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Project Report

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A study of e-learners' experiences in the mixed-mode professional degree programme, the Master of Teaching

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IV. Summary

The research project was a nine-month qualitative investigation into the experiences of e-learners¹. The research was conducted within the framework of a pilot evaluation strategy which was implemented with a cohort of participants studying on an award-bearing professional learning programme for

teachers, the Master of Teaching (MTeach) at the Institute of Education, University of London. The focus of the research was on the subjective and perceptual aspects of the learners' experiences, and aimed to investigate how they can be gauged as part of an evaluation strategy which is built into course design. An innovative methodology was devised based on the collection of learner narratives which required a continuous process of meta-level engagement with the research questions by the participants. A variety of types of learner narratives was collected through both online and face to face methods. From these, sample cases of the e-learners were constructed. A qualitative analysis of the narrative data was made and key findings identified which affect e-learning course development. Chief outcomes include recommendations for an embedded



1. The project was funded by the Centre for Distance Education, University of London and conducted and supported by the Centre for Excellence in Work-Based Learning for Education Professionals, Institute of Education, University of London.

approach to evaluation in the design of e-learning courses and associated narrative strategies for gathering information about e-learners' experiences.

Greenhalgh, Russell and Swinglehurst (2005) argue that "narrative-based quality improvement research (focussed, systematic enquiry that uses narrative methods to generate new knowledge)... is currently rare" (p. 443). A range of narrative collection techniques were used to (realize and) study the MTeach's concurrent and reciprocal pilot evaluation model (see Table 1). The narrative interview was a key method adopted by the project. Within the mixed-mode context of the project, we also developed narrative data collection which harnesses the potential of the online environment where it is difficult to meet participants and to immerse in a full range of the social interactions afforded by ethnographic approaches – online 'think

aloud' and online response to key topics. Online data collection and the collection of group narratives was fully embedded within the structure of the module being studied and timed to capture learner responses at regular stages of experience. Narrative interviews with individuals took place at the Institute and in participants' schools, and were concurrent with their participation in the module (see Table 1).

V. Key findings

In an inductive approach to the data, the researchers undertook systematic reading of the transcripts of narrative interviews, online commentaries, think aloud reporting and group discussions. Content themes were identified which reflect the key features of the learner experiences for each dataset and key features and quotations were extracted and organised thematically.

Table 1: E-learners' experiences: framework for evaluation using narrative data collection

MTeach module 1			
	Course activities	Evaluation activities	Narrative data collection
Sept		Pre-course questionnaire eliciting baseline demographic and attitudinal data	
Module 1 starts			
Oct	Face to face induction evening Online discussion task 1	Online Issue 1 – 'a sense of community'	Online commentaries
Nov	Face to face day Online discussion task 2	Focus group discussions on outcomes of Issue 1 Online Issue 2 – 'writing online to learn'	Group narratives Online commentaries
Dec	Face to face day Online discussion task 3	Online Issue 3 – response to image of e-learning	Online think aloud
Jan – Mar	Coursework completed (written submission)		Long narrative interviews with sample of participants (45 mins +)
Module 1 ends			

Content categories of experience

Four content categories of experience were identified which appear persistently in the learner narratives throughout the data and reveal the dominant features of the learners' experiences in terms of what they choose to tell about explicitly:

1. The experience of moving between work/life/learning contexts

This category related to the preconceptions and reflections on the affordances and constraints of e-learning in the context of work/life demands. It included comments made regarding the degrees of coherence and complementarity between the e-learning experience and the rest of the participants' lives. This category included how technology-related features are perceived and how the medium itself affects the learners' capacities to participate. It also included the ways in which the experience of e-learning has an effect on other aspects of their lives, and what impact it had on their work-based practices.

2. The experience of communicating online (genre, mode and medium-switch)

This category related to the preconceptions and reflections on the affordances and constraints of communicating with each other in a text-based online environment. It included participants' perceptions of the writing demands of the e-forum and personal perspectives on these demands in the light of their histories as learners and their previous use of academic and professional literacies. It also included accounts of reading online peer contributions as part of the learning process.

3. The experience of collaborative learning

This category related to the preconceptions and reflections on the affordances and constraints of collaborative learning in the online context. It included comments which revealed the participants' views on learning with and from others, both from the individual's perspective and in terms of how they perceived the effects of collaborative learning on others.

