WE-TEACH:
Participatory education for a sharing society

Using YouTube to cross the classroom borders

> *" ... [that is] .. the economic logic of the computer games. How could we just get 1% of the secondary school population to become co-developers of education? That is the scale of the opportunity and the scale of the waste if we don't transform education into a co-created, participative, community-based experience."* (Leadbeater, Next Practice Podcasts)

> *" .. .. School creates the impression that learning is something we do only in special places, at special times in our lives, with the help of special people: accredited teachers. Education is seen as unworldly; to learn is to be cut off from the day-to-day world. By extension, that world cannot be about learning. Education is not seen as a personal project of self-development, but rather a process of certification to show that you have learned what the system expects."* (Leadbeater, The DIY State, 2007)

We Teach[1] aims to extend the classroom beyond the borders of the school, the community, the country, the continents. Let the pupils create their own learning resources. What follows below is a ruminative proposal, a seed kernel for an ongoing collective project. Some exploratory steps have already been taken, including a series of workshops based around YouTube and using Drama in Education techniques. These were presented at teachers' conferences in Portugal, Istanbul and at the TENET International Conference in Athens[2].

WE-TEACH (preamble):

This is a programme for the future. It is an invitation to play. WE-TEACH has grown out of the mPPACT[3] programme which aims to foster a new teaching practice in Europe that engages with contemporary social realities and their reflection in the classroom. It uses the participatory arts to explore identity and transformation, being and becoming, the self and the other**.**

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[1] Acknowledgement:
the title is a deliberate and respectful reference to Charles Leadbeater whose book We-Think has been influential in the shaping of these ideas and has been, as a creative common, an invaluable source of internet history for this article. (Leadbeater, We-Think, 2008)

[2] 6th Athens International Conference on Theatre/Drama in Education" (Athens, Greece: March 2008). This is the annual conference of TENet – the Theatre and Education Network of Hellenic Teachers.

[3] Methodology for a Pupil and performing Arts Centred Teaching (mPPACT). This is a Comenius 2.1 action of the European Union's Life-Long Learning (formerly Socrates) programme, administered by the Education Audiovisual Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and co-ordinated by the author. www.mPPACT.eu

In keeping with mPPACT it seeks to put the pupil at the centre of the learning process, in a co-creative relationship with his/her peers *and* with the teacher. Like mPPACT, We-Teach it can be applied to any topic, but is most effective at the human interface – that is issues of social and personal interaction. This would cover anything from the arithmetical to the ethical.

1 Unknown school in UK, c 1950

On the whole, classroom content continues to follow the standard school text books, to provide information about distant social, political, historical, geographical and even scientific realities. These evolving contexts are the elements of our school curricula. They are fixed into printed texts that cannot keep up with our changing world, nor encompass differing points of view, whether cultural or political. Thus though the basic 'facts' may remain true, contemporary perceptions and interpretations are not reflected in the given texts, especially in some parts of the world whose text books have been handed down from schools in other more 'developed' countries. Owing to class sizes, curriculum restrictions and teacher skills, the information to be taught is largely transferred in a top down model with little empirical knowledge available, offered or invited except in the praxis of the more dedicated and imaginative teachers. Pupils on both sides of the digital divide have little opportunity actually *to* ***contribute*** to the growing body of knowledge, let alone have their contribution recognised outside that classroom.

The interactive internet, the so-called web 2.0, has changed this. Students can make their own [re]search, finding counterpoint opinions and fuelling their own classroom debates. Beyond the schools, people are increasingly able to make their own contribution to a raft of discourses, through their blogs, or blog responses, their contributions to people's newspapers like Indymedia, their Flickr pictures, their Amazon book reviews, their Wikipedia interventions. So too, our We-Teach pupils will make their own contributions to a given subject and create their own discourses, arriving at their own conclusions and using their own media such as, for example, YouTube or other video sharing networks, social networks, and Wikipedia.

