

# Adult Education Adrift in a Net: Making Waves or Clutching a Lifering?

Roger Boshier [Convenor]  
Mary Wilson, Byron Burnham and Patricia Reeves

**Abstract: The Internet and World Wide Web exemplify values advanced by heroic adult education theorists such as Ivan Illich. They have also triggered a deluge of hyperbole and surfeit of false dichotomies (e.g. online *versus* face-to-face education). But, in the chorus of critics and advocates, adult educators have been noticeably silent. This symposium is designed to rectify this situation by interrogating Internet and Web learning and education from an "adult education" perspective.**

## Notice to Shipping: Complex Web Directly Ahead

Roger Boshier

When a vessel runs into a fishnet it comes to an immediate halt and, if near shore, can drift helplessly into rocks or sand. In B.C. a salmon net is made of fine Web and, even with the stricken vessel hauled out of the water, it is a formidable task to get out of the tangle.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Adult Education is steaming along seemingly oblivious to nets laying directly ahead and also to port and starboard. On the bridge, critical theorists, postmoderns and functionalists are peering ahead but not keeping a "sharp lookout" as required by Rule 5 of the Collision Regulations. In many quarters it's as if the Internet (and its sexy offspring, the World Wide Web) is just another passing fad - like its predecessors, group discussion, great books and A-V devices. In short, there are few signs adult educators are significantly influencing discourses about education and learning on the World Wide Web. Is adult education adrift - being dragged along by the discourses of corporatism, "training" and "communications?"

To what extent does the Internet present adult educators with opportunities to enact their historic commitments to equity and social justice? With the enormous reach of the Web what will adult education look like twenty years from now? What is the relationship between adult education and "distributed learning?" Does anyone worry that the Web is largely an American creation with a spine that begins in Vancouver/Seattle, snakes through Palo Alto and ends in San Diego? Unlike teaching machines from yesteryear, the Internet is not a passing fad. Because of its scope and speed of deployment - and possible consequences for adult education - this is a good time to reinforce Rule 5.

Because the Internet changes daily and barely a week goes by without news of new corporate acquisitions, mergers or other "restructurings" of search engine, software and hardware companies, it is risky writing about the Web. Yet, as we lower the flag on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the most ardent advocates of the Internet seem to think the initials www are written across the bow of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Web is a corollary of the commodification of education in the context of "globalisation" (in some parts of the world, a code for "Americanisation"). Some of the

discourses constructing Internet learning and education contain high levels of hyperbole while others are dismal and pessimistic. But, whatever the situation, the Web is seductive and, as Mao Tse Tung observed, "we live in interesting times." At present, at least four discourses are constructing Web learning and education (Boshier & Chia, 1999).

Advocates of *techno-utopianism* believe the Web leads to greater access to education, will result in "equity" and revive fading local democracies. This discourse is choked with corporate razzmatazz and is largely constructed around California chic - with unproblematized commitments to individual liberty and tendency to ignore awkward problems like racism, violence, environmental degradation and the fact folks living not far from Los Angeles don't have a telephone - let alone a high-speed computer and server.

Advocates of *techno-cynicism* do not consider the Web a wired utopia. To what extent is it a centralizing technology - which extends the reach, and possibilities for surveillance, by already privileged elites? Another element of this discourse concerns American dominance of the Web (Wilson, Qayyum & Boshier, 1997) and its role in exploitative colonialism.

Techno-zealotry is tiresome and continuously upbeat. The Web is a "rational-technical" instrument that knows no bounds and can be harnessed to educate rich and poor and, when necessary, run the coffee and Coca Cola machine. Techno-zealots take refuge in grand generalizations, deploy lofty metanarratives and pursue technology for its own sake.

In the *techno-structuralism* discourse the key question is - who is doing what to whom and why? What matters is how the Web is deployed. Hence, the context in which the Web is deployed or the institutional forces within which it is nested, are at the centre of this discourse (Gayol & Schied, 1997). Whether it is good for adult learning and education, or has the potential to revitalise local democracy, depends less on the Web and more on who's using it and why.

AIDS educators in places like San Francisco have used principles of adult education with stunning success. Yet, for reasons difficult to understand, the AIDS epidemic - and the educational response it evoked - is barely visible in "mainstream" adult education. There have been a few papers at AERC and occasional articles in the *Adult Education Quarterly* or comparable journals elsewhere. But a few toots on a horn hardly constitute a coherent symphony of effort. Is it the same with the Web? Even out of a sense of self-interest, adult educators might heave themselves up the nearest vantage point to look at the Internet learning and education landscape.

