaining ground, but how does this fit with student expectations of academic authority and expertise?

Bill Rammell
I think what you're rightly identifying is that there's a tension there in that I think as time as gone on, as academic thinking has gone on, as the way that universities position themselves has developed, we are convinced that the best model is a model of partnership. But, at the same time, there is an expectation from students – you know, rightly – that their lecturers, their teaching staff, know more then they do. And therefore I think it is really, really important that we are clear with students at the beginning about mutual expectations and that there's a real clarity in terms of explaining that the philosophy is very much that the student will get

more out of the experience if they are involved in the process itself. So I think it' about being clear and not misleading students about the situation.

Sarah Porter
I think again that this is an area where we need to be very thoughtful and very careful in what we do. When you talk to students I think you find that, yes, they want to be active participants in their learning, but they also want to learn from experts, they want to learn from people who have been through this and know good approaches to find information, know how to construct a good essay, if you like, or a good resource (whether it's a spread sheet or whatever). That's the whole point of the university system, looking at that system particularly, that you learnt from experts and you shadowed their behaviour. It was a mentoring system to some extent. So I think we do have to be careful that we're not putting too much pressure on students but also expect them to find their way through their own learning pathway without enough support.

Kim Catcheside
Technology-enhanced learning can really engage students in their own education process, but creating a dynamic, thought-provoking environment raises questions about the traditional curriculum…

Sarah Porter
We're looking at things like curriculum design and redesign and how that process can be improved. There's a risk that curriculum design can become almost like an administrative process where it's kind of ticking boxes and have you said what the learning objectives are going to be, have many interactions at what points and so on. Actually, we want teachers to be thinking about the pedagogic experience: how are they engaging with the learner; what are they hoping the learner will take away. Offering a range of opportunities, and digital is just one of those things.

Ewan McIntosh
I would love to get a straw poll of how many higher education and further education institutions are offering their students a proper map for learning, a compass, or even better a GPS…

Kim Catcheside
Ewan McIntosh is convinced that getting through content has been a real cause of harm in teaching engagement…

Ewan McIntosh
… My evidence is not many. That's why lectures are so prominent because lectures are the ultimate control of learning. You are not giving them the map because you're going to keep hold of the map and you're going to drag them kicking and screaming to the end through that forest. So if we're saying, well, let's give more control over the route we take to get through

this forest to the youngster, it would be criminal not to give them the tools to let them get through that successfully. So what this requires is a total change in pedagogy and thinking about what it's for. Is learning, is higher education, for getting through content? Is it for getting through content as quickly as possible, in which case absolutely the most expedient way of doing that is hold your students by the hand and drag them through the forest; or are we trying to do something more meaningful, more engaging, with lessons that are deeply absorbed by the learner because the first thing you have to do is learn how to use the tools of learning and only once you've understood the tools of learning, the thinking skills involved, can they then go through and begin to contemplate the content.

Kim Catcheside
Finding the balance between Ewan's co-creative learning and the reliance that students have on a tutor's expertise is vital… and some students have to build the level of confidence required…
They want the guidance, they want the lectures and they want the one-to-one interaction and if you gave them as many choices as you're suggesting they would flounder.

Ewan McIntosh
Students would absolutely flounder if they were just given these choices. The fact is it's not taught. When we talk about flipping the classroom, when we talk about students coming in with a much more open ended curriculum, the first thing is they need to be taught how to do that. There are the tools of thinking that they need taught; they need to learn how to learn. Too many students leave high school without even knowing how they learn. I'm not talking about the pseudo-science of learning styles, I'm talking about how do you know you learnt something, how do you know what you need to learn next in order to achieve what you want to achieve? The challenge there comes if you're learning something that isn't related to anything you want to achieve but it's related to what a university course wants you to achieve. When you remove the inner belief that what you're doing is important and worthwhile then learning becomes less meaningful in itself.

Kim Catcheside
You're listening to Jisc On Air – an introduction to Learning in Transition, the subject of the JISC Online conference, later this month – for more online information, please visit www.jisc.ac.uk/elpconference11

Kim Catcheside
Sarah Porter, Head of Innovation for JISC, identified collaboration as one of the main issues for discussion. We've seen a great deal of enthusiasm for Open Education…but since the stakes are higher…with students being cast more and more as consumers looking for distinctive offers …the heat is on.
In this environment, we are going to see universities becoming more competitive.
We've got the beginning of a market being introduced and they will be much more

anxious to create and safeguard their brands. In that atmosphere, are they really going to want to collaborate?