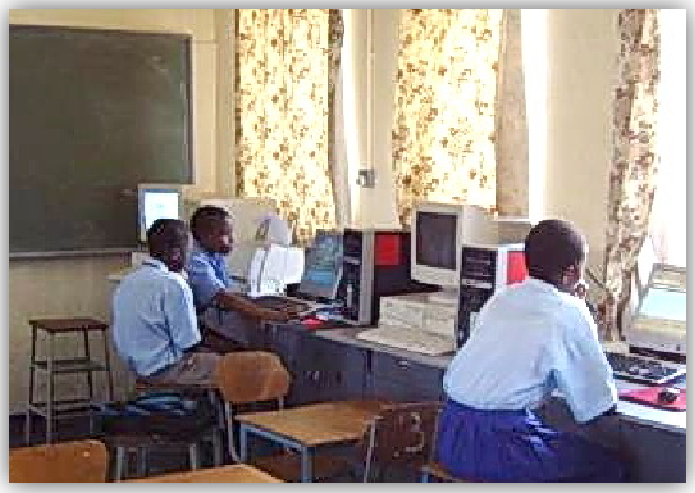
Wikipedia is built on contributions from a self-organising group of volunteers: its knowledge is our collective wisdom, its power is in "harnessing collective intelligence"[4]. To make them work, these online collaborations] need a kernel or central idea and structure. They need a **germinator** to plant the seeds of [ex]change and they need a **communicating group** to grow and harvest the fruit that emerges. Given a suitable online platform, pupils may generate a 'common-interest' community that can exchange ideas, develop their own discourses, and enlarge the body of knowledge on any given topic.

[4] According to Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, "harnessing collective intelligence" (his term) is a core principle at the heart of the so-called web 2.0. Cited here from a ZD net blog on web 2.0 (Hinchcliffe, 2006)

So what is the project?

> Take for example, the two pupils in Exeter, UK, who responded to a geography assignment by making a short video about everyday life in Calcutta. The task was to research, explore and present the severe water and sanitation problems. They chose to use video and present their findings as a quasi-TV reportage. They set their shots in some of the more run down parts of their school, that they felt most closely resembled the Calcutta urban location. Their film expressed some interesting perceptions (and misconceptions), based on their classroom and internet researches.

Clearly there will have been gaps in their understanding of the human complexities and subtleties of Indian urban life across such a vast cultural divide. Given the opportunity, what would a Calcutta school pupil have made of the film? What would a Calcutta school pupil have to offer, or to say to these film makers, to add to the film and build the cross-cultural understanding of both classroom cohorts?



2: A contemporary school in Zimbabwe: part of a development programme involving ICT

If the film was available to them – on YouTube or another platform – they could comment on it, they could make their own film in response. This is a potential dialectic whose synthesis may lie in a commonly owned, collectively created forest of perspectives and information around a given issue. It may or may not result in a definitive account – probably there is no such thing. Synthesis may reside in the separate classrooms discussions, or it may come on the screens shared by all. Either way, the means of response, communication, collaboration and expression would be in the hands of the pupils. The medium could easily be YouTube. **That is the essence of the We-Think project, and the Calcutta film is its inspirational starting point.**

It's the pupils' world – let them teach the teachers

Innovation happens only when users are comfortable with a technology, when it is freely used, when it has become second nature (Shirky, 2008). By and large, today's 'screenagers' (as Douglas Rushkoff had dubbed them[5]) - are already familiar and comfortable with the internet's social networking tools: tools that some of their teachers are still grappling with. Teachers may be apprehensive of the new technology; they may feel that it cuts them off from the world of their pupils, or the reverse.

[5] An apt term, coined by Douglas Rushkoff in Rushkoff, D (2006). *Screenagers: Lessons in Chaos from Digital Kids*. London: Hampton Press.

They may feel 'out of control'. Nonetheless in the co-intentional, co-creative classroom, the playing field is level –teachers can engage with these potential teaching tools. And their pupils can teach them how to do it. So long as the teachers are not threatened by this.

Of course this intervention itself may prove to be an intrusion, a hijack by over-zealous or powerful teachers. But within our co-creative classroom, where outcomes are offered to the world on YouTube for verification, triangulation and response (antithesis, synthesis) pupils will get due recognition from their immediate peers and from their counterparts in the entire education community tuned in to the interactive web.

It's all about the Sharing:

The internet was not invented by the commercial forces of globalization. It was invented by scientists whose quest was to share information. It was not built on personal gain. It was designed and built to foster exchange and sharing of documents and information between peers. They sent each other their documents and emailed each other in response. When the now ubiquitous reply-to-all option emerged, we had the very beginnings of today's virtual, social, multi-lateral, communication **groups** (Shirky, 2008). Final approval and publication was and is regulated through the same peer to peer review process that remains the egalitarian mainstay of contemporary scientific and academic discourse.

