

Vegged out or Switched on?

Learning through the TV

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Introduction

Government policy favours the use of new technologies in learning, both for its reported ability to widen participation in learning, and also to produce a workforce skilled in the areas which are perceived to be needed for economic success.

To investigate the extent to which technology has the potential to widen participation in Hull, the Learners' Forum has conducted research into people's attitudes to learning and technology in the city. Whilst this report concentrates on learning through the television, the full report also analyses data about computers, online learning, mobile phones and games consoles. For more information about these other areas, please see the full report, entitled, 'A Digital City? Attitudes to learning and technology in Hull'.

In total, 103 residents of the city were spoken to, and the make-up of this sample broadly reflects the demographics of Hull in terms of gender, age, employment status and ethnicity. In addition to this, we made sure that we spoke to people from all areas of the city by dividing it up according to the Area Committees.

For this piece of research, the Learners' Forum used semi-structured interviews, meaning that we were able to gain an insight into people's opinions and experiences in their own words. For more details about the methodology used in this research, please refer to the full report, 'A Digital City? Attitudes to learning and technology in Hull'.

This report looks at learning through the television, or 't-learning'. In the interviews, the questions on this topic were quite extensive and so we have been able to build up a picture of respondents' viewing habits, and to what extent people feel able to learn through the television.

The Biography of Television

Government policy is focussed on the notion that technology can be viewed as a means to widen participation in learning. This can either be as a way of removing some of the barriers that traditional courses have, or as a 'hook' to engage people's interest enough for them to participate in learning. In this context, this report concentrates on the potential that learning via the television has.

In recent times developments in technology, and particularly the emergence of digital and interactive services, have meant that learning through the television (often termed t-learning) has been projected as a way of increasing participation in learning (Atwere and Bates, 2003). By gauging people's attitudes to television, this report will consider how realistic it is for this to be achieved in Hull.

The concept of the 'biography of technology' is a useful one for understanding attitudes about television. The concept was devised by Kopytoff (1986) in a contribution to Appadurai's (1986) 'The Social Life of Things'.

The concept helps us understand the social and cultural context of the television. Technologies are socially constructed; in other words, their meaning and use comes from the society in which we live rather than being determined by the technology itself. The work of Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) is part of a move away from 'technological determinism' within social theory, in order to recognise that the way in which we use technologies in everyday life reflects the social and cultural context in which we live.

The notion of the 'biography of technology' recognises that technologies have a history within our culture. The ways in which we have used technologies over time define the ways in which new advances have been used by people. The biography could be described as a set of meanings about what the technology is, what it is for, how it is used and by whom. The biography of the technology is not static and, as the technology or the social context in which it is used changes, so too can the biography. It is not a rigid set of rules which determine how the technology should be used, but a set of meanings which act in the background moulding our use of them.

The biography of the TV is complex; its use varies amongst different social groups for example. However, the following description provides a brief indication of television's biography. Up until recently, television has been a one-way medium which has been watched in the centre of the home. Despite many households having more than one television, the majority place their largest set in a central position in their living room. As technology has advanced, additional features such as colour, video recorders and satellite/ multiple channels have developed. The benefits of these have been recognised by viewers and therefore have gradually become more widely adopted. More recent advances, and particularly digital interactive television, offer new possibilities that differ from the historical way in which television has been used. Digital services offer the possibility of television as a two-way medium.

The question of whether t-learning is a way of widening participation is dependent upon how people make use of recent technological developments alongside the existing biography of the TV. In this report we will refer to the 'biography of the television' in order to shed light on the ways in which Hull residents watch television and explore how they perceive themselves to learn through the TV, if at all. Through this, we will be able to assess how prepared for t-learning Hull seems to be. The biography of the television sets the context for the viewing patterns discussed in the remainder of the report.

The Social Context of TV Viewing

Analysis of people's views about the context in which they watch television may help us understand the potential TV has for learning– could it really be a hook into learning? In particular, two aspects of the wider context of television viewing shed light on the possibilities of learning via the TV.

The first relates to people's interests and how these shape TV viewing habits. It would appear that people's hobbies and pastimes apart from watching television have an effect on the types of programmes they are attracted to, how much time they spend watching television, what they watch and when. Naturally, people like their television viewing to relate to topics or subject matter which spark their interest. For example, if you feel that you are 'into sports' this may mean that you seek to watch sport whenever you can:

**Well I'm a sportsman, so any sport I watch...
(74/retired/male)**

Therefore, do t-learning materials just have to appeal to people's interests in order to draw them into learning?

