

Coping with a Revolution: Will the Internet Change Learning?

Occasional Paper for Faculty

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Libraries are full of information. Universities are full of knowledge. The core business of a university is 'to know'. This is what sustains me through an increasing bombardment of information from a range of sources, old and new and from missives telling me that I will not cope with the Information Revolution.

Many years ago the amount of information in my fields of interest was greater than I could handle or cope with, so I learned to forage and search. Nothing has changed that process. The fact that the amount of information is now 1000 million times more than I can handle or cope with, is immaterial to the processes I use. Exponential growth in information ceases to be a problem once it passed my ability to cope with it all. The skills then are selection, prioritizing and constructing just as they were before. Surprised?

Some are prophesying that there will be a 'ladder' in the Net and all the information will burst out (only those born before 1950 will know what 'ladder' means in this context). I am not concerned. I have always had access to more information than I needed, so what is new. Even as a five year old child I could have got information from Mum or Dad or my brothers and sisters. I learnt where the best source was for each need. It was my use of that information (learning) that gave me 'knowledge'. We only know something when we attach it to the framework of our being. Information can pass through us with the speed of thought and make no impression on what or how much we know. Only when we choose to do some work on information do we shift it into knowledge. You may notice I stay clear of the word 'understand' because it is a more complex concept.

Reading is not knowing. As most students can attest, they can often lift their eyes after reading a page and wonder what it is they have read. Believing that they must not have read it at all they return to the top of the page and read it again only to find that it seems familiar. There is something magic about reading for the first time. On the second run through their brains say "We have read this all before". The intra-personal response is "Yes. But we don't **know** it do we? It is familiar. It is information. It is not known." If access to information was knowledge then libraries would grant degrees to every student who borrowed 65 books.

At one time in my past there were encyclopaedias that were sold door to door and the sales people said that if you didn't have this wonderful (but expensive) set of books your child would be deprived and would not do well at school. They told us about other and prestigious people who lived in our street who had copies. But if you bought the books, they sat on the shelf, just like other sources of information. Knowledge didn't leap into our children's heads. Those who didn't buy them were still able to learn. So what of the CD-ROM you bought and the access from your own garden shed to the Library of Congress description of world weeds. When you want to know, you may still seek someone who knows - if only because it is cheaper and because it is friendly.

Maybe there are new ways of knowing! I met an academic staff member the other day who, when I inquired about an article, said that he hadn't read it but (brightly) "I have a copy." This, I suspect is a new way of 'knowing'! It is one thing to know something; but is having a copy a substitute for knowing? Do photocopiers know! Some students believe wrongly, that getting a copy and filing it away carefully is storing knowledge.

Twenty years ago, so Peter Gatehouse tells me, an educational guru returned to NZ from an overseas visit having 'seen the future'. He had seen rows of cubicles in which Japanese five year olds were 'interacting' (?) with their own computers. This, he said was the way things would be in 1996. There are still pundits who say that future Lauras and Hamishs will do their learning alone. The popular phrase is 'alone, at their own pace and in their own time.' For

some, a minority, that may be the case. For others, a majority, education and knowing will be 'at the pace of the group, and at a time when they can be together.'

I saw a fatuous statement last week proclaiming (in the only paragraph I read), that if students had access to more and more information (maybe even more than their teachers) why would they come to a university? What twaddle! Nerds can learn alone and should be encouraged to do so. Students don't come to a university because it has access to information. They come to socialize, to find partners, to have fun, to talk long into the night about deep things, to play football, to be with others among whom they will make friendships for life at a time in their life when that is most easily done... The fabric on which all of this activity is appliquéd is the desire to know, to learn about themselves, about permaculture, about growing animals or saving animals, about social movements, about their past, their language... and to do so in a social setting of their choice and in a pleasant physical environment. As long as Lincoln University provides a venue for all of the 'activities' above it will attract groups of people who want to be together.

I am helped frequently by a notice on my wall. Somebody who knew (?) said it was from Toffler.

a collection of data is not information a collection of information is not knowledge a collection of knowledge is not wisdom a collection of wisdom is not truth

We at Lincoln University are in the 'knowledge' business. If you want to collect information there are other places where you can go. A university uses information to make knowledge. Research makes new knowledge from information and data. Teachers encourage their students to make knowledge. Assessment events measure the extent to which students have increased their knowledge. Only the students know that extent. That is why we have to ask them.

How do I combat the information overload. On my email bulletin boards I get the computer to filter out those authors who have little to say. From the titles of the 150 messages that I get each week I delete those that are informing me about coming events, conferences, new additions to the list. I can get those elsewhere. I avoid, or do other things in meetings that spend time **Informing** rather than **Discussing** or **Deciding**. I try to attend meetings for only an hour and to make my contribution in that hour. I do not schedule any of my own meetings for more than an hour. I spell-check incoming information to see if it has the word 'know' or 'student' in it and delete the whole thing if it doesn't. You would be surprised how many things whirling around on email or paper fail this simple test. But, I respond promptly to personal requests where somebody wants to know something from me.

Maybe I am a modern day Luddite. I checked this out with a few people and they thought not. I use the tools available just as others do. Currently, I belong to three email bulletin boards for my better understanding of learning, staff development and communication. I am using email to write to each individual in my class of 48 -not to inform them about the next essay or to tell them there is no class on Field Trip Day - a subject outline is a better medium for that. It would be wasting the power of email to use it for such dead information. I am writing to the students to get to **know** them and their capacity for knowledge. I frequently ask them if they are learning. I never ask them if they want more information.

I started by saying that our university library has information. That is what is on the shelves. The library staff are knowledge brokers as are the library teachers. If you want to know something you can ask and the knowledgeable library staff will help you. Library information is on the shelves and the copper wires and the disks. Library knowledge is in the library staff.

So, will the information revolution mean that by 2006 students will have stopped coming to Lincoln University. NO! As long as the teachers at Lincoln still make knowledge and demonstrate and guide others to do the same, students will still gather on Mondays and Tuesdays to learn.

I hope that you will have done some brain-work on this article and made some more knowledge. I apologize for giving you more information when you have enough already. My only excuse is that I did use the words 'know', 'knew' 'knowledge' and 'knowing' 43 times in this piece so I am definitely in the business of a university.