Peer review is there in the commercial side of the internet too. When Ebay began, it almost collapsed from too many questions about the products and too many fraudsters trying to cheat. When they got sellers to answer the questions addressed to them, and buyers to rate the service they got, they grew into the vast user-based organisation we all know about today. Amazon is a similar edifice, with their peer reviews of books and recommendations that are based on readers' comments.

More significantly for us, and keeping well out of the commercial sphere is Wikipedia. All of it depends on the voluntary and free contributions of thousands of contributors whose entries are discussed and changed by their peers until consensus is reached – and beyond. There have been famous and much publicised errors and frauds, but these are typically found and repaired **within minutes,** by the **'group'.** Wikipedia is an organic structure initiated by a pair of individuals, but effectively built by a self-organising crowd. And like the YouTube dialectic – the discussions continue so that any wisdom on any subject is always live and in theory at least, always part of an evolving discourse.

YouTube?

Although it is generally accepted that we learn from playing, many teachers and certainly curriculum planners are blinded by some of the [regrettable] content of most contemporary computer games, YouTube and other recreational internet environments. They miss their usefulness, their significance. They forget the prophetic vision of Marshall McLuhan in predicting this global village,

this electronic age and his loudly proclaimed aphorism that " the *medium* is the message" - not the content. (McLuhan, 1964)

Charles Leadbeater has argued that the publication of film clips on public virtual spaces such as YouTube is empowering not only through the 'freedom' to do so, but through the recognition, positive or negative, that is manifest in the comments and responses. Mostly comments are highly emotional and often flippant, but it has elements of peer review and there is a significant degree of dialectical exchange as well, especially when they are video responses..[6]

YouTube is almost encyclopaedic in itself, covering the full gamut of human endeavour. Nonetheless YouTube is banned in a number of schools, at least in the UK. So it may not even *BE* an option for us. There are alternative video sharing sites with similar attributes, but offering a more controlled access. This project will not fall on the rejection of YouTube as a medium.

However it should be noted that YouTube is the front-runner because it has the most successful format, including the principle of open access and freedom of expression, within certain legal boundaries.

3: the Cyberbullying video
(highlighted: video responses, textual responses, explanatory / contextualising notes)

- To the right of the video panel, YouTube has space for a **textual explanation** or background information, which can be of a useful length including links to further reading on other websites.
- Each video clip in YouTube invites **textual response** and it invites **video response**.
    a. The **textual responses** can offer a brief evaluation of the films, some are more discursive, though it must be said that they are often rather banal in practice.
    b. Given the extra thought and effort required to create a **video response**, these are more often constructive and foster an ongoing visual dialogue, enriching the discourse with

[6] Leadbeater, C (2008). *We-Think*. London: Profile Books.

counter-offers (antithesis) and films by third parties who have been linked through search or recommendation (see below) from other sites.

- This in turn builds up a **suite of items** on related topics accessible through links from any starting point, and any appropriate Google search string
- It has **recommendations** of related video material. This is determined by cross referencing ('tags') as well as by users' recommendations, rather like Amazon. If the project is using a format open to the rest of the internet, this broadens the 'tapestry' of videos to incorporate contributions from sources outside the known or partnered class groups. It is open to the world.

The advantage of this open access is the potential for exponential growth as new participants visit the site and respond. This kind of 'viral' growth is by now familiar through celebrated examples like facebook, Wikipedia MySpace and Linked-In..

The disadvantage in a schools context is obvious. There are data protection issues in the screening on the open internet of video material involving young people. There is the potential for malicious postings of unwelcome material.

Furthermore, because they do not censor significantly there is room for all manner of (mostly creative) experimentation "mashing up" excerpts and other elements from other (sometimes copyrighted) material in the creation of new work, 'the mashup'. In some circles this is frowned upon, though it has been argued cogently elsewhere, that that is the nature of most creative work through the ages and the current trend to 'rip, mix and burn' should be allowed and celebrated. (Lessig, 2004)[7] . both the films used in the We-Teach conference workshops outlined below were mashups of styles and form derived by the children-authors from other sources, though the content and intention was entirely original.