The second feature of the wider context of television means that this may not be as simple as it may seem. Whilst people may choose to watch programmes they identify with and find interesting, not everyone has total control of the television or an ability to dictate their choice of viewing. Television is watched in the context of the household, its routines and its culture. As a result, the television is shared - not everyone has control of the television all of the time and may not always be able to watch what they want:

**Whatever the kids wanna watch [laughs]. Ain't got a choice!
(52/ part-time employed/male)**

**I don't watch any of the soaps they don't interest me at all, not in the least, but something that's amusing, comical, erm sports, if I get a chance, but I'm outnumbered- I listen to the radio
(46/ full-time employed/male)**

**I just tag along, whatever's on, what everybody else is watching. Most of the time I'll read or put me headphones on and listen to me music.
(56/ retired/male)**

Household relations mean that control of the television is not always equally shared. This is also affected by the roles different people take within the household or family, influenced by gendered social relations (Morley, 1986; Cockburn, 1992). In our study we found that it was males who largely commented about their viewing being directed by the choices of others, whether their wives/ partners or their children, but women reported this too. Essentially though, for the majority of those who did not feel they had total control over what they watched on the TV, the television was not a priority for them, which was why they had surrendered control of the remote to others!

Morley (1986) suggested that television can be problematic for some women as it demands inactivity in the domestic sphere— a space constructed as both the site of work and leisure for many women. Equally, this could mean that television is perceived as a relaxation tool for men after work. This is reflected in the following extract from an interview from a 50 year old female who handed over control of the TV to her husband in the evening **'because he's worked so hard he needs to watch his things'**:

...I watch all the naughty things like Tricia, This Morning and things like that...so I feel that when [my partner] comes home on the night, because he's worked so hard he needs to watch his things and he watches really boring things like fishing and Time Team and science and Egyptian Mummies, really boring, so if I can be bothered I go upstairs, to my telly upstairs and watch Corrie and things that he won't like... (50/ incapacity benefit/female)

Accordingly, the views of people in Hull indicate that t-learning strategies need to take into account the contexts in which people make decisions about what they watch on TV and the environment they watch it in. Removing barriers to learning is not just about removing barriers of access; whilst t-learning may mean that learners can access their course in their own home, the home is not a neutral site. Although some people have a home environment which is an ideal relaxed place in which to engage in learning through the TV, with ample time and opportunity to do so, for many others there are the responsibilities of family and relationships to shoulder and their homes may be fraught with tension, noise and distraction. Indeed, this may be how the television is usually watched in many households. Clearly, any t-learning initiatives need to be flexible enough to deal with the tangled and busy nature of learners' real lives.

How people watch TV: Active or Passive?

In order to gauge how realistic it is for TV to act as a way of drawing people into learning in Hull, we also need to consider how people watch television. By doing this, we will be able to gain some notion of how people regard the TV, and whether they feel that they currently learn by watching it.

Interviewees reported watching television in both active and passive ways. In the context of this part of the interviews, which focused on general viewing habits without specific reference to learning, active TV viewing was not associated with 'learning' but with exercising the brain or getting new ideas, for instance from gardening or cookery programmes:

**I watch Star Trek just [for] inspiration I suppose– new, new ideas and err, science fiction is more of a, sort of a learning thing where it could plant a seed for a particular idea and, err, you develop it yourself
(24/ full time employed/male)**

**I suppose I watch these decorating programmes and they give you ideas for decorating, since I do most of my own decorating, I er, always find that, you know so I suppose you could say that's learning, gardening programmes of course, I love my gardening.
(67/ retired/male)**

This would indicate that television does have some potential for learning for those who already watch programmes with the intention of learning. It is particularly interesting that it is those subject matters which require some practical application away from the television set, such as gardening, decorating and cookery, which seem to be popular with viewers in this way. Because of this, there is the opportunity for programmes like these to act as a 'hook' to reel viewers in to further learning; this currently happens at the end of many shows where viewers have the chance to send away for more details in a booklet or to log onto the show's website to learn more about a particular topic. This differs from how people conceived online learning to work; viewing it as being just about computers rather than the wide scope of learning which can take place online. Clearly, it is an indication of how the biography of a technology strongly affects how it used, and how new uses are considered by society at large.

Therefore, we would suggest that active viewers of programmes such as these might be more prepared to engage in some form of t-learning since they already regard the television as a learning resource which fits in with their everyday life.

However, many described consciously designating the TV as a device to be watched passively. Television was intentionally used in an inert way, in order to relax or 'switch off the brain':

Int: Why would you say you watch the programmes that you do?

