ultraversity research project findings

Anglia Ruskin University

The Ultraversity undergraduate degree is a 100% online, full-time, programme that leads towards an award of BA (Hons) Learning, Technology and Research in just 3 years. The approach to study is not typical of most undergraduate degrees in that there are no subject specific modules with pre-determined content. Ultraversity uses action research and reflective practice as its approach to learning to enable undergraduates to inquire into their work role and that is why we call them 'researchers'.

To be successful, researchers need to be capable of self-directed study with their learning coming from their structured examination of their work role in their own work context. However, this is only part of the story, as Ultraversity researchers also need to work collaboratively in online learning communities. It is in these communities that they meet other researchers to, share research findings, peer review and critique each-others work, discuss ideas and issues, and offer each other support socially.

Learning facilitators who are University lecturers work with researchers to negotiate a personal pathway of action research relevant to their particular needs and work context. Guest 'expert witnesses' also join the communities to bring additional practitioner knowledge to support the learning process.

Towards the end of the programme, instead of undertaking a dissertation, researchers develop an exhibition in an appropriate work context. This may be their actual workplace or some other suitable setting. The purpose of this is for researchers to promote learning beyond themselves in organisations and individuals, and to gain evaluative feedback on the research they have undertaken.

Although not designed as a programme that employers sign up to on behalf of their staff, the Ultraversity degree does aim to provide access to higher education for people who are committed to developing themselves in their work role. The programme is designed to develop researchers' confidence to influence and improve practice within their work setting through developing their ability as articulate, critically reflective problem solvers.

www.ultraversity.net

The Ultraversity Project is the invention of Ultralab, a research centre at Anglia Ruskin University. Its globally respected team offers major expertise in e-learning through facilitated community online, e-assessment, mobile learning, action research, work-based learning, new software tools, digital creativity and strategic consultancy.

Ultralab enjoys working with partners and is sponsored by governments, charities and companies. We are not-for-profit, but seek sponsorship to sustain and develop our research.

Ultralab has a vision to enhance participation and delight in learning with technology, guided by a shared set of learning concepts and values. We have a proven track record inventing small and large-scale projects to explore our ideas. We have been growing since 1988 and are based in Chelmsford and all over the UK, with strong international links, especially in New Zealand.

U L T R A L A B
learning • technology • research

"The genre I am using is photo narrative, it will follow a selection of my flower photographs growth journey - from early development to death. I will reflect on my own personal growth..."

Innovation in assessment

Patchwork media **online** to enhance personalised learning – achieving high levels of personal and professional reflection.
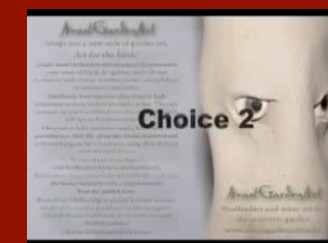
The traditional method of assessment in higher education is the essay. This requires not only a certain level of literacy, but also a familiarity with the 'academic voice', which can place constraints on students, including a feeling of isolation.

Ultraversity aims to cater for a wide range of students, and a large proportion of our student body are those who would normally not have access to higher education.

We set out to find exciting and imaginative ways to submit work for assessment that would be less exclusive.

We took the 'Patchwork text' idea and adapted it to our online needs. What exactly is that and how successful has it been in Ultraversity?

Student researchers are encouraged to create reports in a range of genre, media and scope.

This is expected to harness their creative imagination and to provide stepping-stones to substantial writing.

Students appear to move to more traditional forms of academic writing as they gain confidence and experience.

Through these processes they achieve high levels of personal and professional reflection, irrespective of starting point.

So what is 'patchwork text'?

Professor Richard Winter's enlivening 'Patchwork Text' idea seeks out a more imaginative alternative to the traditional essay, which currently dominates assessment in higher education. Central to his idea is the role of the creative imagination. Providing a way of integrating this into the assessment process is the secret to reaching all kinds of learners.

Student researchers are set small-scale pieces of varying genre throughout a course, with opportunity for feedback and discussion from their peers and facilitator. Then the student must create a concluding piece, which 'stitches' together the previous pieces, linking ideas and forming conclusions.

How does it work in Ultraversity?

An important part of the Ultraversity degree is the technological component. So we encourage the use of a wide selection of technology, including blogs, wikis, videos, audio files and animation. This emphasis on using a range of media, combined with Winter's use of different genre to harness the creative imagination, such as fictional writing and poetry, results in a rich and varied range of work for assessment.

"I used Net Opp to create the environment of a 'Chat Room' or 'Instant Messenging Service', this allowed the child to prove his understanding of safety online. It is at this point that I realise that Net Opp had lots of applications that I hadn't considered before. That I had more to learn about the software and how it could support teaching."
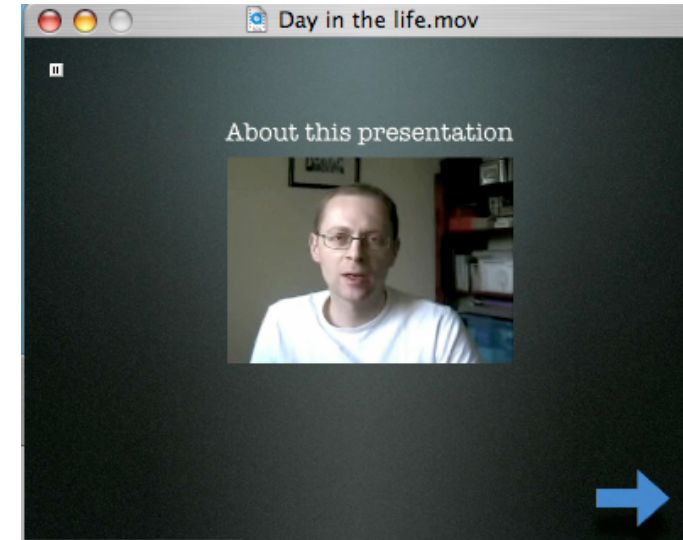

What is our research focus?