4. The experience of socio-dynamics

This category related to the accounts given by learners of the relationships within the group, and how they are affected by the e-learning context. It included references to how relationships relate to the participants' learning and social needs as e-learners and how they experienced 'knowing' their fellow learners.

Sample cases

To further investigate the experiences of e-learners within the group, participants were selected for a further narrative interview, and four detailed sample cases of their experiences drawn up. The sample cases represent the range of participants, including those with very differing prior exposure to e-learning, differences in gender, and previous learning histories and academic profiles. Brief summaries of two of the cases, below, serve to illustrate their distinctive features and exhibit core themes of e-learning experiences identified by the study.

Case 1: Katy

"I love online stuff because I'm totally used to it..."

Though one of the youngest course participants, Katy in many ways offers the voice of experience to the project. She is twenty-four and in her second year of teaching science at a secondary school in East London. She is one of only two people in the group with prior experience of e-learning. This and her commitment to rigorously logico-scientific forms of knowledge are a main source of reflection and conflict within her e-learning experiences. The technological issues which are a source of initial anxiety for many of the novices are not relevant to her and she relates how she revels in using the wider affordances of e-learning, "having Google and Wikipedia at my fingertips". At the same time however, she experiences other forms of newness which unsettle her as the module progresses. As an experienced e-learner she is able to comprehend early on the 'newness' of the experience is attributable largely to social relations which are made online rather

than technological issues, "There's this entirely new social situation".

Katy, by admission, is differently positioned from the others in terms of social relations online. Referring to herself as "fairly quiet" in face to face situations, she claims that online communication empowers her by affording her more licence to participate and to adopt an assertive persona, becoming a different type of person, being argumentative and arguing strongly for her positions in ways she would never do in a seminar room. Because she values e-learning as a means of adopting counter-positions, she becomes dissatisfied with the 'courtesy' which some other participants have said they value in online exchange. The social relations pose unexpected difficulties for her and she finds herself in a tense online relationship with another participant. She regrets that she has inadvertently offended that participant by arguing so strongly, and now consciously tries to reign in any trace of what she calls "nastiness", but she feels that this makes learning less effective for her. She wants the "quickfire part of social exchange" and feels that what people write is too carefully calculated, or "rehearsed thoughts". 'Rehearsing' thinking though, is exactly what some people have said is advantageous for them – to stop and think at length. There are differing confidence levels in posting immediate ideas, and also differences in how people like to learn. Paradoxically, for Katy a benefit of asynchronous exchange is "an opportunity to slow down" in order to engage more deeply, "I can think rather than just...babbling out something...I can edit" and affords her control over her own learning process.

A further internal struggle has been coming to terms with the socio-constructivist approaches to learning which underpin the online discussions, "if we're going to talk about learning, then I want to hear what everybody in the world who is important has ever said about learning, and then maybe I'll have my own opinion". Reconciling this scepticism with the constructivist e-pedagogy she refers to

as "an ongoing journey". She accepts that she holds multiple and oppositional opinions about the experience, saying at one point it is "not just discussion, it's a deeper thing".

Case 2: Rose

"I felt a bit on the fringes"

Rose is very experienced in teaching in a range of Adult and Higher Education contexts, and currently teaches Egyptology and gerontology part-time. Her motivation for doing an online degree is different from most, as she already has two masters qualifications. Though an experienced teacher, Rose felt "a bit on the fringes" finding the range of new experiences are not those she most expected. In her fifties, she is older than most MTeach participants, and worried that this would be a disadvantage in becoming familiar with the technology used on the course - familiarizing herself with learning using modern technology was a goal for her and seeing "how I coped as an older learner". But her initial nervousness was soon resolved when it turned out that "the technology wasn't actually a problem, so, it just fell into place straight away". She concluded later that "age was not an issue" in her experience of becoming an e-learner after all, although in a subsequent interview she wonders whether "it is age actually" which accounted for her frustration with her peers' use of non-conventional grammar and 'text message English' in email exchange. Rose also felt on the fringes in that she works in adult education while the majority of the participants teach in primary and secondary schools. This impacted on her experience as a 'collaborative learner'. She acknowledged the potential for learning from the different experiences people bring to the discussions, but she also assumed a minimum level of 'sharedness' is required to benefit from exchanges. She believed the 'sharedness' can evolve however.