**Pp: I don't...I have no idea...just to slouch in front of the TV more than to watch what's actually on it.
(24/ full-time employed/female)**

[I watch TV] just to switch off. I watch comedies and soap operas too. Going home on a night and you think I've got home from work and you don't have to take anything heavy on board you just have to veggie in front of the television.

(27/ full-time employed/female)

As seen above, there is evidence of people watching television in both active and passive ways. It may be presumed that there may be potential for learning through TV for those who watch television actively. However, it would also be reasonable to presume that if people can choose to “switch off” when watching television and use it as a mode of relaxation, they could also possibly “switch on” as viewers and make use of the TV as a learning tool. The fact that people watch TV passively and perceive themselves to be shutting down their brains when doing so ought not to be seen as an impassable barrier to the aims of t-learning, but rather as a challenge to those responsible for developing this area to ensure that programmes are engaging and the learning embedded in them is useful and meaningful to the target audience. Whilst there will be some people who have a history, or biography, of using television in a wholly passive way and are happy to continue to do so, as the notion of t-learning becomes more widespread and digital interactive services develop, more people will come to understand this as another function of the television, so too will an increasing number of people begin to be active viewers and see the TV as a two-way device.

However, our evidence indicates that what might be key to this is not just whether television is watched actively or not, but people's *reasons* for watching television both generally, or particular programmes.

Can you learn from television?

In our interviews we explored participants' views about television and their thoughts about learning from their viewing, particularly in relation to certain types of programmes– quiz shows, soaps (using Eastenders as an example) and documentaries. Analysis of participants' responses suggests that in terms of learning from their TV viewing, their intentions (i.e. why they were watching the programme, what they expected to get from it and their attitude towards it) were central.

Quiz shows

When asked whether or not they considered watching quiz shows to be learning, the vast majority of participants thought that it was. People felt that it was a way of learning general knowledge by picking up morsels of trivia through the answers to questions:

Mmm, yeah, that's learning, but... only general knowledge or... it's like snippets of information, not really learning about a, a subject as a whole.

(21/ student/male)

**I mean, they've got general knowledge on there so it is more general and not, not so err structured way of learning.
(24/ full-time employed/male)**

As the above quotes indicate, participants made a distinction between the kind of learning quizzes offered and 'real learning'. By 'real learning', participants intimated that this was structured learning that has a formal outcome and application. For some people therefore, the idea of learning through quiz shows would be off-putting because the learning would not be viewed as genuine. Conversely, for others, the very fact of quiz shows being so dissimilar to traditional learning in a classroom could act as a "hook" into learning. In actual fact, one interviewee felt that quiz shows were such a valuable source of learning that they taped some shows to ensure that they benefited from the learning:

Pp: I do learn a lot from quiz shows.

Int: Do you think it sinks in?

**Pp: Not all the time no. So then sometimes I like to record it so I can learn off it and think 'ah! Yes that's the one' so yeah you can learn a lot from quiz shows, not just me but the kids do as well because there will be something that will come up on a quiz show like Countdown, do you know what I mean you are learning sums and you are learning your English, so yeah quiz shows is the top one out of everything on there I would say quiz shows, definitely.
(37/ unemployed/female)**

An indicator of the value of learning is how meaningful it is to people. Certainly, the usefulness and relevance of the information learnt from quiz shows was questioned by some interviewees:

**But er, yeah, quizzes, I like quizzes and they can teach you some stuff. Not always useful or relevant stuff, but er...
(25/ part-time employed/male)**

So quizzes are generally seen as a way of learning new information which adds to a person's general knowledge, but with no real application beyond that. With the t-learning agenda in mind, if quiz shows were produced which were more focused on a particular topic, for example areas of literacy and numeracy, perhaps people might feel the benefit of enjoying these types of programmes and learning from them. Interviewees spoke about the varying levels of quality in quiz shows, which would of course have to be addressed in order to command high levels of interest from audiences.

It was suggested that the quality of learning from quiz shows is affected by how well viewers can remember the answers to the questions:

Well yeah, you learn from them only so much as you learn and your memory can!

(71/ retired/male)

The quick-fire nature of many quiz shows seems to affect how much information people can take in and remember. Indeed, the way in which the multitude of questions are often totally unrelated to each other in content also means that viewers are not able to link together new information and retain it, leading to poor quality learning in the long term:

Limited level of learning, it's just dealing in cold facts, some you know, some you don't know, you might pick up the odd fact you don't know, but the thing is you won't retain them necessarily. Some you may retain because it all depends on your sort of memory, or if you can make associations with the new facts that; limited learning.

