



## In this Issue

Director's Corner

Viewpoint

Focus on the Hub

Focus on the Nodes

Other News

Spotlight on

Resources

Spotlight on Events

## Directors' Corner

*Gráinne Conole, Co-Director*



This issue looks at the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and in particular how they can be used to support online learning and communication, of particular relevance to the training and capacity building remit of NCRM and associated ESRC

investments. The Internet and associated tools have now been used in education for more than a decade and are seen by many as an essential element in delivering education and training efficiently and effectively to a diverse, mass audience. The best example is the now ubiquitous use of the computer as a work tool and the replacement of many traditional work modes of communication, such as memos, with email. The two main advances in terms of use have been in information handling and communication. Tools to provide different forms of visualisation, to support collaboration or enable more complex cognitive functions are still in their infancy but are likely to form the next major shift in ICT. There are now a multitude of online environments to support teaching and learning. These include communication (email, discussion boards, synchronous chat), authoring and assessment tools, integrated learning environments, information management tools and gateways and portals. In particular, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) quickly gained popularity because they offered easy-to-use, all-in-one environments. Practitioners found them accessible because they aligned with their existing practice in terms of preparation, delivery and assessment. There has also been a growth in tools for searching and retrieving information and software for managing and manipulating data. In recent years grid-enabled technologies have been applied to support globally distributed research in Science (see for example <http://www.nesc.ac.uk/> and (<http://www.ncess.org/>). Technologies offer practitioners new ways of doing tasks (faster, easier, more comprehensively) but also can have associated drawbacks; for example although the internet provides access to vast quantities of materials there are increasingly real issues about information overload, access and quality control/ authenticity of materials. Similarly, tools for communication offer opportunities for new forms of dialogue and collaboration but require new forms of literacy and skills.

However, there is much hype around the potential use of technologies to support learning and teaching: that their use will lead to new forms of learning; that they are adaptable, flexible and personalised; that mobile technologies mean learning can take place anywhere and that they offer the potential to provide students with new forms of representation. More specifically, technologies offer the promise of repurposing and sharing resources. In particular, learning objects, defined as 'digital entities deliverable over the Internet... that any number of people can access and use... simultaneously', are purported to offer the potential for reuse across a variety of contexts and uses. Although there is a grain of truth in all of these, understanding the nature of technologies and their impact is much more complex and multifaceted than these simple headline statements might suggest. In reality uptake of such tools is patchy. Nevertheless it is clear that these technologies are having an increasing impact on our lives, in terms of changing structures, roles and processes.

There is a real need for research to gain a better understanding of how they can be used to support learning and teaching and for this to feed back into policy making and practice. What is important is the use of tools in specific contexts. Discussion forums do have the potential to move practice on by providing opportunities for sharing ideas and developing thoughts through a network of peers with similar interests. However, it is evident that success depends on factors, such as relevance and timeliness of the topics discussed, support and guidance provided, and ways in which the forum is structured and managed.

The next decade will be critical in terms of research into the use of ICT and its impact on practice finding a clear niche and position alongside more established research fields. Research can offer us a real insight into the ways in which technologies can effectively support learning and teaching, and an understanding of how they can be used to improve organisational processes. We should also begin to see the development of new underpinning theories and models of explanation to account for the use of learning technologies, and perhaps even the emergence of new learning paradigms and working practices. Only time will tell.

## Viewpoint

Sarah Porter, JISC

'JISC' has different connotations for different groups and individuals depending on their background and engagement with us. For IT directors and network managers, the JISC is about the SuperJanet network; for information professionals, the JISC is also about licensing for electronic journals; for some universities, the JISC is about advice and guidance on range of IT-related issues and innovative funding projects. All of these views are correct but their diversity reflects the very broad range of activities that are funded, coordinated and promoted by the Joint Information Systems Committee. The JISC is unique in that it is funded by all the UK post-16 and higher education bodies – its remit spreads both geographically and across the education sectors. The JISC's activities are driven by the requirements of its stakeholders – the universities, colleges and research organisations – and the breadth of the 'JISC family' is reflected in its broad range of activities – from the introduction of bleeding edge network technologies, through the development of national technical services such as ATHENS, through research and development activities that support innovation in research, administration, teaching and learning, through its cost-saving 'content deals' with publishers and through the provision of 'human-facing services' such as the JISC Plagiarism advisory service.