The mode of communication in the online discussions impacted far more on Rose's learning experiences than mastering the

technology. She came to believe that a real discussion will only develop if people are more controversial and say what they really mean. This brings with it further dilemmas. While she wanted people to write using standard English conventions, she became increasingly convinced that forthright opinion should be expressed. In retelling why she was diplomatic and “carefully worded” her response to an online participant whose comment had made her “rather cross”, she mentioned three considerations that seem to have prevented her from pursuing the confrontation that she seeks, the second and the third of which relate to the affordances and constraints of communicating through written emails. First, it had involved a new person in the tutor group, who was not yet introduced to their peers online. Second, “because you’re not seeing people you are very careful.” In a face-to-face situation she would probably have handled the issue more directly, she predicted. Third, her strong feelings about the importance of standard forms of written English mean a concern to get her message “absolutely accurate” before posting.

The technology itself was not a barrier to her learning. The process of participation in the new communicative mode took Rose longer to adjust to, and possibly impeded her gains from the forum by holding back, “I still feel that I need time to reflect and should not rush in online and make a fool of myself”. She was still working out an appropriate dynamic for her participation.

The interpretation of these narratives requires ongoing dialogue between the researchers, and an agreement on principles of meaningful interpretation, or what constitutes a ‘good story’ in terms of yielding meanings which have value for improving professional understanding and practice. In the context of primary healthcare professionals, Greenhalgh (2006, pp.9-12) argues that a ‘good story’ for research on which approaches to professional learning may be developed meets key criteria:

Aesthetic appeal	the narrative is pleasing to hear and recount; it contains an internal harmony
Coherence	the narrative is clear and makes a logical whole; it contains a ‘moral order’ or sense
Authenticity	the narrative has credibility, based on the experiences of the listeners/readers
Reportability	“the ‘so what’ value” of what is narrated; its significance
Persuasiveness	the narrative convinces of the teller’s own perspective

Table 3. Greenhalgh’s criteria for a ‘good story’ in narrative research.

These criteria characterise the learner narratives in individual instances but also and more powerfully in the case of our longitudinal data as demonstrated in the sample cases, they characterise them over time. Rose has studied gerontology and her perceptions of age-related factors affecting e-learning (including ageism) change over the course of her narratives which increases the authenticity and coherence of her accounts as a whole. Her later accounts cause her to spontaneously revisit a ‘spent’ narrative strand about age being a potential obstacle to learning to ‘do’ e-learning, a strand which she introduced in her first interview. She subsequently revises her story of being what she terms an ‘older learner’ by re-presenting it in different terms. No longer is the story one of learning to deal with technologies in order to ‘keep up’ with contemporary employability. Instead, it becomes one of how she has felt alienated by the use of informal e-language by some participants which makes her ‘freak out’. She says, after recounting an example, “it is age, actually”. There is not anything deterministic about this – we cannot say this

is a 'fact' and our experience of other older learners may contradict this. It does however, have high believability in the case of her narration, which is rhetorically emphatic and convinces of her perspective as being complex and containing contradictory elements of accommodation and resistance, "I have an urge to say (laughs) but I won't, I won't". The cumulative significance of her stories tell us about the persistence of socio-cultural factors in how individual participants perceive e-learning and what it takes to be a successful learner.

Themes of transition

Key themes were identified cutting across the categories of experiences outlined in Table 2. Temporality has been a central feature of these themes which are related to the transitions which are involved in 'getting used to' e-learning. The themes are hypothetical, derived from cross-referencing between the researchers of the range of narrative data. The themes appear as a spectrum along four lines of experience:

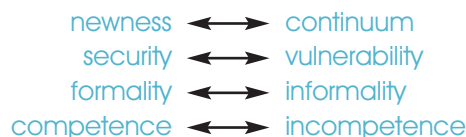


Figure 1. Themes of transition in e-learning experiences

Experiences within any spectrum can be multiple and oppositional, and conflicting experiences can co-exist both within the same person and across the group. There is no necessary linear progression in learner positions over time, i.e. they can start from any position of competence/newness/vulnerability and can move to other learner positions according to the complex of experiences they have and there is therefore no hierarchy of 'accomplished' experiences – the newness of social relations can undermine the competence of an experienced e-learner. Many narratives are simultaneously suggestive of both vulnerability and expertise and newness (or the opposites). The construction of sample

cases of individual e-learners reveals a strong sense of at least duality or even dichotomy in the overall pattern of learning experiences.

