FROM FATIGUE TO ANXIETY
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ABSTRACT

Purpose
The reason for writing the paper is to recognise that as educators moving into, or already in, a Web 2.0 world, we are likely to experience anxiety, and to explore the implications for educational design in a Web 2.0 world.

Design/methodology/approach
The objectives are achieved as the result of recent successes with the commissioners for two online courses at the University. Both of these commissioners were anxious education developers, but have come around to a way of thinking that includes the potential of web-based learning (at its most up-to-date). In this paper I present interviews with both of these commissioners.

Findings
The findings are as follows:
Not only is anxiety understandable for educators, it is an important part of the educational process (as it also is for our learners); furthermore, it is a healthy response to a perception of an older (and worn out) version of the internet that is all that we have known up to now. Anxiety has implications for the design of Web 2.0 educational materials; and one argument might be that Web 2.0 is more than a tool for the beginnings of the future of education: it is also, in and of itself, the beginnings of the future of education. It is not only the tool to use, it is something which needs to be understood better itself. Web 1 must be retired. This is one of the ways that a dynamic evolves: the disuse of one model is replaced by the (temporary) overuse of the next model.

Research limitations/implications (if applicable)
N/A

Practical implications (if applicable)
This paper contends that successful educational Web 2.0 will require more balance and pedagogic poise than was shown throughout some of the early days of online education. It will not involve flashing everything all at once, for such an approach can only lead to internet fatigue (and learner boredom). Web 2.0 is about learning from the learner, and answers should be found to the following: What part of the new structure is appreciated? What part is ignored? Why do these things happen? What role does the educator play in his own developmental learning of the tools of his trade? And how does this inform his preparations for the learners’ experiences?

Social implications (if applicable)
N/A

Originality/value
The paper explores issues of anxiety from the educators' point of view, and explores how we will respond to inevitable changes in the online learning milieu.

KEYWORDS: Online learning; anxiety; Web 2.0; future

INTRODUCTION

What are the implications for educators in a Web 2.0 existence? Unless we tack on a caveat that says something like ‘...in twenty years time’, a prediction of the future of online learning is likely to be weighted in a conservative, staid manner. We are realists. Despite the fact that our burgeoning field is more fruitful than ever; despite the fact that
many of our occupations did not exist two decades ago – or even one decade ago – and despite the fact that occupations have been made redundant to create our posts, when contemplating the future of online learning we are apt to keep our feet on the ground. We do not lose our heads, with ambition being one thing, dreamy optimism quite another. But when we reflect on the achievements to date, if we have pause for thought, why do we not Think Big or Bigger? Quite possibly any sense of self-restraint (posing as pragmatism) is a conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of our current restrictions. For example, as yet we do not have infinite bandwidth; we do not have instantaneous synchronous facilities for groupwork for learners in every time zone; we do not have cranial receptor accessories; so we tend to predict based on a Web 1 mentality, and err somewhat on the side of caution – for fear of appearing foolish or naive. Furthermore, the unknown can seem scary.

GROWTH

Despite the sense of anxiety that might be instigated – ‘fear with a definable content’, in the words of Juutinen and Saariluoma (2010) – we should probably regard the near future and its implications for educational design in a web 2.0 world. Within the online learning industry, very few practitioners would argue with the consensus view that growth is one of its few certainties. How we understand the concept of growth, on the other hand, is open to any number of interpretations; and when contemplating the likely characteristics of the future of online learning, commentators are likely to fall into one of several camps. Commentators such as Nagel (Nagel 2010) might emphasise the fiscal and financial spurts that the industry is likely to experience; whereas Bates (Bates 2011) is keen to promote the idea that online learning will replace more traditional modes of delivery, irrespective of concerns that technology is often not employed to a high standard. Chiming nicely with Bates’s views, Downes writes: ‘While technology changes rapidly, people do not. People want to use tools that look and feel like tools they’ve always used, and will tend to adopt tools only if they see a clear benefit either in productivity or in savings’ (Downes 2008). With the above views in mind, it might be useful to explore an extrapolation that has not been addressed in much detail up to now. At the same time, Milligan (Milligan 2006) was perhaps slightly ahead of his time with the notion of the PLE – the Personalised Learning Environment – but the prescience of his conclusions is obviously bearing fruit as our industry develops and as more emphasis is placed on the learner’s ways of communicating and creating. Finally, we should probably not go any further into a discussion of online learning growth without mentioning the hardware that we will probably require: is it not predictable that a growth in the industry will be accompanied by a paradoxical reduction in the size of the necessary equipment?