One of the most exciting areas of development for the JISC in the last two years has been the start of its new e-learning programme. This builds upon earlier work to explore how technology can support learning, teaching and their associated processes – basically, to try to help universities to use technology in an appropriate and effective way to support learning and teaching. The new programme has recognised that there has been a gap in understanding and collaboration between technologists and technology innovators and teachers or lecturers. It is funding strands of activity in innovative technologies, pedagogy and e-learning, distributed e-learning (including personalisation and e-portfolio approaches) and also an 'e-learning framework' that attempts to provide a single technical approach that allows flexible choices about e-learning technologies. The new programme combines several strands of work and a variety of short and long projects – so that its aims can develop over time as we learn more about e-learning practice. This presents its own set of challenges for project holders and for the JISC but we hope to learn from the approach and draw upon its successes for the new phase of e-learning activity that will be funded from April 2006 onwards. For more information refer to the JISC web site at <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>. For information about the e-learning programme, please visit <http://www.elearning.ac.uk/>.

## Focus on the Hub

Since the last newsletter was published, the NCRM hub team at Southampton has been joined by Nick Bardsley and Jane Schofield. Nick joined us on 1 December as Senior Research Fellow to replace Dr Gabrielle B. Durrant. Nick has most recently worked at the University of Nottingham, School of Economics. His main interests are in research methodology,

in particular experimental methods and issues of external validity. Apart from these Nick enjoys hiking, jazz and playing squash. Jane, who joined us on 4 January, has taken over as Hub Administrator from Becky Clarke, who has moved to London. Jane was previously administrator for the Courses in Applied Social Surveys at the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute.

A major activity of the hub over the autumn and winter has been the preparation of a detailed Training Needs Assessment for ESRC, including consultations with researchers at different career stages, research employers and other key stakeholders. We shall be reporting more fully on the outcomes of this assessment exercise in a future edition of *Methods/News*.

## Focus on the Nodes

'Qualiti' – *Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact* – aims to contribute to the advancement of methodological understanding, innovation and practice in qualitative research, and has a commitment to the strategic development of research capacity building in relation to qualitative methods and methodologies across the social sciences. Qualiti is particularly concerned with ensuring that methodological development and innovation reflect the social contexts within which research production is located, and that both academic and non-academic research communities foster a critical engagement with qualitative methods for social scientific inquiry.

This node of the NCRM is based in the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, and is directed by Amanda Coffey and Chris Taylor. It brings together a large group of colleagues from a range of social science disciplines, including sociology, education, social work, social policy and anthropology. The programme of work includes substantive research projects, as well as a range of training, networking and capacity building activities. The demonstrator research projects are each designed to engage with the development of innovative research practice, as well as with the role of qualitative research in contributing to policy, practice and knowledge production. These projects are:

- *Talking treatments: using deliberative methods to engage citizens in the provision of health care* (principal investigator: Rob Evans).
- *A qualitative sociological autopsy study of gendered suicide* (principal investigator: Jonathan Scourfield).
- *(Extra)Ordinary lives: Children's everyday relationship cultures in public care* (principal investigators: Emma Renold and Sally Holland).
- *Watching, listening, reading and clicking: Representing data through different media* (principal investigator: Bella Dicks)

Alongside our research programme, we will also be engaged in a programme of training, networking and research capacity building. This will include running seminars and other events throughout the UK, placement and mentoring schemes, publishing *Qualitative Researcher* (a quarterly publication providing an interdisciplinary forum for methodological

dissemination, debate and discussion), and establishing commissioned inquiries to promote deliberations on contemporary issues and debates in relation to qualitative research practice. We launched our capacity building programme with a series of half-day roadshows in Autumn 2005, visiting Leicester, Manchester, Glasgow, York, London and Belfast. These roadshows attracted approximately 400 social scientists, to whom we were able to outline the work of Qualiiti and how researchers could get involved in our activities and work. We also began to consider the nature of methodological 'innovation' and the implications for 'innovation' in practice and for capacity-building.