(44/ full-time employed/male)

The earlier suggestion of quiz shows with a common theme to all the questions running throughout the programme might go some way to addressing the above and enabling the viewer to 'make associations with the new facts'. In addition to this, if a quiz programme was intended to support learning then the format would need to suit this aim, with perhaps more involved questions and more time to answer them in order to give t-learners the best opportunity to engage in learning through the quiz.

However, perhaps more important is the argument that quiz shows do not exist to help their viewers learn new knowledge and skills, but are there to test people's current levels of skill and knowledge. Several participants described how they thought of quizzes in this way:

Yeah! I s'pose it's learning in a sense isn't it, but you have to be able to do the thing in the first place for the quiz show you're watching, so if it's a word game or a numbers game, you have to have the basic knowledge and I think it's more refining, so it is learning in a sense, but you're not learning from scratch, you're just getting better at spelling or...

(24/ student/male)

In this way, it would appear that quizzes could fulfil a valuable role in the learning process for some viewers at home, but as a way in which learners could test their own abilities.

Soaps

Less people considered watching a soap opera such as Eastenders as learning, although most interviewees thought that some form of learning could take place when viewing it. Many were reluctant to describe watching Eastenders as learning, and were uncertain of the amount of learning which could take place,

but when they did explain their views it was mainly perceived as a way of learning about society and social issues.

...well they all do it nowadays, but soaps, especially now, they have this way of introducing an issue or a topic that people should be thinking about. So, yeah, I think it does, I mean it makes some people

**aware of something that they probably wouldn't be aware about otherwise. They're always coming up with outrageous stories, but...
(45/ part-time self-employed/male)**

It was clear that learning through watching a soap is thought by most to be wildly different to the structured 'real learning' contrasted to quiz shows earlier.

**I wouldn't say it was learning, but I mean, maybe people can pick up, because they have erm, objectional views as well, there've been like rapes and marital stress and stuff like that, so yeah, it's a learning process in a way, although, you know. [pulls funny face]
(50/ full-time employed/female)**

Despite most interviewees being unsure about whether or not Eastenders is learning, they seem to conceive this type of programme as a way of learning about controversial subjects for some people. Because of this, perhaps some of these might be convinced of the merits of t-learning contributing to learning about things such as social issues and citizenship.

It could be argued that attempting to engage Eastenders viewers in learning would be hugely difficult, as many people watch the programme passively and use it as a relaxation tool without expecting anything from it;

You don't watch Eastenders with the intention of getting something out of it. (24/ full-time employed/female)

However, in addition to the soap opera itself, the Eastenders web pages are a popular and well-used part of the BBC website. Alongside fun games and quizzes linked to the characters from the show are some which support basic literacy and IT skills development, such as the opportunity for people to write their own storylines and, by using digital manipulation, make the characters look somewhat strange and amusing! Of course, this requires people to have access to an internet-enabled computer and the time, skills and confidence to make use of it. But it is not unreasonable to presume that activities in a similar vein could be developed for digital televisions, thus making them more accessible to a wider range of people.

As part of a study into t-learning, some future scenarios were developed to showcase the potential of digital interactive technology and assess how likely different forms of usage might be (Bates 2003). One of these included a woman who, in watching her favourite soap opera, found that she related to one of the characters' difficulties in taking measurements and making calculations. By pressing the interactive button, she becomes engaged in learning how the

character overcomes his problems and taking part in exercises on the television and subsequently on her mobile phone. Through doing so, she becomes increasingly excited by the further learning she is doing to the extent that she eventually agrees to a home visit by a numeracy tutor from the local learning centre. The notion is that interactive television can hook passive viewers' interest and reel them into active learning by appealing to their interests and highlighting skills gaps many are known to have.

Documentaries

In contrast to the way in which soaps were thought of in relation to learning are documentaries and nature programmes, which were the foremost type of programming associated with learning. For example, when participants were asked if the things they watched on television were educational, many referred to documentaries or nature programmes in the first instance:

Int: And do you think the things you watch are educational?

Pp: Some of the things are, erm, you know 'What the Romans Did for Us' that type of thing.

(30/ part-time employed and part-time student/male)

In order for viewers to take on board the information contained in documentary style programmes, as with other styles of TV shows, it was important that there was some level of interest in the subject matter:

...a lot of the Discovery channel stuff I've found... interesting and err... from an educational point of view it's probably not a lot of use to me, but err... it's just nice to learn and, err... you can drop the odd things in, in the, the conversation [laughs].