The physical dimensions of pieces of hardware will not mark the end of the paradoxes in the years to come, of course. The fact that we are transitioning from what will be seen as the ‘early days’ of online learning (and have yet to get it quite right), to a more ‘confident’ stance as we gaze into the future, is sure to instigate anxieties for both educators and learners. Arguably, we are moving from a away from a somewhat worn-out opening foray into online learning – along with its implications of internet fatigue (Horrigan 2009) – to a future that seems bright with pedagogic possibilities, so bright in fact that it makes us somewhat uneasy not to be able to see clearly in the dazzle. In other words, we might argue that the movement is from a sense of (comfortable) fatigue
with the current tools of our trade, to a desire that is divided in two: a desire to view the future of online learning as being reliant on the next tool (which will resemble the existing tool); and a desire to peek into a future that is only embryonic and not in situ.

**ANXIETY**

Anxiety is a natural and unavoidable reaction to a perception of danger or risk. In the context that we are exploring, anxiety is not only understandable, it is a healthy response to the loss of an ‘old’ Web 1, complete with its quirks and its sensibilities, and the emergence of a way of learner engagement that remains new to some educators and at least fresh to others who have been employing the Web 2.0 technologies (such as they are as yet) for some time. In fact, we might add that it is not anxiety that is unhealthy; it is the fact that an awareness of the new horizons of online learning isn’t rife, that is unhealthy. Along with the perception of an increase in workload, the anxiety for many educators is that technology itself needs to be mastered before we can educate our learners to the standards that we would wish to offer. But are either of these perceptions fair? Certainly if we accept the existence of online learning as an ongoing concept, however, we must also consider the developments inherent. For example, if you were to type ‘the future of online learning’ into any search engine, you would be likely to receive in excess of fifty million hits. Type ‘the future of cheating in online learning’ and you still get 500,000! If we are going to consider our learners of the future, we must of course consider all the exciting new ways in which they might cheat!

What is it about the prospects of a Web 2.0 sphere of learning that promotes such consternation and distress among staff and learners? It is natural to be wary of the unknown, of course, but as far back as 1998 Jaffee (among others) was writing about institutional resistances to new technologies, particularly asynchronous learning networks. At what point do we become used to a so-called ‘new’ system? Should we not have emerged from such a fight-or-flight mindset by now? Even if we should have, it has not happened. The issues revolving around design, administration and the decision-making processes that feed into a new programme that were reported by Magiuka and Bonk in 2005 are as relevant today, perhaps more so. Our ongoing anxiety about online learning gives the lie to the notion that ours is an industry in which change occurs rapidly and frequently. Indeed, it might easily be argued that the opposite is true; and if the latter is the case, perhaps people want to stay frightened. Naturally this leaves us with something of a muddied picture, in which ‘higher education faculties are responding slowly, or even resisting, the non-traditional instructional models innate to distance education’ (Mills et al 2009 p.19), but in which learners ‘expect institutions of higher education to keep pace with their skills and interests’ (ibid p.20, italics added).

This last point is crucial. Even more so than they ever were, learners are now in a position to insist that their needs are met; to demand, in a sense, the full quality control of their individual Personalised Learning Environments. As practitioners we should be in a position to want to help them to achieve – rather than reacting to edicts from above about the future of education being online distance learning, whether you like it or not – and surely the nettle is ours to grasp. Losing our amnesia would be a good way to begin to do so. Buckling under the weight of deadlines, marking, meetings and tutorials, it has become the simplest choice to 'forget' – to engage in a wilful act of paramnesiac blindness – that learners often march one by one, not group by group.
When something enters our experience that is unknown, our brains might secrete adrenalin, dopamine and a host of other enzymes, and we are squarely in a fight-or-flight mode; but this is a reaction to a perceived stripping-away of control (or self-control). Until we determine what the unknown quality is, and how we can deal with it, we cannot control it (or ourselves). Though we are not be able to control everything, of course, we try to control what we are exposed to, thereby reducing the number of surprises and dosing ourselves to a comfortable numbness with the self-medicative qualities of Web 1. But many learners may well feel differently. For many learners the unknown quality of a life before the Internet: anxiety is boredom itself, and vice versa. Control is theirs.

