

Schome

Peter Twining, Open University

"The best way to plan for the future is to build it." Peter Twining of the Open University is intent on just that, building a genuinely new future for learning.

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"Think of a 3 or 4 year-old: they are very efficient learners, active, dynamic, exploratory. Just imagine if we had a system that took those 4 year-olds and built on their learning expertise, enhanced it and then gave them additional strategies and empowered them to really go for it. Just think what that would do to the whole system."

The whole system is what concerns Peter Twining. His ambition is great. Schome (Not School - Not Home - Schome: www.schome.ac.uk) is going to be nothing less than "a new form of educational system designed to overcome the problems within current education systems. It will meet the needs of society and individuals in the 21st century".

There are four steps to Schome. Firstly, establishing aims and developing shared understandings about the kind of education system needed for this century. Secondly, creating a shared vision of what the system would look like that would allow the meeting of those aims unimpeded by the existing education system. Thirdly, devising ways of moving from the present system to Schome. Fourthly, implementing the system.

Peter believes strongly that the need for a new model for teaching and learning is urgent. Before starting his present work at the Open University, Peter worked in schools and colleges. His thinking has been influenced by thinkers Seymour Papert and Professor Larry Cuban, whose books question the present role of ICT and the efficacy of the present systems.

"Although my early work was involved with ICT, I realised that I needed to stop thinking about ICT and start thinking about what we wanted from an education system. Most of the current initiatives are too tied into our existing conceptions of what education is like. We have run focus groups to think about the future and they all come up with something that is like now but just a little bit better. Helping people to think 'out of the box' about what Schome should be like is very challenging - we are all so indoctrinated into thinking that education looks like school."

Peter argues that the very nature of present-day schools and the assumptions about their role mean that they cannot address the problems of learning in the Information Age. "The constraints under which schools have to operate make it very difficult for them to evaluate and reshape their practice."

The big problems, he argues, are to do with accountability and assessment. Schools and teachers are judged on their results in national tests. The national tests measure the wrong things. "If we can't crack that we are doomed. Because the tests measure the wrong things the teachers teach the wrong things. We need to value what the kids can do. Until we get a system that recognises the competencies that young people have, how can we claim that we are educating them? Accountability could be about the health of the community: vandalism, crime rate, level of employment - is the school making a difference to all of that? We need to unlink assessment and accountability."

Setting up schools of the future, in Peter's view, is not the way forward. He advocates setting up some parallel systems. "If I was running a business and I wanted to re-engineer my business for the future, I would not tinker with the old business, I would create a start-up running alongside and when the new business was working well that would take over. We cannot throw out the complex system of schools, colleges and universities and exam boards. We need to set up a parallel system which at some point in the dim and distant future, if it was effective, might become the main system."

Schome, in Peter's vision, will not be an abstract entity. Schome will provide real physical spaces for learners. Peter recognises that there is a need to provide social activities, resources and care for young people. "Children have to be looked after so that parents can go to work. Many people do not home educate because they cannot afford to give up their job. Shared understandings about education are crucial. If we don't have that, and we don't at the moment, then we will be working at cross purposes."

New technologies will be essential in Schome to provide personalised learning and the more precise use of information resources. "ICT does have implications for the knowledge, understandings and skills that society needs, as well as the pedagogical approaches that are possible."

The key activity within Schome at the moment centres on building a vision of a future. There is a sub-project called The Aspire Project which is used to develop 'provocations' and to support other people in coming up with creative yet grounded visions of Schome. "We ran the Aspire project in the hope that it would provoke people into thinking radically. They did not, but the schools that had used the project moved on in their thinking, for instance using kids to lead staff development sessions."

An interesting way of building the vision is the use of Second Life an alternative world. Second Life is a 3D virtual world built and owned by its residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown quickly and to a total of nearly five million people from around the globe. The phrase "The best way to plan for the future is to build it" is made real in Second Life. The environment enables anyone to test out new designs and ideas before introducing them to the real world.

"We thought that being able to live alternative models of Schome and try out visions for how education might be organised within (teen) Second Life might be one way to extend our ability to think out of the box about visions for Schome. So we are exploring setting up Schome Island. The island in the Teen Grid is called Schome Park, we also have one in the Main Grid called SchomeBase within (teen) Second Life." This pilot project involves around 200 members of NAGTY (The National Association of Gifted and Talented Youth) aged between 13 and 17.

Links:

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