# 'Virtual spaces: preparing for real learning'

**TNP2 workshop**
**Handelshøjskolen i København**
**7–8 June 2002**

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How can we prepare ourselves - and our learners - for real learning in virtual spaces? That emphasis on **learners** is important, and it works in two directions:

1. Many of us at the TNP workshop spoke of the need to be learner-centred. Across our group we probably have a range of views about what being 'learner-centred' actually means. But we probably would agree that, however we apply it in the practice of our daily teaching, being learner-centred implies a general set of values – an emphasis on respect for the learners, for example, and a willingness to take account of the social and economic grain of their daily lives. We recognize that our learners face demands, and construct identities, outside our classrooms or new learning environments. Being learner-centred also means recognizing that people do not all learn in the same way – hence our emphasis on learning styles. And it means recognizing that increasingly learners can move from one institution to another according to their preference.

2. If we are learner-centred, what are some of the implications for our work in new environments? I have in mind virtual learning environments (VLEs), where students can carry out a wide range of tasks: accessing online resources, reading material from their teacher, collaborating online with other students, meeting in an online café, and so on. I believe there is a paradox in being learner-centred. What is it? Well, how should we react if learners report that they do not enjoy working in a virtual learning environment? Do we say to the students, 'OK. You report you didn't like this style of learning – this collaborative work online, for instance. We won't ask you to do it again'? Or do we try a different route? We could, for example, continue to take the students' feedback very seriously, and develop our teaching materials accordingly, while also recognizing that…

   **It can take more than a year for a student to become an effective learner in a virtual learning environment (VLE) [Powerpoint slide 2].**

That's why I am suggesting that there is a paradox: although being learner-centred means, among other things, that we listen to students and find out where they are now, it also means that we may have to encourage them to move to somewhere else.

And during the year (or more) that the student is learning to learn in new ways, what is the teacher doing?

   **It can take more than a year for a teacher to become effective in a virtual learning environment (VLE) [slides 3 & 4].**

It looks as though it could be a tricky journey for both learners and teachers! And while certain of the new learning environments, particularly those developed from

an instructivist perspective, may arouse fears that the machine will replace the teacher, this does not have to be the case. In relation to designing and facilitating online conferencing, for example, the new environments require teachers to 'upskill' rather than 'deskill'. I referred in my talk to an example from Oliver, who found that the combination of a VLE and assessment-related rewards resulted in some unexpected effects, leading him to research, reflect and revise – and to stay tuned to the unexpected *[slide 5]*.

At TNP2 we spoke at some length about the new skills that teachers will need. I'd like to mention two here very briefly, and then expand on a third. Teachers will need to:

- develop an online presence that supports learners *[slide 6]*

- learn how to manage their time; of course they already have to do this, but email and VLEs are notoriously time-consuming *[slide 7]*, and so teachers need to develop new skills – and also guidelines, to ensure that learners do not make unreasonable demands.

In addition, teachers who are working in a campus-based institution need to learn **how to blend their face-to-face classes with their use of virtual learning environments**. For example, suppose as a teacher you wish to introduce your students to a new topic. You could do this in a number of ways, considering the pros and cons for your students in their circumstances. The sequence of five slides *[slides 8–12]* is designed to present some of the options for real teachers trying to integrate virtual learning environments with their existing teaching. This down-to-earth approach is designed to build teachers' confidence, which is one of the most important issues as we move to new learning environments *[slide 13]*.

Finally, in addition to the Powerpoint slides, here are some suggestions for those who would like to use print – a very powerful medium still, as one of our TNP2 participants reminded us. Naturally I recommend the last one in the list :-)

Collis, B. and Moonen, J. (2001) *Flexible Learning in a Digital World: experiences and expectations*, Kogan Page, London.

Laurillard, D. (2002, 2nd edn) *Rethinking University Teaching: a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*, RoutledgeFalmer, London and New York.

Oliver, R. (2001) 'It seemed like a good idea at the time' in Murphy, D., Walker, R. and Webb, G. (eds) *Online Learning and Teaching with Technology: case studies, experience and practice*, Kogan Page, London.

Pettit, J. and Mason, R. (2002 forthcoming) 'Virtual space, real learning: an introduction to VLEs' in Fry, H., Ketteridge, S. and Marshall, S. (eds) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: enhancing academic practice*, Kogan Page, London.