'Newness'

The narratives reveal the pervasiveness of the experience of 'newness' in the process of e-learning. Levy (2006) has pointed out that in researching e-learner experiences within constructivist contexts, the "developmental implications for learners...are well known":

"Progression from disorientation to reorientation through praxis – through critically reflective action that generates personal, practical knowledge about learning – is recognised as part of the process of becoming a 'constructivist' learner"(p. 227).

The persistent and recurrent experiences identified in this group are of being in transition between states and processes which have varying degrees of familiarity, both social and intellectual. The transitions are partly to do with adjusting to new ways of establishing social relations in a collaborative virtual context and, inter-related with this, to do with learning how to learn, what Levy has termed the 'process' domain of learning with e-pedagogies. Features of transition are based largely on how far their learning experiences form a continuum with experiences from other modes. The group shares an overall sense of optimism that they will be able to learn how to learn online, in both technical terms and, more importantly in terms of lifelong learning, in developing ways of engaging with ideas and people in a virtual context. The 'newness' of the mode of learning is explicit for most of them "it's a big learning curve for me", "communicating in this way is certainly different", "it certainly takes some getting used to". This is within a mostly optimistic outlook from e-learning novices, "I am beginning to feel more confident in this online learning process", "I'm sure I'll get used to it". There is a shared investment in the belief that they will learn to learn like this and it is necessarily something they must work out for themselves. The critical question then for e-practitioners, is how far

we can embed means by which learners can make sense of these new experiences, sense which supports individual orientation to learning in new ways but which our data would suggest is achieved through shared evaluation processes which afford opportunities for narration.

Meta-learning

Peer learning emerges from the participants' engagement in the process of the data collection and points to strong benefits for the learners of embedding reflection on the processes in which they are engaged within course design. Within the framework of evaluation activities, they become extremely frank as they interrogate each other about the processes they have been involved in, "I think actually had you written a one-sentence response with a couple of exclamation marks at the end, I would have thought you were a bit flippant". Discussion has changed this participant's perspective, "but it's only now that we're meeting face-to-face and talking about it, I'm realising that actually that's a really valuable way of working". Another change in perspective comes from Katy, as she starts to question her independent way of working and is surprised at the importance attached by her peers to receiving group validation of their ideas, "probably I need to learn a bit about collaborative learning". It is pointed out by a different speaker "did we want people to respond, or do we want people to agree?" The ongoing evaluation activities developed thinking about how they were learning and what helped them to learn in a collaborative context – they asked critical questions, distinguishing the need for 'consensus' and 'relevance' in online discussion:

"I just wanted [the others] to respond because I felt then I would know that my argument had been pitched at the right level...it didn't matter whether people agreed with it or not, it just meant that it was relevant and that was validating it." (Group narrative)

By midway through the module, they have established a large investment in their

peers as sources of validation, challenge and learning, rather than an expectation that these will come from the tutor. The responsibilities have been a challenge and surprised them, but they appear to be learning how to do this and working out what their roles are in their own and in each other's learning. Engaging with narrative data collection within embedded course evaluation activities has made a significant contribution to this development because it has been instrumental in how the learners create the context of their learning. Moving away from material and spatial considerations of what is socially binding, Jones (2002) argues that context in text-based CMC is made up of the various 'models' that people build up in their minds (and in their interaction) of the situation, and how they use these models to make predictions about the kinds of meanings that are likely to be foregrounded and the kinds of behaviours which will show them to be 'competent' members of particular communities (after Hymes, 1994). He argues that 'context' is therefore not something communication 'exists in', but is more **"something that interactants create as they go along...context is a function of interaction and negotiation, bound up with communicative intentions and purposes and dependent on the ways people enact social presence and become aware of and interpret the enactment of social presence by others** (Jones, 2002, pp. 4-5).