Our purpose is to examine developments in Web learning and education from the perspective of adult education. Although adult education is imbued by postmodern ambiguities, core values still prevail. These concern (i) the need to manifest respect for the experience and background of learners (ii) the importance of authentic - not just superficial - forms of interaction and (iii) respect for learning in a broad array of settings. The symposium is organised as follows. After an initial analysis concerning the state of adult education and its core values the presenters will position themselves as adult educators and consider issues pertaining to the Web.

## **The Web in Higher Education: Steaming Ahead or Tangled Propellers**

Byron Burnham

When gillnetters or seiners chase elusive salmon, mariners who run into nets create tangles which evokes harsh words, bitter feelings and lawsuits. The same happens when universities embrace the Web (usually positioning it as an instrument to secure "access" and "equity"). With universities committed to distributed learning - the convergence of face-to-face and off-campus technologies, why bother with adult education? The Web has provided money-minded university administrators with a way of leap-frogging right over extension or adult education operations. Now there is nothing to "extend" because the university is everywhere and nowhere all at the same time. There isn't much space for adult education in the midst of this postmodern conundrum.

Faculty are recording lectures and placing them on the Web for student review. We can now place even annotated graphics on the Web to accompany lectures. The old sequence of audience, method, technique, and finally device selection has been turned on its head. Devices or technology are creating new ways of teaching. We are even meeting our students differently from the way we did in the past.

With that as a backdrop, here are *Guiding Principles for Distance Teaching and Learning* as espoused by ADEC (a large university consortium dedicated to distance learning) with responses framed from an adult education perspective).

### **ADEC Principles and ADED Responses**

First Principle: "The learning experience must have a clear purpose with tightly focused outcomes and objectives. Web-based learning designs must consider the nature of content, specific context, desired learning outcomes and characteristics of the learner. Learner-centered strategies include modular, stand-alone units compatible with short bursts of learning. Learning modules may also be open, flexible and self-directing."

Response: Many adult educators would object to this principle. At times we may want to be purposely vague and open. There are situations when outcomes should be listed in the most general way. For example, transformative learning outcomes can be stated only in the broadest of terms.

Second Principle: "The learner is actively engaged. Active, hands-on, concrete experiences are highly effective. Learning by doing, analogy and assimilation are increasingly important pedagogical forms. Where possible, learning outcomes should relate to real-life experiences through simulation and application."

*Response: This principle seems limited to few topics. For example, a philosophy course which deal with ideas may have a harder time providing for "hands-on" experiences than would a fly tying course.*

*Principle Three: "The learning environment makes appropriate use of a variety of media. Various learning styles are best engaged by using a variety of media to achieve learning outcomes. Selection of media may also depend on nature of content, learning goals, access to technology, and the local learning environment."*

*Response: The idea that learning styles are best accommodated with a variety of media seems congruent with principles of adult education. But we must examine media available in a Web world. At present there is little variation in Web environments. Selection of media is dependent upon local learning environments. We seem to be left with a narrow set of options. Some might be so bold as to suggest we have only one environment in Web world. Indeed, the authors of one survey (Boshier, et. al., 1997) complained about the prevalence of dreary lecture notes posted on the Web and asked if this was "innovative."*

*Principle Four: "Learning environments must include problem as well as knowledge-based learning. Problem-based learning involves higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation while knowledge-based learning involves recall, comprehension and application."*

*Response: Learning about ideas also involves analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Problem-based learning, while useful for many purposes, is not (and should not be) the only show in town.*

*Principle Five: "Learning experiences should support interaction and the development of communities of interest. Learning is social and sensitive to context. Learning experiences based on collaboration support learning communities while building a support network to enhance learning outcomes. Multiple interactions, group collaboration and cooperative learning may provide increased levels of interaction and simulation.">*

*Response: One characteristic of most education is the artificial nature of the learning groups we create (classes). As such, we cannot expect a support network to last any longer than a class is in session. Training within an organization might allow longer lasting support groups to be established.*

*Principle Six: "The practice of distance learning contributes to the larger social mission of education and training in a democratic society. Changing mental models and constructing new knowledge empowers learners and encourages critical thinking. Knowledge becomes a function of how the individual creates meaning from his or her experiences."*

*Response: This should be broadened to include a plurality of missions. While meaning-making is laudable not all education is concerned with meaning. This is what David Noble's harangue is about. He is not as concerned about the technology as about the purposes for which it is used. What is tucked inside the technology Trojan Horse?*

*Afterword: Whether adult education significantly informs Web learning and education remains to be seen. Right now, we need to study good practice. "Extension" used to involve "extending" the reach of the university. If the university loses its way in the Web, Extension will also get lost. Adult education as a discipline has a double lever for affecting higher education. One is as a university discipline, and thus an internal influence on the academy. The other is as an influence on the practice of adult education.*

### ***Holiday Jaunt or Home Invasion? Doctors in the Web***

*Mary Wilson*

*A course on the World Wide Web should be attractive, interactive and accessible (Boshier, et. al., 1997). As well, there are two central questions for the adult educator:*