The alternative platforms for We-Teach may have other advantages to offer. Rather than going to another video-specifc platform like vimeo or videojug, it would be worth looking at broader based sites like *Radiowaves* (designed with schools in mind) and *Ning*, which allow video as well as other media – photographs, music and audio as well as room for discussion, blog and chat. These are more complex , needing a more careful setup, but where YouTube has the serendipitous possibility of 'just happening' – or failing (it is indeed a gamble!) - using radiowaves or ning would de facto provide a web infrastructure within which the films would stand side by side with comments, analysis, counter-offer and discussion. As proposed, the We-Teach project would need a website to go with it and hold background exchanges and evaluative discussions. A closed circuit social network like ning, with its sub-groups, could contain all the levels of the project in one space.

[7] Lawrence Lessig is the initiator of the Creative Commons alternative copyright system. The book may be *bought* through the normal outlets, or downloaded *free* as a pdf from http://www.free-culture.cc/freecontent/ under a creative commons license.

The Dilemma:

As a consequence of the above, We-Teach must at least consider a platform which restricts membership and creates a closed circuit – or at least a circuit whose expansion depends on invitation (as do Facebook and Ning) which must be approved or rejected by an 'administrator'.

This poses a fundamental dilemma. Preserving a closed circuit system may defeat part of the purpose – that is the potential for expansion into the new and unknown world, across cultures and beyond the boundaries of a safe pair of designated or authorised class cohorts.

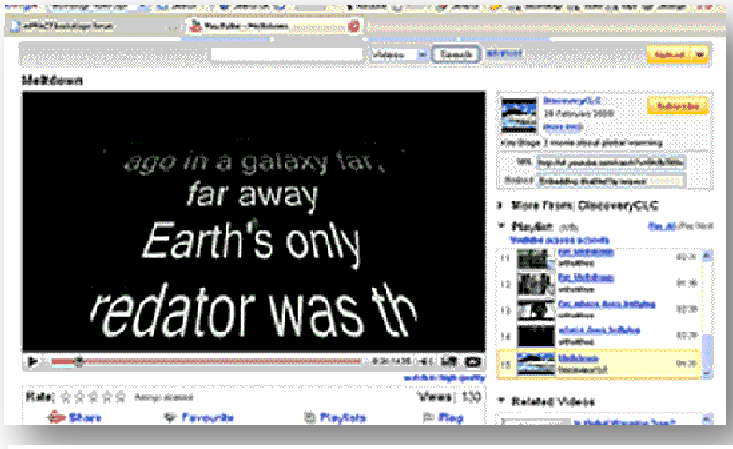
The classroom community no longer has to be restricted to the four walls that constrain it. If class sizes are going to be too big – let them become enormous. We can profit from that. Potentially every classroom can be linked to a virtual community that stretches beyond the school precinct, the neighbourhood limits, the national boundaries. We are educating the children of the world, but we need to foster ways for the children of the world in its different localities, to share their own knowledge and perceptions – and to educate each other, peer to peer.

On the other hand, a closed group would de facto revert to classroom structures and the existing (often top down) status quo. It is unlikely to be self-organising, which could reduce the broader and more subtle learning processes proposed here, to do with self and other, teamwork, participation in a world community. For pupils to achieve ownership of the collaborative practices targeted here, there needs to be the maximum potential freedom and a co-creative balance between guidance and license. Let the teacher, as 'germinator' merely plant the seeds and prune the weeds.

If the pupils are to achieve ownership of the process, the means of production, they need the freedom to explore the internet that is already their own domain. Without that freedom, We-Teach risks becoming just another classroom activity, albeit an entertaining one, and may never go beyond the lesson itself. Either way, the teachers' role should be the minimum necessary to shape and promote motivation and involvement in the project activities. Let the teacher, as 'Germinator' , merely plant the seeds and prune the weeds.

The YouTube workshops

Up till now We-Teach has been floated and explored in three very brief conference workshops with teachers (Portugal, Greece and Turkey), coupled with some more substantial fieldwork by students of the MA TMfD at the University of Winchester, during their practical fieldwork in Singapore and Plymouth UK.
(This fieldwork is still under way at the time of writing.)



