

New technology revolution brings ‘learning windfall’ to 500,000 third-agers

By Ian Nash

A national learning technology revolution is underway to give almost 500,000 adults greater access to online education in their homes and community-based groups throughout the United Kingdom. Reforms being shaped by the University of the Third Age and overarching Third Age Trust draw on the evidence from pilot work with a small group of U3As, which is now extended to around 100. In part it is a “catching-up” exercise since organisations for informal adult learning are seen as being slower than further education colleges to develop such opportunities.

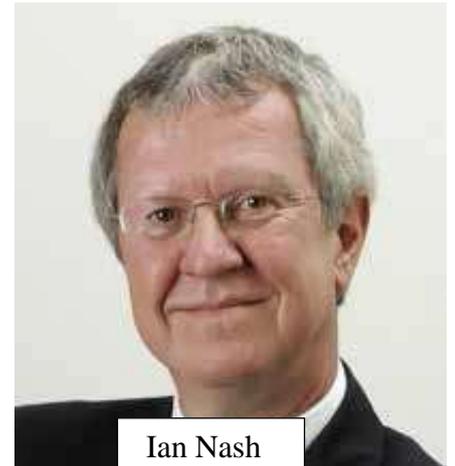
The U3A reforms go much further, however, creating a national network for all 950 member University of the Third Age associations to promote more adult learning opportunities, share the best ideas and resources more widely and manage issues such as membership bureaucracy and expansion of a national resource library more effectively.

But there is an even more crucial imperative, says Anthony Hughes, an architect of the reforms and U3A Trustee. He is concerned, first, that an increasingly aging population will create greater isolation and loneliness; second, younger people entering the third age with technology skills will expect U3As to be up-to-date if they are to join. “They do not want formal learning that leads to exams and they want to have far greater control over what they learn,” he says. New technology learning tools fit the U3A ethos – the learner is also the teacher and the members of each independent U3A decide what learning groups to create “from macramé and bridge to mediaeval history and nuclear physics”.

Far from being behind the times, says Hughes, U3As were often ahead of the game when it came to the use of developments such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), but ideas were not as widely shared as they could be. Also, the fear that such provision, targeted at the personal computer user, would encourage greater isolation in the home was unfounded. “We find people who use technology are more likely to get out and actively seek face-to-face study groups; learning is a force for socialisation not isolation.”

The power of new technology to give people control over what they learn and how they learn it is a strong factor. Too many teachers think you must learn “formally” how to use technology before applying it to informal learning, he says. Hughes’ approach is to tap into a desire to learn, picking up IT skills in the process. For example, he is convenor of a group at Swansea U3A that used iPads for detailed research into Oystermouth castle and created YouTube films of the castle’s history, the life of Dylan Thomas and archive film history of the Mumbles Train. “I contend that we have been teaching skills of technology for learning the wrong way. The right way is what I call Windfall Learning. Like so much that is too formally taught, a defined syllabus can put you off.”

Where initially many members start by admitting they have a fear of technology, all the Swansea group ended up with a range of skills – handling sophisticated systems including the internet, digital picture cropping, PowerPoint, cloud computing, sharing eBook design, handling timeline software and managing online genealogy research methods. “The whole point of this is that we didn’t set out to learn



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technology although we knew that we would be using it throughout - it was a 'Digital Media for Fun' class after all."

The ubiquity of the Internet and digital technology is such that, in formal education, it has official status as a 'skill for life' alongside literacy, language and numeracy. FE colleges have invested huge sums of money in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) or depositories for learning materials developed by the teachers. While such developments steal headlines in the educational media, little is said about developments in the informal learning sector.

Some U3A developments are linked to local schools and colleges and many U3As team up with them to create tutor groups which impart computer and information technology skills. However, the U3As have a pedigree when it comes to technology for learning, says Len Street, former national chairman of the Third Age Trust, who set up the U3A's Standing Committee on Education in 1996. "Members have been delivering online courses written by third agers for third agers since the late 1990s on art, creative writing, garden design, and much more," he says. There has been the "Computer Awareness Roadshow" visiting U3As to demonstrate practical uses of a computer, such as word processing, information search, emails and spread sheets. More recently, in-depth studies being developed include "Mathematics- making use of the virtual classroom" and a course in "Early Christianity", he said.

Hughes has further ambitions for the U3As. "I want to come up with a virtual TV channel equivalent of YouTube focused on learning. Call it a 'virtual TV channel', or people will think it is a real channel," he says. Real or virtual, however, it signals a major advance in national communications and sharing for the U3As.

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The potential for U3As to both reach out to isolated adults and go far beyond to reach new audiences is epitomised by the work of Malcolm Mclvor (Grange & District U3A), who, for family reasons, depended for a time on distance learning. "My wife and I spent half of each year with our family in Canada and couldn't usefully take part in [U3A local section science group] activities; so I took up U3A online courses of one sort or another and eventually ended up leading the 'Design in Your Life' course for 8 years. The course I led was written by a member of Reading U3A but operated out of the Griffith University arrangement with U3A Australia," he says.

"This worked really well and meant that participants could come from all over the world." However, he adds, with such growth comes the need for good management, constant vigilance and updating if globally-available courses are to retain local value. This is true even in the "sciences" which many would see as the most objective of studies. "There are three science courses on offer currently: one on Climate Change and two relating to Astronomy. An online science course...that more reflects the variety that is experienced in the local section science groups would be more popular because it would be much more variable and encourage greater participation."

For Hughes, the need to encourage greater participation is what the technology is all about. At the extremes, giving physical access to the most immobile and infirm will continue to pose problems, "but they are problems about which technology can help", he insists. "We have to use Skype and other devices more imaginatively to combat isolation. Whatever challenges U3As face, technology is there to help."

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