*How can the course remain faithful to principles of adult education outside of a face-to-face setting, involving genuine interaction and respect for learners' experience?*

*Can the course use the information-rich environment of the World Wide Web, so that online education is a benefit, not just a second-best alternative to face-to-face?*

*When the purpose is continuing professional education (CPE), course planners face an additional challenge. Courses must satisfy educators and participants **and** the standards of the professional accrediting body. From the perspective of some busy doctors, on-line CPE relieves pressure and feels like a bit of a holiday. For others, it constitutes a further assault on privacy and personal space - a "home invasion."*

*There are two types of CPE, each with a different focus. Some focus on a transfer of information (such as new treatments or drugs for physicians, updates in tax law for accountants). These may be presented in face-to-face sessions, or print-based or online distance education formats. Some professional journals include self-tests which can be completed and sent to an accrediting body for credit. Other courses focus on professional practice and encourage participants to learn from each other. Journal clubs, online and face-to-face discussion groups and workshops with a practice focus, are examples of this second type. The World Wide Web, with the software additions that allow for conferencing, lends itself to a combination of the two types. It is this combination that appeals to most family physicians.*

*I am working with family physicians to bring a continuing medical education course in geriatrics to the World Wide Web. We conducted focus groups with three groups of family physicians in B.C., Canada and found they're interested in the Web's potential for:*

Providing opportunities for convenient continuing professional education

Allowing discussion with their colleagues over a longer period than is usually the case with face-to-face workshops

Facilitating cross-discipline collaboration and discussion

Fostering guided access to online resources

### **Interaction**

To design an online course that takes advantage of the Web, meets the expectations of the professional participants and accrediting bodies and is congruent with principles of adult education, five types of interaction must be considered:

Learner-Learner: There should be an opportunity for participants to share their own experiences and reactions to new material. In CPE, speaking with other participants provides a chance to collectively evaluate what is being presented. At least among family physicians, there tends to be cynicism about expert, hospital-based or specialist knowledge. For family physicians the opportunity to discuss things with others who work in a family practice must be at the heart of an effective Web-based course. If this chance for discussion is in place, there is no reason for it to terminate when the course is officially over. As part of our project's Website, we are developing a "Doctors lounge" to continue after the course has ended.

Learner-Facilitator: The facilitator ideally provides new information and is the person responsible for encouraging discussion. The equality of individuals stressed in adult education is particularly clear in medical CPE, where many participants have facilitated courses. Initially our course participants and facilitators will all be family physicians. We envision, in the future, expanding the program to include other health professionals involved in the care of the frail elderly, patient advocates and elderly people.

Learner-Online information: Information management is a challenge for family physicians. Piles of journals, invitations to workshops and newsletters arrive in the average doctor's mailbox each month. Online courses must not aggravate the problem without providing a life-ring. In the course we are designing, access to information will include tutorials on the use of online

search tools, and discussions of information management techniques and evaluation.

Learner-Offline Environment: Learners' interactions with their own environment - their professional practice - have often been ignored. In CPE, lack of attention to this aspect of interaction sometimes means information may be absorbed but not applied. New models of CPE are attempting to overcome this gap.

Learner-Technology: In a Web-based course, the first three forms of interaction take place against the background of learner-technology interaction. Via focus groups, we found family physicians have varied levels of computer expertise. It is important to provide meaningful levels of computer support, including tutorials, written instructions, help lines and an online forum where participants can share their expertise.

The Canadian College of Family Physicians adopted an approach to continuing education that encourages an interactive focus. Courses designed to meet College criteria must use Schon's reflective practitioner approach. Physicians will develop concerns based in their experience, frame questions, and find answers which integrates their practice. Evaluation for professional education credit will be based on the physician's analysis of their own success in integrating theory and practice.

### **Blurring the lines**

A young physician in one of our focus groups unhappily said the "convenience" of online education means that what used to be "family time" is now used for online learning. This is a growing concern. If Web-based education comes to replace face-to-face CPE with a form of "home invasion" that further blurs the line between personal and professional life, it would be a dubious step forward indeed. Whether the Web can incorporate the best principles of adult education remains to be seen.

### **Does Illich Point to the Net and Say "I Told You So?"**

Patricia Reeves

What significance can be attached to the fact the Starr Report on US Presidential dalliances was launched not in newspapers but on the World Wide Web? Just as the Gulf War redefined network television news, Clinton's sex life forever positioned the Web as an instrument for informal learning which, as Faure (1972) and others noted, is a vital component in an architecture of lifelong education. Has Ivan Illich's utopian notion of a deschooled society finally arrived? If citizens can get what they need with a mouse why endure teachers, schools and arcane professors arguing about "needs," "reflection" and "positionality"? Who needs it?