We are testing Winter's ideas through the Ultraversity project, and our research attempts to evaluate how successfully we have embraced and developed his ideas.

Central to Winter's vision is the importance of the creative imagination and the potential power it has in every person. (Winter et al 1999) Imagination provides us with the ability to go beyond what is directly present to our senses and it can create metaphorical links between things and situations. It links the intellect with feelings. An essay or a 'report' does not have any link or any significance outside of itself.

He argues that artistic creativity and aesthetic modes of judgment are not the preserve of a rare and special type of person, whom society would call an artist, but a universal capacity, available to everyone. He sees this creativity as a central component of reflection on experience, and throughout his work there shines through a delight in and awe of the power of imagination.

Winter says:

> If participants are capable of producing imaginative artistic work then examiners ought to be capable of appreciating and evaluating it. Human beings are always happy to make discriminative judgements and there is no reason why this should be more difficult with an essay on Wordsworth's poetry or a bottle of wine – it's just that we are not yet used to it.
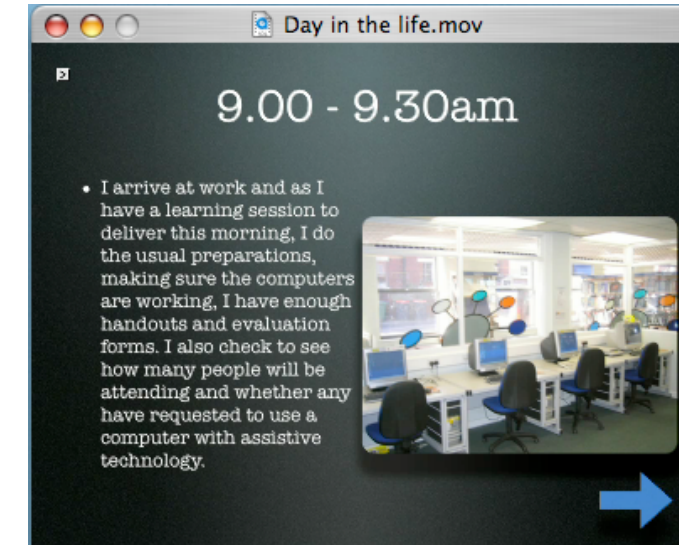
Five themes underpin his conception of patchwork text:

- social learning;
- theory into practice;
- storying imagination;
- reflective paradigm, making visible;
- and drawing attention to, the creative interpretive process itself.
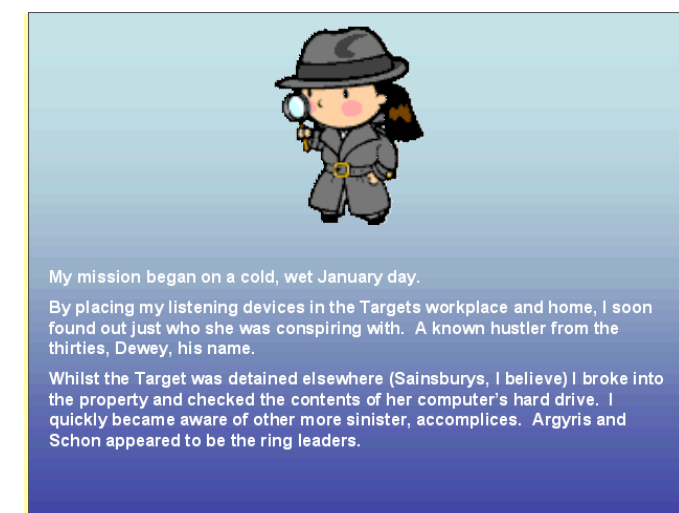
"Building on the skills learnt in the module, Reflection in the Work Setting, this module allowed for a deeper understanding of reflection. I found it useful to revisit theories such as those written by John Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983). Looking deeper into reflection required the understanding of new concepts, such as Theory in Use, Espoused Theory , artefacts, governing variables and Double Loop reflection. I found a great deal of information available on the internet and managed to clarify and organise my thoughts through discussions on the online community hotseat." –Student researcher

Looking at the evidence so far, the implementation and adaptation of Patchwork Text has been enormously successful in providing a way for students from a wide range of backgrounds to express their ideas.

The central premise of Professor Winter's vision is the harnessing of the creative imagination. The Ultraversity approach adds a different dimension, encouraging not only different genres, but also an exploration of different technologies. We have termed this adaptation, 'Patchwork Media'. This allows Ultraversity students the opportunity to utilise their creativity through technology, using different forms of media to express their thoughts and ideas as they journey towards becoming reflective practitioners.

We have noticed that patchwork text is used less as the students move through the programme and enter into the final year of study, which requires rigorous academic defence of their research. The traditional text-based structured essay dominates. This could suggest that the initial use of Patchwork text has provided a useful scaffold for reflection and analysis, and has allowed the gradual and supported growth of the 'academic voice'.

In Ultraversity we have seen these aspects combine to create opportunities for people to achieve high levels of personal and professional reflection, irrespective of their former academic experience.

References

Winter, R, Buck, A and Sobiechowska, P 1999 Professional Experience and the Investigative Imagination, Routledge, London

Ultraversity Research Blog:
http://blog.ultralab.net/~blogger/uv/