VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3
2012

DIGITAL CULTURE
& EDUCATION

The game of educational teaching and research: Review of CCA-EDUCAUSE Australasia, 2011

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In April 2011, I attended the CCA-EDCAUSE Australasian conference in Sydney, Australia. It brought together a mix of Australian and New Zealand education and related fields professionals with guest speakers in the fields of higher education teaching and research from the United States and United Kingdom. This conference was based on a metaphor: that the 'game' of learning and teaching has dramatically changed.

The main message of this review is that digital culture in secondary and tertiary educational institutions is impacting heavily on teachers and students as we move through a period where the relationship between both is changing. Technology is mediating this change; however, the control of learning, what students want to learn, when and how, is increasingly changing. But there was also on display a relationship between business and academia especially in information technology expenditure that cannot be ignored because, as digital education resource users, we need to be aware how to utilise resources efficiently for our students.

This review demonstrates that the talents and skills of many people go into creating new systems to allow students to control the administrative and learning functions of their educational career. However, the conference also questioned delegates' responses to change and accept that student teacher relationships have, and will continue, to change into partnerships and mentoring, with technology creating an absence of some previous teacher-led activities. It is crucial that teaching professionals at any level be aware of the changes at the research, resources and technology because they are widespread (CCA-EDCAUSE, 2011). This review will stress the impact of these three issues.

Brad Wheeler of Indiana University was the keynote speaker who outlined the theme of the conference. Using the analogy of a game as metaphor, he described the core worldwide problem of higher education. The problem as he explains is that higher education does not have the structural capacity for large collaborative action in regards to the information technology infrastructures across the planet (Wheeler, 2011). This is important for digital educators to be aware of the new sets of relationship rules that will arise from worldwide digital education and research. As Poon (2006) explains the decreasing level of government funding in developed countries has put pressure on universities to enter into collaborative, sometimes controversial, alliances with corporations and educational providers. This was evident at this conference as academics and university support staff paid attention to the experiences of other universities when such universities developed student learning and administrative support systems.

The underlying message from the academic administrators and vice chancellors was, as Pathak and Pathak (2010) describe in their paper on higher education value added activities, is education is a buyer's market and the student is the customer. Part of that, as the conference stressed, is the development of digital education and e-learning systems for student teaching and student self-administration of activities such as

enrolling in classes. While these have been part of the landscape for over a decade, the conference presenters were interested in their student learning management systems being robust, easy and intuitive to use, anticipating student needs and, very importantly now compared to the past systems, have some form of social networking and media platforms within them.

The game metaphor suggested by many of the speakers was widely described as a set of changing rules where digital media and its administration and management is driving change. Of note was Diana Oblinger's (2011) video conference, who viewed these changes as a gift. As Executive Director of Higher Learning in Microsoft, she outlined in 2003 the factors that would lead to the increased use of technology in distance and face-to-face learning at universities. The "information-age mindset" she described was the difference between those who used computers and did not (Oblinger, 2003). However, since the time she described this mindset more the access to digital learning has increased substantially.

In her keynote speech, Oblinger (2011) emphasised that it is the educators who have the opportunity to create the next generation of learning for the next generation of learners. She urged those at the conference to keep ahead of this "game" by constantly interacting with students to see the directions and trends that their students are taking in the learning process. This is why journals such as *The Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* and *Digital Culture & Education* which report the research of established and forthcoming researchers in digital education are crucial to emerging interdisciplinary research in education that deals with digital cultures and technologies. Two examples include Disbrow's (2008) study of online student conferencing for distance students who argued it was a much better interaction medium than asynchronous static virtual communities. The second example was Peterson's (2011) study of online role-playing games in Japan where students felt less anxious to participate in learning language skills because they could remain anonymous to others.

This conference needed to have more input from other scholars using such technologies to tell stories of how students use digital technology to enhance their learning. Nevertheless, the mix of technology providers and scholars did emphasise one key point; students have and are changing the game of education and offered studies and examples of how this is being done.

Research has moved from a self-contained to one university or specific discipline to a collaborative and cross discipline environment. Additionally, corporations sponsor research and researchers from many universities may work together. An excellent presentation that highlighted the need for universities to manage data and relationships between researchers was from Wolski and Richardson (2011). Their framework comprehensively suggested how to manage research data through the stages of discovery and collection, cleansing, analysis and preservation. But the issue of finding data, particularly quickly finding experts in a field, their publications and contact details on the internet was seen as a major problem. Porter's (2011) presentation argued that the University of Melbourne's approach using an ontological approach to web design was effective for indexing and finding research publications. It made a salient point that it is difficult, but increasingly possible, to pull massive amounts of data together to form a coherent and useful profile of researchers and their careers. Why this is important becomes clear when, as digital educators, we need to access expertise in fast growing fields. Therefore, we need electronic and online systems that can store as much relevant research data as possible and for researchers to find quickly those human and other resources they need.