One ought not engage in too many techno-utopian excesses. Yet it is undeniable that the Web provides a rich venue for informal learning. Like the best forms of adult education, informal learning is organized around real-life experience and is often tacit, non-institutional and non-routine. The learner does their own "program planning." The learner is in control. But are these developments congruent with principles of adult education?

Many attributes of andragogy are embodied in the best forms of Web learning. In the first place, the Web provides an accessible context for many (mostly privileged) adults to learn things they need to know. If adults are intrinsically motivated to learn, as Knowles claims, the Internet expedites the process. The Web also provides a way for adults to assume control of their learning. Part of its appeal is the fact users plan, carry out, and evaluate their own learning. Are these the hallmarks of self-directed learning? Is there enough in the Web to lure Allen Tough away from extra-terrestrials and back to learning projects?

Think about your own learning endeavors. Did you turn to the Web to learn something about this conference? Affordable airfare to Chicago? Did you check the permanent AERC website up in Vancouver? [<http://educ.ubc.ca/edst/aerc/>]. Citizens daily learn in formal, nonformal but, most importantly in this context, informal settings.

Learning occurs in informal settings for a host of reasons - from seeking information that satisfies curiosity to securing data that may save lives. Activities taking place in natural settings (e.g., work, home) primarily involve learners themselves. The Web greatly facilitates self-directed learning. Yet learning in informal settings gets little respect in many adult education circles. Is this due to the tacit belief that learning activities undertaken without institutional direction threatens vested interests? This concern lies at the heart of higher education discourse about distributed learning and distance education. Yet, not embracing informal learning also threatens adult education. At a time when departments of adult education are being dismantled we must demonstrate the unique educational contributions our field can make. We must broaden our conceptual lens as to what constitutes "real learning." At the turn of the century this is a good time to endorse a variety of arenas for learning and education.

Learning activities undertaken on the Web are ideally suited to the needs of adult learners. The Web provides a fertile venue for informal and self-directed learning activities. It promotes self-direction, demands active engagement by the learner and is poised to respond to the readiness to learn characteristic of the adult learner. On the Web, information (which does not always constitute "education") is literally at one's fingertips, 24 hours a day.

*Access and equity are moribund issues in many parts of the USA. A recent report by the American Library Association revealed that 73% of US public libraries offer Internet access, and this number will increase. E-rate discounts on telecommunications, have been made to insure that libraries, particularly those in rural and poor areas, can afford to go online. A study of Internet use among HIV-positive adults found economic factors were not the most pressing concerns about Internet use (Reeves, 1998). Almost half the participants were not computer owners but still regular Internet users. Access is a multifaceted issue, and concerns focused solely on economic considerations are too narrowly focused. Access is more than just a matter of money.*

What opportunities does the Internet provide for adult educators? For one, we can use the unprecedented access to learning opportunities that it provides to revisit our goals as educators. Ryder and Wilson (1996) maintain that "since we can no longer filter and select proper materials for our students, our highest calling as educators will be to support students in developing such discipline for themselves" (p. 651). We can also stake more of a claim on instructional design to insure conformity to the principles of adult learning. We in Adult Education have too long let "design" be handled by instructional technologists.

The nautical metaphor behind this symposium is apt. Opportunities to support informal learning ventures abound for adult educators, and we must take on the challenges -- for our own survival and because of the historic Adult Education commitment to learners in all walks of life. Certain kinds of education made possible by the Internet could be congruent with principles of adult education. With a new century looming, the adult education flotilla is sailing into seas filled with Nets. Do we plough ahead, huffing, puffing and making waves, return to shore, or practice what we preach - try to figure out what to do. To paraphrase a man more familiar with fish than electronic nets this is a good time to ask "Think what the Net means for adult education and what adult education means for the Net?"

### References

Boshier, R.W., Mohapi, M., Moulton, G., Qayyum, A., Sadownik, L. & Wilson, M. (1997). Best and worst-dressed Web courses: Strutting into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in comfort and style. *Distance Education: An International Journal*, 18, 2, 327-348.

Boshier, R.W. & Chia, M.O. (1999). Discursive constructions of Web learning and education: Neither "World Wide" or "Open." *Proceedings of the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (Held in Brunei)*, Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Commonwealth of Learning.

Faure, E. (1972). *Learning to Be*. Paris: UNESCO.

Gayol, Y. & Schied, F. (1997) Cultural Imperialism in the virtual classroom: Critical pedagogy in transnational distance education.

Reeves, P. M. (1998). An investigation of the use and impact of the Internet in coping with an HIV-positive diagnosis. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*, The University of Georgia, Athens.

Ryder, M. & Wilson, B. (1996, February). Affordances and constraints of the Internet for learning and instruction. *Paper presented at the Association for Educational Communications and Technology*, Indianapolis, IN.