4 the original mashup by pupils at the Discovery City Learning Centre

1. "Get-In! to International Education"[8] (Leiria, Portugal, September 2007)

Inspired by the Calcutta film mentioned above, pupils in a one-off session at the Discovery City Learning Centre (the Wirral, Liverpool) were commissioned by their teacher to make a short video animation film around the topic of global warming and our 'carbon footprint'. They in turn mashed up some ideas from the blue Man group[9] and from the Starwars title sequence. The Get-In! workshop was for teachers and delegates at the conference. It used Drama In Education (DIE) techniques to explore the issues raised in the CLC's film and to prepare a very brief video response to it. The video was then uploaded to Youtube.

5 the drama-based response from the Leiria workshop

2. 6th Athens International Conference on Theatre/Drama in Education" (Athens, Greece: March 2008)[10]

A classmate of the Calcutta film-makers' in Exeter, UK, produced a very personal and moving account of cyber-bullying, clearly from her own experience, highlighting the plight of its victims and incorporating some well researched statistical information. The teachers in the Greek conference were not by and large aware of the phenomenon of cyber-bullying and a large part of the workshop was spent in exploring the idea through DIE techniques. The dramatic outcome of this was filmed and uploaded to YouTube.

The workshop was successful in that it took a stimulus from YouTube and used it to explore some serious issues while preparing a response. The group looked forward to seeing a counter-response. Sadly the original film was spotted by a group of internet hooligans who decided to target it and its author with a scale of cyber-bullying that illustrated the very content of her film. This caused significant distress and the film was removed from YouTube. It is a salutary reminder that there ARE dangers in the open world. One view may be that we cannot protect against these eventualities, and that we should better learn how to overcome them. Sadly of course, this may be better for the general good, but devastating for any individual student who suffered the specific slings and arrows.

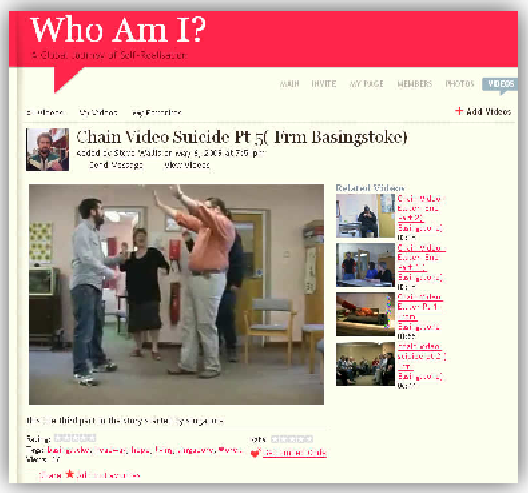
3. "Get-In Further": Dialogue and Co-operation in Education[11] (conference, Istanbul: November 2008)
YouTube is banned in Turkey, though the rumoured reasons are not to do with education. This was a seminar presentation, for teachers. The aim was to open the potential to use

[8] Conference of the Comenius Get-In! Network (Gender Ethnicity – Integration through International School Projects) under the EU Long-Life Learning/Socrates programme.

[9] http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8453442377878175440
[10] This is the annual conference of TENet – the Theatre and Education Network of Hellenic Teachers., Athens
[11] This is the Dissemination Conference of the Comenius Get-In! Network. November 2008. Istanbul

social video sharing networks coupled with the participatory classroom arts, and to strategise for how that could be done.

4. "Who am I? A global journey of self-realisation" (UK and Singapore)
In a related project, two students of the MA Theatre and media for Development (MA TMfD) at the University of Winchester have begun (at the time of writing) work with three groups across the globe – two school-goers and one group of disabled people. They will use Ning (internet social network application) to exchange videos, ideas, stories, and reflections of themselves. Ning also has provision for a range of discussion formats, photos, blogs, chats and each member has a separate page of their own. The intention here is to build a collaborative video narrative involving all three cohorts. Their aim is not directly related to school curricula, but rather explores individual and shared identities, building relationships and encouraging creative participation across cultures.[12]



6 the ning layout, showing the related video responses

Any takers?