By creating the communicative context for themselves, practitioners develop knowledge about how to 'be' an e-learner at the same time as they learn the curriculum content aims of the course, by constant reference to the developing discourse and its shifting politics. Such a perspective affords a high degree of agency to the participants, whose interaction can shape what things mean and bring into being new conceptions of the self-as-learner as an individual in relation to others. The high levels of reflection on their e-learning experiences found in the data suggest that such context-making processes have benefits for the learners, manifested in a variety of types of meta-level activity:

- They teach each other about how the course works, more effectively than reading handbooks and online course information, or listening to the tutor (See Vogel and Oliver (2006) on the issues of 'representation' of e-learning courses);
- They take on 'teacherly' roles and appreciate the input from those who do the same online;
- They assume responsibility for the conduct of the forum;
- They reflect on the desirable features of the online discussions, and debate the merits of different forms of online writing, thereby making explicit that choices exist for individuals in how they participate;
- They develop a respect for the differences between learners in the group, and discuss the benefits of plural literacies or 'genre mixing' within the online exchanges;
- They consider the need for some people not to respond much and accept that they can still be learning;
- They articulate accounts of their experiences of online discussion and compare their anxieties and misunderstandings, establishing a strong sense of community support;
- They engage in metalevel discussion about how their own learning is going, and how it is connected to the learning of others;
- They review assumptions about the relationships between each other and think in more complex ways about how relationships affect learning.

VI. Relevance to work-based learning

E-learning programmes which offer post-graduate professional awards form a key growth area in HE. The project investigated participants whose experiences take place within highly pressurised work contexts, who seek accreditation of work-based learning

through such programmes (Bates, 2005). The MTeach is a mixed-mode course for teachers and is practice-focused and aimed at developing critically-informed professional learning in order to lead to accredited Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at masters level. The adjustment to being a 'novice' student whilst frequently occupying senior career roles (Steirer, 2000) is a factor which negatively affects some participants on professional programmes, an issue which can be compounded by a lack of familiarity with new technologies and e-learning pedagogies. Hitherto, a 'student satisfaction' model has dominated approaches to evaluation conducted by HE practitioners, especially for those participants studying at a distance where close engagement with qualitative analyses of experience is more difficult to achieve. In this model, frequently based on comments from those who are 'exiting' their studies, students answer questions predefined by the evaluator after completing the course. By contrast, the premise of the project was that student learning is enhanced by evaluation which is 'embedded' or *concurrent* with teaching, and in which a reciprocal relationship is established between tutor and learner around how the learning is going. Potential conflicts between work-place and HE perspectives on professional knowledge need to be communicated in a course context which is not linked to assessment. The development of appropriate tools to understand learner experiences in order to develop adaptive pedagogies and maximise effective participation is central to the quality of university provision for these cohorts of students in particular, and all distance e-learners in general.

VII. Use of technology

The project used technology to collect data in a distance learning context, in addition to face to face narrative interviews. The methods used asynchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) for data collection via online commentary on key topics and online 'think aloud'. *Online commentary* has much in common with the narrative interview in terms of 'epitome'

and rhetorical cohesion related to participant response to a key question or issue, but minimises the interviewer-respondent dynamic. *Online 'think aloud'* allowed for data to be collected based on participants' immediate responses to an image of e-learning used as a stimulus and also provided the opportunity for participants to reflect further on these responses. The think aloud task also invited the possibility of metaphor-building as a way of 'storying' the image to tell about their experiences, all of which could be conducted at a distance. In addition, face to face narrative interviews were filmed and clips extracted to form part of the sample cases to be used as potential training material for e-practitioners' pedagogical development.

VIII. Recommendations

The implications for e-learning course design are considerable. The findings question the extent to which subject-focused task-design is actually a main factor in the experiences of e-learners. This supports Blake's findings (2000) that practitioner-focused refinement of task-design and e-tutoring may not be entirely productive in enhancing the learner experience, since diverse learners' experiences of input and collaboration vary so widely. In addition, an acknowledged lack of coherence between students' work-based knowledge and academic discourses is further complicated by engaging with unfixed 'e-learning genres'. These discontinuities are compounded for experienced professionals by the time which elapses following undergraduate study before returning to learning for accredited professional development. [The findings suggest that the incorporation of student meta-level engagement within e-learning experiences plays a critical role in achieving coherence for learners, and that both novice and experienced e-learners respond positively to narrative investigative tools to articulate the features involved in 'getting used to' new e-learning contexts.](#)