A UNIVERSITY’S EXAMPLES

An institution for Higher Education in the South-East of England is leading the way locally with its dedication to Mode 3 Learning: programmes that either are or will be delivered entirely online. For this university the implementation of Mode 3 marks a development on from two possibilities:

1. A face-to-face programme.
2. A blended learning programme.

Developing an online learning package from either original source is problematic, and neither source makes for an easier transition than the other, with both of them bringing their own specific challenges and areas of frustration (Sapsed and Mathew 2011, and Mathew 2011). However, educator engagement and enthusiasm may prove the best possible spur to invention; and it is worth reviewing briefly two new courses offered by the university, by way of illustration of the same.

The courses are both located within the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, and by coincidence the leaders of both courses approached the relevant department with the query of how the existing programmes might be ‘turned into’ fully online Mode 3 deliveries. The discussion took place that one is not ‘turned into’ the other (except in rare circumstances); instead work must be re-contextualised, repackaged, and often rewritten. It is not so much a case of redeployment as re-creation.

The leaders of both courses, although initially anxious about the (somewhat unexpected) workload that would be required, were keen to purse the idea of re-creating the existing face-to-face delivery into an online package. Coincidentally, not only do both courses appeal to members of the Health Care profession, and not only were we commissioned by them at the same time; it is also the case that both courses already have compulsory attendance days and an emphasis on Continuing Professional Development, with the completion of each course leading to fifteen UK credits. (A fifteen-credit programme would be equal to approximately 150 hours of work in total.)

In preparation for this paper, the author asked the course leaders five quick questions on the subject of their involvement with online learning to date. The responses are below. The questions were:

1. You are moving from a face-to-face delivery to an online delivery of your programme. When you first thought about this, how did you feel about the idea?
2. Why do you think you felt this way?
3. Have your feelings changed since the project started?
4. How do you feel about online learning/your project online now?
5. What would be a perfect future for your programme?
At a later date these interviews will be built upon, as this work will be monitored over the next few years.

**COURSE 1: RTPP**

The first course to look at is the Return to Professional Practice course, which prepares qualified staff to return to nursing following a career break. This course is a mandatory requirement that has been set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council. It is a part-time course that has always required a set number of days of physical appearance in a classroom (forty hours in total) along with written pieces and reflective writing by way of a summative assessment. The course also enables practitioners to experience practice in a health care setting agreed between them and a supporting practice provider; furthermore, the student focuses on health and social trends and professional issues relevant to their professional background.

The course leader's answers were as follows:

1. As I had had the thought about doing the RTP by distance learning, I was quite excited about the prospect, although I was concerned about the actual development of the pack. As well as other issues which are addressed in other questions.
2. I had wanted to change the RTP for a number of reasons, but I was unsure if it would be possible to go down this route within University Regulations. I was also worried that I did not have enough IT skills to do the packs, and also how to provide the material. I did not want to go down the old OU route. [Author's note: The OU is The Open University, a respected institution of distance learning but not necessarily online distance learning. A lot of the OU's materials follow the model of the learner reading some material and then answering some questions or writing an essay.]
3. Some of my anxieties have gone, and I really had no idea how the project could mushroom. I am still very excited about it. I also feel very supported in the development of the packages.
4. I feel that there is potential for so much on-line learning. I was so pleased to see the first package functioning, and was amazed at how it was 'presented'.
5. I would like it to continue to grow, which would open up possibilities for many more RTP students.

**COURSE 2: MSPP**

The Mentorship and Support for Professional Practice course is delivered in a number of local settings and brings together three key elements within the role of mentor in a health care environment:

1. student support and supervision
2. practice assessment
3. the facilitation of learning.

The Department of Health and the Nursing and Midwifery Council expect programmes of study that address head on the nature of learning in practice. This course promotes an
enhanced understanding of the skills and attitudes that are needed to support pre-
registration health and social care students. The learner is required to complete written
work in partnership with a mentor, having identified a learner's needs, to work on a
learning programme for the same learner, and to write an evaluation of the role of the
mentor.

The course leader's replies were as follows:

1. When it was first mentioned to me (e-learning) I was extremely anxious, but at
the same time keen to go along with it.
2. I was anxious as I believe I'm a real novice with any form of technology but I was
keen to go ahead as I could see that blended learning would suit a lot of my
students and also make it easier for practice (in terms of not having to release
them from heavy workloads in the Trust on so many occasions, e-learning having
replaced 2 contact days).
3. My feelings of anxiety have changed as it has become obvious that you are
prepared to help and teach me what I need to know.
4. I am still a little anxious about monitoring groups through the e-learning site, but
I think you will support me in this (hope so anyway). I am really pleased that you
are going to site the e-learning on the Blackboard site with the added bonus that
you have offered to help me clean this site up.
5. This MSPP is becoming more practically based as some students will be studying
on a non accredited basis, therefore I would like to increase the e-learning
content (eventually) and hopefully also have some material for the mentors of
these students. I would like to link all my mentorship sites (MSPP & Mentor
site) so that this e-learning in the form of quizzes would be available to more
practitioners/mentors.

