



As **Mark Schofield** explains, there's a revolution taking place in the way that students learn at university

If you've been used to school classrooms bristling with computers, then going into Higher Education can be something of a culture shock. The textbook is still king. Reading lists as long as your arm and not an interactive exercise in sight.

This may have something to do with attitudes to what degree study should be like, that it requires the mature and patient reflection involved in reading one textbook after another and materials can't be reproduced in what can be seen as lighter, maybe more flippant electronic formats. It's also because higher education institutions are focused on quality and won't introduce any technology for its own sake, it needs to have been proven to improve learning and the development of their students. The SOLSTICE centre at Edge Hill University has been set up to

explore this whole issue of how students actually use elearning and how they can best benefit from it, and is helping to roll out a series of elearning based programmes and electronic elements for more traditional courses.

With a stronger sense of the value of electronic learning materials and what they can do, the future will see far greater use of the kinds of online and social 'Web 2.0' media, the blogs, podcasts and information sharing web sites that are now such a familiar part of everyday life.

It's already starting to happen

New media is offering more real, more living materials, and the chance for students to share their work and experiences. At Edge Hill University, new online programmes are being offered in health care, as part of which students

can make use of podcasts from real patients who relate their experiences of different conditions at different stages. Real human voices, their emotions and changing perspectives over time, provide a much richer insight and experience for students in getting a real understanding of what they're dealing with, not just as an abstract and theoretical illness, but just as they would in their future working life.

An online 'stage' has been created for Performing Arts students to post and share their performances as audio and video. There's also a linked chat and blog facility for the students to document the creative process as they go along and get into a dialogue with other students over how it's been done. This way, thinking and debate over ideas and creativity doesn't have to be limited to seminars and tutorials, it's something which happens naturally through the lifetime of the course and encourages a community of performers to work together.

30 universities, including Cambridge, Durham, Warwick, Nottingham and City, are piloting a new online service that brings economic theory to life. LiveEcon (www.liveecon.com) takes what can be a dry and theoretical subject and presents it in an interactive way, making use of the techno-literacy of students. Rather than just showing moving graphs, or allowing one change to a graph, LiveEcon allows users to manipulate all the economics variables to see the complete economics model.

For the future you can expect elearning to be at the heart of how your course works. Developers are looking at the potential for online course management, so that access to all your materials will be online. Updated details of lectures, tutorials and exams will be there, as well as being the portal for submission of essays and assignments.

You'll work co-operatively with other students this way, as well as having more access to input from your tutors online. It will also be the way in which lecturers will be able to more closely monitor how you are doing in terms of which resources you've accessed, online exercises completed at milestones throughout the course and your contributions to debates and group

work. Everything will be more easily accessible and open and structured, far better than the reams of photocopied handouts of information.

eLearning isn't for everyone

Research by Dr Simone Kruger at SOLSTICE has shown that women are far better than men at generating a supportive learning experience, for example. Dr Kruger explored student experiences of elearning using 'virtual ethnography' - based on observing and participating with research participants as they engaged with online technology for their studies.

It was found that women express themselves more openly and encourage others to feel at ease in these kinds of situations. Men in this study, on the other hand, found it harder to engage with peers and 'did their own thing'. Dr Kruger added:

"Participants in online courses might only succeed if they know each other well, and where the learning environment becomes a space in which mutual trust and support can be developed."

Dr Kruger also found that elearning has a dramatic effect on the quality of students' reflection, both on the subject matter and on their own role and capabilities as 'learners', compared with students who solely study through traditional classroom and textbook means.

What this means is that we're still learning about the nature and potential of electronic resources in Higher Education. For some people, communicating with people remotely, taking part in chatroom-style conversations and using audio/video evidence rather than just textbooks will mean the need for more support and a transformation in how they think about education. For others, and increasingly it seems for the majority, it will be a more natural, useful and inspirational way to work.

Mark Schofield, Dean of Teaching and Learning Development, Academic Director of SOLSTICE, Edge Hill University