(67/retired/male)

Whilst many felt that watching documentaries was learning, fewer found that their learning was of relevance to their everyday lives. However, where people did recount examples of what they had learnt through documentary style programmes, it was evident that the learning had been practical, concrete and was useful to individuals:

And my stepson's actually learnt that, I can't remember, I think it was Kenyon Reports on some teenagers who were a bit deviant, a bit wayward, and they issued - I can't remember what they're called - something orders, I can't remember what they're called, you know, the special order from the court and he actually learnt from that that he could go to prison at fourteen, with this order. He hasn't been any trouble since! He's been quite, I've had no problems getting him to school, and stuff like that since then. So you can definitely learn from documentaries...I can't quite remember the name of it...aggressive behaviour order, something like that...anti-social behavioural orders.

35/full-time mother)

The way in which people felt their interest must be engaged in order for them to watch a programme meant that participants noted that learning may not be derived from the most educational of documentaries. Two descriptions were associated with documentaries; they were perceived as both 'educational' and 'boring'. In order to prevent a documentary from becoming too boring, it was essential that it was engaging and held the viewer's interest. Casual, passive viewing of documentaries can mean that boredom prevails; participants saw this as quashing any learning from the documentary. The viewer needs to feel engaged in some way:

**Well [learning] depends what it's on about doesn't it? Put it that way!
You know, some [documentaries] are a bit boring.
(40-50/unemployed/female)**

The experiences reported by some participants suggest that having an interest in the programme being watched, and more particularly an active 'switched on' approach to viewing, are central to learning via the television set. Interviewees who had a recent experience of formal learning as an adult often described how this had encouraged them to think in more critical ways and with a fresh perspective. One unemployed female who had recently returned to education described her new critical approach to her viewing and the way in which, for the first time, she perceived television as offering exciting learning opportunities:

**Erm... you see, if you'd have asked me this before I started me course it would have been different. Erm, I watch a lot of documentaries now, erm, I've found that I'm, I'm TV mad as I go through and I look and see what, and you know, highlight things, so I make sure that I don't miss them, sort of thing. I watch a lot of documentaries, erm... erm... I'm really boring aren't I?
(36/unemployed/female)**

In the case of this participant the trigger for learning through television was not the television programmes themselves, but an experience of formal learning that had encouraged the participant to seek out learning experiences from her television viewing in order to supplement her studies. This was experienced by others too. Another adult learner explained how her course had encouraged her to view a range of TV programmes, including Eastenders, in a new, more critical and reflexive way, contrasting this with the way she used to watch television:

**Erm, I wouldn't have [thought watching Eastenders was learning] before I started this course. Now it's part of me. We are told to watch programmes like Eastenders to find out what goes on in a situation. Before it just used to be watching telly.
(38/single parent on income support/female)**

Whilst other participants may have intentionally watched documentaries as educational viewing, their lack of critical perspective reveals a distinction in terms of the learning derived from their viewing. Many participants, for example, described documentaries as a source of learning as they supply 'facts', and most

particularly if presented by trusted personalities like David Attenborough or Robert Winston:

Of course you're learning; there will be new facts you didn't know before.

(40/unemployed/male)

[It's learning] because it's all factual information.

(18/ student/female)

Whilst they may learn from their documentary viewing, the type of learning derived is different from that indicated by participants who watched television in a critical and reflexive way. There is certainly a danger that some people accept all they see and hear from a trusted source – the well-known documentary stalwart, and without the skills and confidence to sift through what they are viewing and make informed decisions about whether the “facts” they are learning from any particular programme are indeed facts and worth learning about at all, there is the potential for people’s learning through the television to be inaccurate and of poor quality. Therefore, there is a high level of responsibility on the shoulders of those producing t-learning materials firstly to ensure that all facts are of course as accurate as possible, but perhaps also to introduce some programmes which do not present information as if it were gospel truth, thus giving the viewer ample opportunity to reflect on what they are watching.

Video

In a bid to discover how active and motivated people are as telly-watchers, we asked participants whether they videotape programmes at all. The number of interviewees who reported using their video recorder was approximately the same as the number of those who did not tape shows from the TV. Whether or not people videoed things links with whether they are active or passive viewers of television, although it reveals more about how selective participants are in their TV viewing rather than their modes of watching.

For those who did not video programmes, it was clear that television was not a high priority in their lives. Some of these simply said that they did not watch much TV and had other hobbies and pastimes which were more important to them, whilst for others, it became clear that watching the television was something which might entertain or inform them when they were at home, but not important enough to think about when they were busy doing other things. T-learning may not be particularly suitable for many of these people for whom the television is not a high priority; or if it is to attempt to reach them, it would have to engage them when they *were* watching television and tap into their interests, or be available either at different slots throughout the day or by demand whenever the viewer wanted.