With increasingly varied cohorts of students within work-based accredited HE programmes, varied user demands and ever

higher expectations of what technologies will be able to provide for distance e-learners, there is a danger that the e-practitioner's task becomes focused on a constant attempt to develop ever-increasingly sophisticated task and delivery design in a world where there is considerably less time-lapse before the next technological innovation comes along. What becomes vital in this scenario is a focus on developing the learners' sensibilities to being an e-learner and to understanding their own learning and how to review the processes of change and adaptation in a way which supports them in the 'newness' of the practices of e-learning. This calls for a reconceptualisation of meaningful evaluation and its relationship to long-term learning-centred goals in HE.

IX. Impact indicators

- Adoption of new approaches to induction of students on the MTeach;
- Development of pedagogical design to enhance student participation in online discussion on the MTeach;
- Collaboration established with peers at UCL and Bournemouth University to conduct further research to trial evaluation methods with students in fully online international contexts in 2006-07;
- Paper accepted for BERA with high rating from referees and top rating for relevance;
- Conceptual development in the field gauged by invitation from Higher Education Academy to disseminate approaches at a research seminar; pending contribution of papers to conferences and journals (one UK, one international).

X. Potential for synergies with other projects

- Developing Moodle for the MTeach (James Emmott) - enhancing the student learning experience through combining the pedagogical and technological affordances of the VLE;

XI. Dissemination activities:

Audience	Date	Venue	Type
Practitioners – University of London External Programme	June 2006	Centre for Distance Education, Fellows Conference	Seminar presentation of work-in-progress http://www.cde.london.ac.uk/support/events/file2471.ppt
Practitioners – IoE Master of Teaching Programme	July 2006	MTeach Awayday	Presentation of findings and recommendations for course development
Academics	September 2006	BERA Conference	Paper presentation
Policy makers/practitioners	October 2006	Centre for Distance Education, University of London	Research report
Academics/researchers	December 2006	ALT-J	Submission of journal article – academic
Practitioners/academics/researchers in work-based learning	November 2006	Centre for Excellence in Work-based Learning for Education Professionals (WLE)	Seminar presentation
Policy makers	December 2006	Higher Education Academy	Seminar presentation on case studies in pedagogic research methods in HE
Policy-makers, practitioners, academics, researchers	December 2006	International Professional Development Association Conference, University of Stirling	Poster presentation and seminar discussion
Academics/researchers	2007	WLE	Occasional paper No. 1 – Journal article – academic www.wlecentre.ac.uk
Academics/researchers	2007 tbd	International conference	Journal article – academic
Practitioners	May 2006 & February 2007	IoE SIG	Seminar presentation of findings
Practitioners	Summer term 2007	IoE 'Pathfinder Project' (HEA funded)	Staff development sessions

- A study of teachers' video-recorded discussions of classroom practice with MTeach colleagues (Jeff Bezemer) – examining the further potentials of collaborative approaches to work-based learning facilitated by innovative online tasks.

XII. Potential for further development

The project has focused on students within one specialist education institution and within a mixed-mode environment and tested out the feasibility of narrative methods where

corroboration of their effectiveness could be more easily facilitated by opportunities to meet face to face. Within this small-scale project, we have been able to identify clear benefits for the students as well as trial a variety of methods, out of which further research is recommended into the wider applicability of the evaluation model from mixed-mode contexts to fully online programmes. The benefits to learners are considerable, and on this basis we propose further research is needed to explore a new relationship between teaching and research which enables e-pedagogy to be research-

informed at a micro- as well as macro-level, and reviews the roles of e-practitioners in their approach to evaluating learner experiences.

To this end the research team is now in a strong position to test the more challenging application of the model to fully online contexts, and has secured funding from the CDE and WLE to conduct a further study during 2006-07 in consultation with new partners with expertise in e-learning and evaluation with fully online learners.

XIII. Partners involved

All members of the original research team are members of the MTeach programme at the IoE. Jeff Bezemer was appointed to the project as a Research Officer. The funding for the further project has been awarded to a team consisting of two new partners:

Jill Russell, Open Learning Unit, University College, University of London;
Jon Wardle, The Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University.

XIV. Key literature and weblinks

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