Sarah Porter

I think that's a very good question. As I was saying earlier, I think we need to look at the places where collaboration really makes sense, and it's not undermining the brand, you know – the things that aren't essential to the value. And some of those things we might actually have to let go of, some of our cultural preoccupations in a way. I think sometimes we believe that some things are very special to the institution and actually they're not. And if we look at something like open education in particular where that is a real challenge, we're saying to people you should consider making your learning resources open for everyone to use as much as possible. And there's nervousness about that: people are thinking we've invested money and time in this, we don't want to open this up. But what we're finding, in fact, actually interestingly in terms of brand, is that by opening up resources, it can really strengthen the institution's brand because it gives the student the opportunity to go and sample the learning environment. And actually we've seen through some of our research that it's actually increased applications for particular courses, because it gives the student the opportunity to really taste what it's like to study at that institution. And so it can actually strengthen brand rather than weaken it.

Kim Catcheside
There are many universities clamouring to stand out from each other. Bill Rammell at Plymouth University sees competition as an inevitable element within partnership working, but is also adamant that collaboration is the way forward…

Bill Rammell
If you push me to my core ,I don't think there is a substitute for being open and transparent. Because I don't think you can build a success on the basis that you have some secret way of working or secret technology that you can keep to yourself, attract students here on that basis, and then that nobody else will share with it. I just think we live in a much more open society than was ever the case in the past and we've got to recognise that. So, yes, there has to be a degree of openness and you have to have a degree of trust that you can work with others, but you can still maintain the advantages that you've got from the fact that you've developed particular instruments.

Kim Catcheside
Increasingly, universities and colleges are accepting and embracing the roles that technology can play in learning, but underlying this are more practical issues. Which technology do you use? How much money do you spend? How do you prioritise the needs?

Sarah Porter

I think people generally acknowledge the importance of technology as part of the experience. But what they're not always able to do is make decisions about what is the right way to use the money actually, so when you're faced by experts coming along and saying I need x pounds to, you know, put in this exciting new thing, are you empowered, to you have the knowledge to actually say no, hold that, we can wait five years?

What we need to do now is upgrade our learning environment because it's creaking. So it's partly about ensuring that senior manages take a professional attitude to technology and that's a really hard thing to do for many of them, because it's something they unfamiliar with. But they have to be asking the hard questions, you know, that they would be asking about any resource; they would ask those questions of teaching practice; they understand learning spaces as in physical rooms; they know when the paints flaking off the wall, don't they? But they may not understand when the paint's flaking off their learning environment.

Mike Sharples
There's a number of misconceptions about learning technology. One of them is that everything's happening so quickly that we have to keep up with the technology. I think that's entirely wrong.

Kim Catcheside
Mike Sharples…
Mike Sharples
When people try to do that, they usually make mistakes, so a good example of that is universities investing in Second Life. So they spent major resources setting up presences in the Second Life virtual world and it lasted for a year. Now how many people engage with Second life? It's a passing fad. We need to understand the co- evolution of learning and technology, how you can develop new approaches to teaching and learning along with effective technologies – that's the important challenge now. It's not racing to stay up with the technology; it's not designing a new tool for every sort of learning; it's how you evolve the two together and that's a discussion, a conversation between technologists and educational developers and educational researchers. So that's the new agenda and that's what I want to focus on in my conference discussion.

Kim Catcheside
For Ewan McIntosh, who will give the closing talk at the conference, our idea of learning needs to develop *alongside* the technology, so that students really can count education as a valuable life experience.

Ewan McIntosh
What is the amazing thing to me is that, out of the two options I have, one is to laud the amazing things going on and pretend that all is well in the world, or to really challenge that mediocre hump that I would like to see changed. Now, if you want to get defensive, if people feel insecure by what they're being provoked on, then that's probably a little alarm bell to not 'get mean but get even'. Go and read Dylan William's work on formative assessment. It's only

twelve pages. It's the most accessible research report I've ever read. Go and discover the world of design thinking which, in the industrial design world, in the service design world, in fact in pretty much every product that we use from the microphone we're speaking in today to the computers you're listening to this on, they've all been designed with the user in mind.

Kim Catcheside
**To find out more about the conference, please visit www.jisc.ac.uk/elpconference11.
This is your chance to increase your understanding of the issues inherent in Learning in Transition, to hear others' experiences along with helpful suggestions and solutions in how to deal with them, but above all, it's a chance for you to participate and collaborate in shaping the vision and management of learning for the future.**