It was found that those who do use the video recorder use it to tape programmes they are interested in, and the types of programmes listed by participants obviously varied wildly due to their large range of tastes. The types of things people do videotape gives a clear indication of their viewing priorities – what they

feel it is vital to watch, as well as what they really use the television for, whether learning, relaxation, information, entertainment etc.

The compulsion for certain types of programmes, particularly soaps and dramas, meant that some people felt the need to watch every episode, and therefore taped them if they were going to be out when it was broadcast:.

Int: Are there any programmes that you would rather tape than miss?

**Pp: Erm, I used to record ER, but I do love Emmerdale and Coronation St, so if I'm not in I have to tape them and watch them.
(18/student/female)**

**I mean to start with like the documentary style programme yeah, if it's something that I did really want to see then I will tape it, if it's part of a series and I don't want to miss it, a crucial episode whatever, erm, yeah I say I mean yeah that kinda thing I suppose
(45/part-time self-employed/male)**

An effective way of engaging those who have been outside of formal learning for a long time could be to use this addiction to programmes and element of compulsion to keep them watching for learning purposes. Thus, as with the popularity of soap operas, once people were "hooked" onto a show, they would feel compelled to continue watching and continue learning!

Interestingly, others describe soaps as entertainment for when they are at home, but do not consider them as important enough to videotape, choosing instead to tape programmes linked to their hobbies or interests, thinking of these as more important to watch and potentially keep.

Another group of interviewees described how they taped programmes when they clashed with other shows they were interested in seeing so they could watch them later on that evening or at a later date. In other words, when TV schedules did not suit individuals, they used their video recorder to create their own individualised schedule. These people might be well-equipped to make use of t-learning if they wished to do so, as they already watch television in a selective manner and are used to making time to watch things they consider a priority.

Essentially, the ways in which people use their video recorders is an indication of how important they consider the television to be, and what their televisual priorities are. People will only video the programmes that are of interest to them, and so it is reasonable to assume that similarly, they will only engage in t-learning if the programmes are appealing and if the learning is seen to be of some use to them.

The ways in which people watched television, and how useful their TV viewing was to them, were central to whether participants derived learning from their television viewing. Many who saw their current viewing as offering experiences of learning made a distinction between this and 'real learning' or more formal learning scenarios. There may be potential to engage people sharing these

attitudes in t-learning, but communications will need to address these perceptions. There is also the possibility of engaging unsuspecting passive TV viewers, as shown through the future scenario recounted earlier.

However, those most likely to learn from t-learning provision might be those participants who have a critical, reflexive approach to their viewing. These participants were often already engaged in some kind of formal learning which negates t-learning's promised role of acting as a hook for non-learners and thereby widening participation.

Digital TV: Access a barrier?

Digital television, particularly its interactive features, has been noted as having specific potential in relation to learning (Atwere and Bates, 2003). 'T-learning' is the term used to describe modes of learning through the television; interactivity in particular has been seen as having the greatest potential in developing new approaches to learning delivered via the television. This section examines in closer detail Hull residents' views about digital interactive services in order to gauge whether they could provide a hook into learning.

102 participants were asked if they had digital television in their own homes. 35% had digital TV, 65% did not, with several more saying that they could sometimes access it in other people's homes. Ofcom's Digital Television Update for December 2003 estimates that 50.2% of UK households have access to digital television output (an increase of 2.2% on the previous quarter). Regional data from mid 2003 suggests that 42% of households in the Yorkshire region have digital (Ofcom, 2004a). Our data suggests that digital TV ownership in Hull is behind the national and regional picture, but it is likely to be increasing.

The views of the interviewees suggest that significant barriers stand in the way of the success of t-learning delivered via digital interactive services. Many, especially older people, were simply confused about what digital TV was, how it differed from existing television and how you could receive it. For example, some interviewees were confused about whether you needed a special television set to receive digital, or were unsure as to whether Sky TV was the same as digital:

Is that Sky?

(38/single parent on income support/female)

We've not actually got digital, but we've got the digibox, with the Freeview channels. Is that the same thing?

(71/retired/female)

What's digital television?

(64/retired/female)

The concept of the 'biography of television' can help explain this. The history of the television set has meant that when new technological advances such as colour

have emerged, the benefit of them over traditional television has been clear. The function and benefits of digital were less obvious to Hull residents.

Those who did not have digital TV explained this in two ways, both of which reflected their perceptions of the biography of television. The first group made reference to either a reluctance to change over to digital, that reflected either a lack of confidence in their ability to use it, or a general sense that they won't change until it becomes imperative:

...I mean I will get it I suppose soon, whenever, but it's just something I never got round to.

(45/part-time self-employed/male)

...it's a case of having to change, rather than willing to change.