There are a number of Qualiiti events taking place during the first half of 2006, including day seminars on *Combining social research methods, data and analyses* (University of Surrey, February) and *Using qualitative research to inform policy and practice* (Office for National Statistics, Newport, April). Further details of our work and activities can be found on the NCRM website or on our own Qualiiti website <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/>.

## Other News

### Second Annual Conference on e-Social Science

The National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS) will be holding its second annual conference on 28-30 June 2006 at Manchester Metropolitan University. Although the call for full papers closes at the end of January, poster abstracts may be submitted until 27 March and workshop, tutorial and panel outlines should be submitted by 27 February. See <http://www.ncess.ac.uk/events/conference/>.

### ESRC Bursaries for Training

The ESRC Research Resources Board makes available 50 bursaries each year for up to £1,000 each to enable HEFC-funded staff in the UK engaged in teaching methods or supervising research to update their skills. From October 2004, the scheme was extended to include contract researchers working in HEIs. The next call will run from 1 - 28 February 2006. Further details, are available from the Research Methods Programme: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/bursaries/>

### Methodology of Longitudinal Surveys

An international conference on this topic is being organised by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex and will be held at Essex on 12-14 July 2006. Associated with the conference are two NCRM-sponsored short courses taking place on 11 July: *Handling incomplete data in longitudinal surveys* and *Multilevel modelling for longitudinal survey data*. For Further details, see: <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/mols2006/>.

### ESRC Research Methods Festival

Following the enormously successful first Research Methods Festival held in 2004, the 2006 Festival is being organised by the Research Methods Programme in collaboration with NCRM and the National Centre for e-Social Science. It will be held at St Catherine's College Oxford from Monday 17 July to Thursday 20 July. The Festival aims to engage social scientists across a wide range of disciplines and at different points in their research careers, aiming to stimulate interest, raise issues,

highlight opportunities and showcase new developments. The festival will be an important event for researchers at all levels and will include lots of networking opportunities and a social programme. Full details will be maintained on the Festival website at <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival/>.

## Spotlight on Resources

### cemmap – The Centre for Microdata Methods and Practice

cemmap offers methodological training resources suitable for a range of audiences from civil servants to postdoctoral researchers. The Centre was set up to provide a focus for development, understanding and application of methods for modelling individual behaviour, the influences on it and the impact of policy interventions. It conducts research, organises training courses, master classes and workshops and builds and maintains networks of researchers and practitioners. cemmap was founded in 2001 with core funding from the Leverhulme Trust. It is directed by Andrew Chesher. Its offices are located at the Institute for Fiscal Studies in Bloomsbury in central London, and it runs its courses and classes close by at the Department of Economics at UCL.

The microdata methods studied at cemmap are the statistical and econometric tools used to study identification of features of behaviour and to extract information about those features from microdata. The microdata studied at cemmap are the survey data recording the actions, experience and outcomes of people, households and enterprises.

Courses and classes are taught by researchers at the Centre and by a network of UK-based Fellows who engage with the Centre's research and run workshops. In 2005 Richard Smith (Cambridge) organised a workshop on Empirical Likelihood and Oliver Linton (LSE) organised a workshop on Testing Stochastic Dominance Restrictions. Later this year Grant Hillier (Southampton) mounts a workshop on Information and Inference in Econometrics.

cemmap organises two-day master classes given by leaders in the development of microdata methods and their application. Master Classes in 2006 include: Tony Lancaster (Brown) on *Modern Bayesian Econometrics* and Ariel Pakes (Harvard) on *Using the Implications of Dynamic Games in Applied and Empirical Work*. Past Master Classes include Roger Koenker (Illinois) on *Quantile Regression*, Joel Horowitz (Northwestern) on *The Bootstrap* and James Powell (UC Berkeley) on *Semiparametric Methods*. Resources arising from these Master Classes and details of upcoming classes are available on the cemmap web site.