Aside from the data and information aspects of finding research and researchers, the research relationships and ownership of digital data was discussed. Scott and

Hillbrick (2011) argued that the positive outcome of collaborative research exercises the Australian Government has insisted on have had good results for students and educators. They spoke of the repositories being archives for research publications and links to such research, such as The University of Queensland's eSpace research repository. The consequences for more open research accessibility will, no doubt, affect journal subscription rates yet will also allow more research to be available to many, hence allowing more potentially new fields to emerge (Scott & Hillbrick, 2011). Another issue in the changing research landscape was discussed by O'Brien (2011) of Griffith University, Brisbane. Her view advocated that information professionals, researchers, library staff, information technologists and archivists must work closely and collaboratively to ensure well organised and easily accessed research repositories are available.As digital educators we will be faced with growing costs to our universities and departments. Resources will be under stress to cope with students who, whilst providing their own mobile devices and internet connection, will demand more internet and mobile resources. The presentation by Nikkel (2011) was well received as a guide to the University of New Brunswick Canada's integration of information technology services across the university. Similarly, Herb (Herb & Steller, 2011) discussed the IT strategic planning process at the University of Newcastle as being successful to deliver digital education resources effectively through careful resource management and planning. Cloud computing was seen as a major strategy for cost saving on resources. However, Northam's (2011) presentation praised and cautioned against the use of cloud computing services. Certainly informal discussions after his presentation were of the type that although cost savings and data access are major advantages, student privacy and mining of data for unethical purposes are of concern to the academic community.

The key lesson from the conference in the area of resources is to be aware of the impact economics has on digital culture and teaching practice. It is a game because balancing student needs and wants with less funds for expenditure on needed infrastructure. At present the worrying trend the conference brought out was that although expensive, if resources were not made available to students to allow them to use technologies then this may play a factor in the decision to attend a certain university. Though a name, such as Oxford or Harvard, will likely always play a role in one's decision to study at a prestige educational institution, technology will and does play a part in a decision to attend a place of learning.

The conference also concerned itself with how educators and university management question the business and service models from both cloud computing and disruptive technologies. Although cloud computing issues, as previously mentioned, were discussed, it was disruptive technologies and their role in the changing landscape of education that became a talking point at the conference. Disruptive technologies are described by Christensen (1997) as those that those that challenge the orthodox ways of doing things that especially produce unexpected and new results and problem. Facebook, Twitter, the iPad, Messenger and YouTube are amongst those in digital education that have done this. As Graetz (2006) contextualises disruptive technologies, they have always existed students daydreaming or doing something else in class. But the difference he argues is the new technologies are there every hour of the day and have changed the education landscape as the temptation to use them is always there (Graetz, 2006). Therefore, as Watulak (2010) observes in her study of mobile phone texting, tensions between teachers and students can arise from use of such technologies. Yet if they are integrated into the learning process as was discussed at several of the conference sessions, it is possible to utilise these tools for educational, not social purposes.

The conference presentations suggested that a way to engage students in learning is through play and creativity use of disruptive technologies, but also as Graeml et al. (2011) stated in their presentation, creating a "caring" learning environment. Several academic and corporate presentations reflected the work in creating virtual technologies that are both disruptive and striving to be effective for student needs. One example at the conference was the growing use of the E-Learning Portfolios. Sutherland (2011) discussed his company's approach to providing the platforms for these portfolios. His message in his paper was interesting in that he stated such portfolios challenge the hegemonic structures of traditional university courses and personalised the learning experience (Sutherland, 2011). They were examples of disruptive technologies because they produced unexpected results, particularly in the United Kingdom, where in some industries they have replaced the resume for obtaining a career. I asked him if they had been well received by universities and lecturers. His reply was mostly yes though formal studies on this are only now beginning, but some resistance was not unexpected as the portfolio was seen as a "substitute Facebook." Some had said it was crucial to control the information of the person on such portfolios, but the software does allow locking of certain parts of the portfolio if needed.

Yet there were also examples of universities embracing and encouraging its academic and library staff to find new ways to utilise technology to improve student learning experiences. Some brief examples follow. Sukovic et al. (2011) reported how her team at Sydney's University of Technology library was encouraged to create the still under construction library as "play spaces" for creativity and problem solving, much, as the presenter said, like Google does at its headquarters. Engaging students through mobile technologies was discussed by Smissen (2011) who explained how his student learning system had mechanisms for identifying students at risk of dropping out of courses, though he was not clear due to time constraints on the specifics of how this worked. Finally, Cooper (2011) discussed how an online program was developed at the University of Wollongong which specifically addressed a common problem in first year learning: how to shift student's thinking from high school to university learning by encouraging them to feel comfortable with using academic journals in their work. She explained how the course uptake was high, boosted by the issuing of a certificate at the end of the course the student could add to their portfolio of tertiary learning.

The conclusion from my attendance is as digital educators who are trying to understand the current and emerging cultures of digital education is that it was worth attending for three main reasons. For early researchers it offered a reasonable priced, informative conference that, whilst slightly leaning towards corporate presentations, gave an appreciation of the current technologies and research in digital education.

It was also beneficial to understand the pressure universities are under which is being student driven to deliver resources at an economical cost but still provide those technologies which students take for granted. It was interesting to hear comments that students, be them online or face-to-face do have this idea to undertake a course based on technological factors the university offers not its name. Also, the thought of a totally virtual library with no books has happened; the impression I got from the discussions after some librarians' presentations was it is not the end of the printed book at this period in time, but certainly the "bookless library" has arrived and is becoming the preferred way of borrowing by students.

I feel it is vital that journals such as this one continue their presence in presenting research that builds upon conference attendance. This conference needs to be more organised in terms of splitting the corporate/academic sessions. Research findings and doctorate proposals were mixed in with corporate presentations. Overall this conference is recommended to attend to see not only the issues of the time facing digital education

in economic and technological innovation terms, but also in seeing that digital education is emerging as an academic discipline and reminds us how our research must benefit our students in their education quest.

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