(18/student/male)

A second group were outwardly opposed to digital television. Digital television was associated with increasing the number of TV channels, but reducing the quality of programming. Unlike previous developments in the biography of television, digital was perceived as an innovation that offered little that was positive:

... I realised what's on TV now is more than half padding and there's very little substance, could be more, could be less than 5% really. I mean, for the news, except for the news, erm. I thought, 'why should I get 30 channels of padding when I've already got four with a whole lot of smultz'. So, no, I'm really disinterested.

(45-49/retired/male)

Where participants had digital television, or were enthusiastic about acquiring it in the future, this was often motivated by the interests they had in life. In a similar way to which people's interests can motivate TV viewing habits, it can motivate some to acquire digital television. This was the case for those who were fans of a specific TV genre such as SciFi or football, where programmes are exclusively or first shown on digital channels. Identifying with such genres provides motivation to buy and use digital TV.

At the time the Attitude Survey interviews were undertaken, access stands as a barrier to learning via television. This barrier has two dimensions. Firstly, only 35% of our sample of Hull residents had digital television; this falls behind both national and regional levels of ownership. While the national picture suggests the number of people who have access to digital is constantly on the increase, at the current point in time access remains a barrier to t-learning.

The second barrier applies to both those with and without access to digital television. The biography of TV means that the advantages and new ways of using television offered by digital services are not obvious or considered to be of use by the majority of Hull residents. This second barrier is examined more in the following section.

Interactivity

The 35% of interview participants who had digital television were asked about their use of interactive services, such as those accessed by pressing the red button. Just over half of these (53%) said that they had used interactive services, while 47% had not. The interactive services participants reported using were games, those associated with reality TV programmes like Big Brother or Pop Idol (often to vote) and red button options on the CBeebies channel. Programmes like Big Brother were the ones most associated with interactive services. Interactive services were seen as something to 'play on' rather than use for a practical purpose:

Sometimes I like playing games on it when you press that red button. I play on that sometimes. But I don't play on it, like that Big Brother.
(27/unemployed/male)

Because using interactive functions is thought of as playing on the television, for some it was seen as existing more for children than for adults:

Int: When you press the red button and do different things on there.

Pp: Oh, the kids do, on what show was it on....Pop Idol, the kids went on there, but I don't do it. I know how to do it, but I don't do it.
(35/housewife and carer/female)

I don't use the games but the grandkids have it on – the one with the coloured balls and when you get three in a row they drop. It's not complicated if you know which button to press.
(61/incapacity benefit/male)

Both positive and negative comments were made about interactive services. Many liked being able to access extra information about certain programmes; history programmes were often mentioned in this context. However, positive comments were often limited by references to aspects of interactivity that were disliked:

Well, when we're watching Sky for example, if we're watching a history programme and the red button lights up and you want to know more, the specific thing they are talking about, at the side of the television they will put more information about that particular thing they are talking about. I don't do it all the time. Yeah, it's good, it's just sometimes it's a bit disconcerting because you've got something going on here and the main programme they have here, and you are watching them both.
(50/incapacity benefit/female)

The biography of the TV means that using interactive services is a very different way of using television to the way it has been used previously. Whilst many participants were actively willing to try interactive services to supplement their viewing, it remains a new way of watching television that takes some adjustment.

Whilst the comments of some participants suggest that they will confidently use interactive services in time, the more negative views expressed by others suggest that significant barriers stand in the way of t-learning acting as a hook for learning for all. These negative comments reflected on the delivery or content of interactive services. Many rejected using interactive because of the length of time it took to load up on the TV screen or for its cumbersome functions, broken links etc:

**...I can't be bothered with it, you know what I mean, I think it's because it takes five minutes after you press a button, I think.
(51/full-time employed/male)**

Naturally, as the technology develops, problems like the above should lessen so interactive services will be able to match people's expectations. In time, therefore, functional difficulties should become less of an issue and barrier to people making use of interactive services.

Others discussed the cost of using interactive services. Many services were deemed too expensive to use and the cost stopped them using either some or all of the features. The function of interactive was seen by some as purely commercial; in this context promoting it as a tool for learning needs to overcome these perceptions:

**Most of it's flogging stuff!
(67/retired/male)**

**I use the news channels, erm, I do use that, but a lot of the more advanced interactive you do actually have to pay for, like banking and stuff, you actually get charged.
(34/full-time employed/male)**

A final barrier for t-learning is those who are simply not interested in using interactive services. As already noted, the biography of the television has a significant influence on how it is used. Whilst some participants' use and attitude towards the TV show signs of change, some participants lacked any interest in interactive services and continued to see the TV as a one-way medium, and were happy to use television just in this way:

**I'm not interested.
(35/housewife/female)**

**...the options are there, you know, to go interactive, but erm, we don't really use it for anything spectacular because we're happy. We're just hooked on to the TV.
(24/student/male)**

Significant barriers stand in the way of the widespread use of t-learning as a hook for learning for all. The views of Hull residents suggest that at the heart of the barriers lies the biography of the television. The 'traditional' role of the television has been as a one-way medium, at the centre of the household, where new technological developments (colour, video, multi-channels etc.) have had visible benefits. This history of the television means that digital interactive services pose new and challenging ways of using television that differ greatly to the way we have become accustomed to watching the telly; this is reflected in the number of participants who had digital television but had not used interactive services (47%).

Some participants were more open to using interactive services than others. Often this reflected a more active approach and intentional viewing of television programming. Others need more convincing that interactive services offer anything of value. The biography of the television is not static, however. Views about using interactive digital services are likely to change over time, as a two-way approach becomes more embedded in the culture of the television. Television schedules are increasingly becoming dominated by programming that goads viewers to respond actively, not just passively, to its content. A wide range of programmes from Big Brother and Test the Nation, to Restoration or the Big Read, have interactivity as their cornerstone.

Therefore, in time it is possible that attitudes towards interactive services will change, as we become more accustomed to its two-way features. Those who already watch TV in an active and engaged way are most likely to be open to the idea of learning through television, most especially if they are already engaged in learning. There are a significant number of people, our interviews suggest, who will need convincing further that interactive services are worth using; the benefits have not been made clear and need communicating in a more effective way.

Conclusion

The overall focus of this report is the notion that technology is viewed as a means to widen participation in learning by acting as a hook into learning, or as a means to remove barriers faced in relation to traditional courses. Here we have considered the potential of this specifically in relation to television and developments using digital interactive services, known as t-learning. Analysis of data from the Learners' Forum Attitude Survey indicates that **significant barriers stand in the way of t-learning**. Barriers to learning are not just about access, and they are more intangible and less concrete than policy approaches often suggest. We hope to have untangled some of this intangibility by indicating the role of the biography of television, the context in which television is viewed and Hull residents' views about how they currently watch television.

New ways of using the television, which digital interactive services and t-learning represent, are understood in relation to the biography of the television. Understanding that television has a history within our culture that shapes how we perceive and use it is central to understanding whether t-learning is likely to widen participation. **The biography of the television sets a context for the way in which it is watched within the household**. T-learning may overcome some barriers to learning, but it is often assumed that no barriers exist within the home and, for instance, our analysis shows that not everyone has control of what they watch on TV (and therefore the time or opportunity to engage in t-learning). In addition to this, some people did not consider the television a priority in their lives, and so t-learning would probably be an inappropriate way of engaging these people in learning.

Our analysis also considered how Hull residents watch TV in order to consider whether learning via the television is likely to be an effective option. People view television in both active and passive ways. **What was key in relation to learning was the intention of the viewer**; if their intention was to learn from TV then learning was more likely; if their intention was to view TV in order to relax or 'switch off', learning seems unlikely.

However, **intention alone might not lead to successful learning**. Many of those who watch documentaries and understood this to be an educational experience felt that they learned 'facts'. Those who watched documentaries or other programmes with a critical, reflexive approach reported a higher level of learning. These participants were already engaged in formal learning (the source of their critical perspective); whilst t-learning might appeal to many non-learners, currently those with existing educational experience seem most likely to benefit from it. This negates t-learning's proposed role of engaging non-learners into some initial learning.

The way in which those who did not approach their viewing with a critical perspective, even if they had the intention to learn, described what they learned as 'facts' provides an indication of the type of learning that t-learning might achieve. T-learning may be able to effectively provide learners with knowledge (provided it can overcome the barrier of access to digital and get people to use interactive

services– our data indicated there is still some way to go here), but not with the ability to think critically, reflexively or imaginatively about it. Therefore, **t-learning might be described as a supplier of ‘McKnowledge’; it will supply knowledge in a fast, efficient and predictable way, but like fast food it may not be as nourishing as other ways of learning.**

This does not mean that it is without value. As has been discussed, there is the potential of learning using quiz formats to test people, or ‘hooking’ some into further learning through programmes they enjoy. It may be that **t-learning is best used as part of a blended package of learning**, incorporating other types of learning. This would allow people to utilise the advantages of it, such as accessibility, familiarity with the original technology and flexibility, but to also enjoy the advantages of other modes of learning. However, before this can happen, issues of access and familiarity regarding digital interactive services need to be overcome, and it may take a few years for the technology to become embedded in homes and routines.

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