An annual programme of ten or so short courses attracts around 200 participants each year, about 55% from the public and private sectors. A grant from ESRC provides subsidised places for HE staff and students. Courses on offer include *Policy Evaluation Methods*, *Discrete Choice Modelling*, and *Microsimulation*. The programme evolves as the demand develops, with a course on *Efficiency Measurement* added in 2006. The Centre also runs bespoke courses for individual government departments focussing on their specific needs.



cemmap is the managing partner in the EU Research and Training Network *Microdata Methods and Practice* involving 13 partner and affiliate institutions across Europe. Academic and practising social scientists, in all disciplines, from the UK and abroad, are welcome at cemmap courses, master classes and workshops. Forthcoming events and further details are on its website: <http://cemmap.ifs.org.uk>.

## Spotlight on Events

Jane K Seale, School of Education, University of Southampton

### ALT-C 2005: exploring the frontiers of e-learning - borders, outposts and migration

Around 600 delegates from all over the world attended the 12th International Conference of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), held at the University of Manchester, between 6 and 8 September 2005. There was a rich programme of research papers, short papers, demonstrations, workshops and symposia from a wide cross-section of the learning technology community. The diversity of disciplines, sectors and professions contained within the programme strongly reflected the theme of exploring the frontiers of e-learning, particularly investigating the extent to which new areas of knowledge, research and practice will emerge from collaboration between the different disciplines, sectors and communities.

The three keynote speakers gave their own unique perspectives on what the frontiers of e-learning might be. Setting the scene for the conference, Professor Alan Gilbert, President and Vice-Chancellor of The University of Manchester, focused on how a change in culture is required in order to offer the new modes of production, service and delivery that are demanded by learners. Carole Twigg outlined her views on how to use technology to achieve improvements in quality and lower the cost of provision. Etienne Wenger encouraged delegates to consider the extent to which the concept community of practice can be applied to the e-learning community.

Four themes pervaded the programme: Design and Development; Architectures and Infrastructures; Implementation and Collaboration. Each was headed by a distinguished Theme Speaker who introduced the issues of the theme in an opening plenary session and led a closing discussion that challenged delegates to think about what had been learnt. Leading the design and development theme, Tom Boyle focused on two questions: What is the real problem that we are trying to solve? And do we have a problem or do we perhaps invent problems in order to use the technology? He suggested that if we do not understand the problem, then the solution would not be appropriate. Leading the Implementation theme Sal Cooke posed the question as to whether any real progress had been made in the areas of technology and e-learning. Were the questions being asked at ALT-C 2005 the same questions that were on the agenda five years ago? Stephen Downes challenged delegates to reflect on their assumptions about the value of collaboration in e-learning and asked the pivotal question: Do we critically reflect on theory and practice regarding collaboration or merely reinforce our existing prejudices? In summarising the infrastructure and architecture theme Oleg Liber identified three recurring sub themes: pedagogy, technology and organisation and offered a model to illustrate the relationship between the three.

ALT-C has always attracted a wide range of delegates, including novices and experts, researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. It has traditionally been viewed as a higher education conference, but this year's conference attracted a wide range of delegates from further education, schools and commercial sectors. This mix appeared to be successful in that it enabled delegates to share their experiences regarding current issues such as learning designs, mobile and wireless technologies and e-portfolios. This was also the first time that 'blogging' was used extensively throughout the conference, with delegates publishing 'as it happens' impressions of the sessions they were attending.

The theme of next years conference is "The Next Generation" and details can be found at: <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2006/>.



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