BUT WHAT DO THE LEARNERS SAY?

Thus far in this paper we have mostly mentioned anxiety in the context of implications
for new course designers, but let us not run away with the impression that learners are
all 'Digital Natives' (Prensky 2001) and fully conversant with all manners and modes of
our industry. This is simply not the case. Distance learners, by definition, will be found in
some of the areas of the world that struggle to maintain an Internet connection, let
alone a fully up-to-date awareness of Web novelties and ephemera. 'All our experiences
in relation to students using the LMS pointed towards the existence of anxiety that
varied in type and in level across the group,' write Saadé and Kira (2009) in their
groundbreaking study of learner anxieties. They continue: 'Motivated to gain insight into
the students’ perceptions of the LMS and document those experiences, we decided to
study anxiety as it relates to computer self-efficacy and perceptions.' As part of the
follow-up to this paper I hope to conduct research on our learners' anxieties, particularly
given the fact that the learners on both the Return to Professional Practice and the
Mentorship courses are not traditionally confident users of computers or of the Internet.
For these learners (and others) it is fair to say that they have not arrived via a
traditional academic background (with occasional exceptions). It will be interesting to
gather their thoughts as the online work continues.

Learner anxiety might also be a gauge of quality of performance (albeit not always a
wholly reliable one). A learner who goes into an exam with no worries at all will
frequently feel that he or she has underperformed afterwards; and it would appear that
a small amount of short term anxiety as one enters a situation might improve one's
performance and even be evolutionarily advantageous (Myers 2007). With Web 2.0 we
have the opportunity of providing, in a totally positive manner, a fully functioning
anxiety-inspiring experience for our learners. Perhaps this will be achieved by
acknowledging that anxiety is an addiction or condition best shared: in this case, perhaps, shared among their peers but also shared with their educators. Web 2.0 is more than a tool for the beginnings of the future of education. It is also, in and of itself, the beginnings of the future of education: its opportunities, as we rethink our way away from a model of 'text + assessment + consolidation + text... ad nauseum (which we should not have been doing in this industry anyway for the past decade) we might allow ourselves the luxury of embracing the new technologies and the pedagogic potentials therein. Web 2.0 is not just the Next Thing, nor is it merely the tool to use, it is something which needs to be understood better itself. Or in other words, it needs to be understood better by us, the educators.

It is the very least that our learners will demand.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taking into consideration the money that circulates around the arteries of this industry, it is foolish to assume anything other than a rude future for online education. As we gratefully retire Web 1, and thank it for its years of dedicated (if sporadically reliable) service, we welcome in the new. This is one of the ways that a dynamic evolves, after all: the disuse of one model is replaced by the (temporary) overuse of the next model; and we are likely to see our educators 'trying too hard' with all of the new tools at their disposal. And yet this is one of the ways that we will all learn. Perhaps the educational protocols of Web 2.0 will require more balance and pedagogic poise than was shown throughout some of the early days of online education, when the tools seemed sometimes more important than the educational activities to which they referred.

Let us hope that we have learned from our own past as educators too. Web 2.0 should not involve using every tool in the box as flashily and gaudily as possible, or all at once. We must listen to our learners and take in the knowledge of what they are telling us – even if we have to intuit some of the less spoken messages! We do not want to lead our learners to another iteration of internet fatigue (and learner boredom) in a few years' time. A good model might be to use our wikis and discussion boards (for example) with enthusiasm but not to place all of our faith in these tools alone. Assume nothing, or at least little; and be prepared to alter our strategies, in precisely the same way that we would in a classroom setting. If X is not working, try Y.

The new generation of web tools will give educators this kind of pioneering freedom, not to mention the chance to learn – really learn – from the learner. Accompanying our course evaluations about what part of the new structure was appreciated by the learner and what part was ignored, about why these things happen and what we do about it later, we have been given the opportunity to play a part in our own developmental learning of the tools of our trade. Will this inform our preparations for the learners' experiences? It is a chance to.

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY


