

e-Fest Conference

Wellington Town Hall

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Distinguished Guests, delegates.

I am very pleased to have been asked to say a few opening words to you at the conference this morning. I have to say that I am particularly impressed by the number of people attending this event, it is no doubt an indication of the growing importance of e-learning within our sector. I will say more about this later.

In the past 15 months or so I have attended an e-Ducation conference, an e-merging conference and now an e-fest conference. I say e-nough is e-nough with the language slaughtering.

E-learning is usually associated with Internet learning, or distance learning or distributive learning or asynchronous learning. It's all of those things but for my money it is more than that. It's about the use of technology in the learning process, wherever that may take place.

There is little doubt that e-Learning has gone through and is perhaps still going through a bit of a difficult time. There are even some people who have been proclaiming the death of e-learning. I would certainly agree that e-learning has had its bad moments of late but proclaiming its demise is like the man who observed when told of the invention of the telephone, *'it's an interesting idea but it*

will never catch on' or George Burns I think it was who said *'rumours of my death are greatly exaggerated'*.

That is not say, however, that the experience of the e-university in the UK where close to \$100m was essentially wasted before the venture was declared a failure or the Univeritas 21 experience which was apparently quite painful, were not relevant. They certainly were relevant and the great value of those experiences was that they provided a rich learning experience for all of us.

Richard Chait, a Harvard professor and guru on good governance tells a story against himself which is relevant at this point. He had launched a book on governance in the not for profit sector and it was selling very well which made him feel good and important. Very important. He was in a hotel in San Francisco and he turned on the TV and was attracted by an interview with a corporate CEO from the deep south who was asked what was the secret of success in business. Chait recalls that the CEO's answer, consisting of a single sentence delivered in a slow southern drawl rendered Chait's highly successful book on governance, completely obsolete. The sentence was: *The main thing is to make sure that the main thing is the main thing.*

So, what is the main thing with respect to e-learning? For my money the main thing is that the key to successful e-learning lies in focusing on the learning bit first and the e bit second. Getting sucked into the myth that technology should be the primary focus can be costly. The e-university experience in the UK certainly demonstrated that. I don't think that in retrospect that many people would think that the main thing in that exercise was to spend \$100m on software that may not work. And in fact didn't work.

Ok, so e-learning has got a bad press over the past few years. That fact is that it will survive. Indeed it will do more than survive. It will increasingly become an integral part of learning in all or our institutions. It is, after all, only technology. At one stage the blackboard and chalk was the newest technology. That was e-learning. Then we made a dramatic advance. We got dustless chalk. Then we got OHPs, photocopiers replaced banda machines, whiteboards came along, VCRs, then we got Powerpoint etc etc. Yes it is only technology but the pace of change in the technology and its increasing ease of use makes it like Colditz. Almost escape proof. Nobody involved in education will be able to escape this stuff.

The other key element here is the x generation or what is now being referred to as the digital natives. A whole generation is coming through that is technology savvy. Not only does this generation expect to see the use of technology as routine, it will not accept anything else. That of course is not to say that they are a complete generation of computer junkies who assiduously avoid human contact and expect to be educated without ever having to come into contact with a human being. We are social animals and it would be a sad world indeed if we ever go to the point where nobody ever had to actually meet anybody else. The technology may someday make that possible but would the great majority of people want that? Not in our lifetimes.

So what will this technology be? Graham Whitehead, British Telecom's Exact's principal consultant recently told an international internet conference that: *"The internet is dead or dying; it's full of viruses, worms and porn, you have to wear a Kevlar suit before you go on line"*. The existing internet will, according to Whitehead be

replaced by supervised private IP networks. If Whitehead is correct households in the future will be highly networked and even low-cost household items such as tins of beans will have individual IP addresses. What will that kind of capability and ubiquity do for e-learning? The question is really rhetorical because by the time we have figured the answer out we will be living in that reality and dealing with it. It is only technology and like any technology its use to us will depend on how creative we are.

I guess the message here is, keep your technology as inexpensive as possible and avoid the 'big solution'. Be flexible and use whatever is available now, because it won't be long before it will be obsolete.

All the more reason, why I would emphasise the need to concentrate on the learning part of e-learning.

I note that the sub-theme of your conference is *thinking* together. I'm assuming that if you meant *thinking* the same you would have said so. That's a relief.

Not long ago the Chancellor of the Maricopa Community College system in Phoenix Arizona required that on every whiteboard in every teaching space in every college the question: what has this stuff got to do with learning? be indelibly written. It's a question that you, the delegates should perhaps ask yourselves on numerous occasions during this conference. Not, what has this stuff got to do with technology but what has this stuff got to do with learning? The technology will look after itself and you can do nothing about that but use it. You can, however do a lot about maximizing the benefits of technology in the learning process.

It is impressive that there are about 200 people here today. But if we are serious about the use of technology shouldn't the numbers be far greater? We, you must avoid the temptation to put e-learning into a box to which only a select few will have a key. E-learning must become an integral part of every educator's life in our sector. That's 5,000 people. W.B Yeats the great Irish poet once said, *education is not about the filling of pail, it's about the lighting of a fire*. I have no doubt that the great majority of you here are convinced that technology offers enormously exciting opportunities for educators in the learning process. No doubt your fire has already been lit.

The challenge facing you as a group is to spread that fire. Only by doing that will you maximize the benefits that e-learning can deliver. Take your conference sub-theme, *thinking* together seriously and think together not only how you can find ways to improve the learning process through the creative use of technology but how you can spread the word and ensure that all 5,000 of our tutors out there are imbued with the same enthusiasm.

I look forward to speaking to many times this number at next year's conference.

Thank you.