We-Teach may involve one or more pairs of partner schools, as is the case with the Singapore-UK project. Assuming that the process is successful the project initiators – the germinators – should relinquish control as much as is possible. In addition, the golden rule of internet applications should be born in mind: that all new applications, from the internet itself and text messaging through to ebay and facebook, have undergone a significant metamorphosis at the hands of their users, before settling into their current co-created formats. (With the possible exception of Wikipedia.)

So let's posit some aims and objectives, make it look like a project:

The overall VISION, would be

1. to develop an open model for peer based pupil-centred educational praxis for the 21st century, implementing screenagers' own favoured technologies.
2. to advance the use of interactive web 2.0 technology in education and contribute the contemporary metamorphosis from a consumer to a sharing culture (from an economy to

[12] At the time of writing the project has just begun. One of the UK groups is the ARROW project (Art: A Resource For Reconciliation Over The World), which uses the language of the arts to break down cross-cultural barriers. It is located at the College of St Mark and St John, in Plymouth.

an ecology.[13]

And in pursuit of that vision, we would be AIMING:

3. to encourage communication and education across cultural and national boundaries both locally and crossing the 'digital divide'.[14]
4. to encourage pupils to create their own learning resources that add to, question, verify, counterpoint and enrich existing given curriculum perspectives
5. to share these all across the world wide web and the world virtual learning community.

Assuming a start with a pair of schools at least, initial OBJECTIVES might run something like this:

6. to create a kernel, in the form of a peer to peer network, that can share video material created by them and others on the open web – allowing the form to be reviewed and altered by participant collaborators[15].
7. to work, in the first instance at least, with a selected theme or subject with partnered schools that can act as a primary provocation to motivate counter-responses in the same medium by partner pupils or others across the internet.. Participation – i.e. dialogue, response and contribution - will be allowed to expand as and when appropriate responses are offered.
8. to create a holding website and forum as a base to the project, that links directly to the video channel, which can house discussions about the *process* and coordinate its progress. Content will be discussed as part of the video sharing.
    a. In case of a restricted programme (where YouTube is blocked , for example and open access to the internet is not permitted) where there is no invitation to the general public, it may be that a social networking site like Ning can be used to house both aspects (video and discussion), and be open only to subscribed members. Some platforms such as Webjam can accommodate separate closed and open components.
9. a second phase of the project is envisaged to be built on the experiences of the first. The structure or form of the pilot phase may well have evolved through the contributions and comments of initial participants, and any future evolution will be affected, collectively and organically by all stakeholders concerned.

It should be noted here that sophisticated video equipment is NOT a prerequisite either at the shooting or the editing stage. Video sites will even accept and show material shot on telephones which are ubiquitous even across the digital divide. Carefully planned, using edit-in-camera techniques there is not even any exclusive need for editing software either. Having said that, both windows and mac operating systems carry built in video editing software so access should not be difficult.

The Time Has Come

Now, more than ever before, it is critical to look at solutions that complement the framework of traditional schooling.

[13] (Rushkoff, Renaissance Prospects (podcast), 2004)
[14] [add brief explanatory note – wikipedia ref??]
[15] Using a social network platform like Ning would have the advantage that a separate evaluative means might be incorporated within it. This would not be possible with a video-dedicated platform like YouTube.

Minimally Invasive Education™ is one such solution – a solution that uses the power of collaboration and the natural curiosity of children to catalyze learning (Mitra) [16]

In 1999 Sugata Mitra installed a computer in a 'hole in the wall' in such a way that it was accessible to the neighbourhood children. He did this in a Delhi slum and later in many remote and rural areas. The experiment is still going on today, from Cambodia to Britain, with similar results. He found the same pattern everywhere. Children with no computer knowledge at all gathered around the screen and began playing on it. Over a period of time they gradually discovered Microsoft paint, they learned to play games, then they found that they could search for more games (so they discovered browsing – and this was 1999) and then realised that they could also search for other information – such as the illnesses that some of their parents were suffering from. Many of them found that they needed to organise themselves a timetable for use of the keyboard so as not to disadvantage the smaller kids, or the girls. The groups self-organised, and they learned how to use the computer **without any guidance except from one another.**

This project is not just for the computer countries. It may be that some countries have easier access for the time being, but the digital divide has to diminish, and these activities will contribute to that and to building cross-cultural awareness and collaborations and as a result.

The time has come to step beyond the classroom, to embrace the rest of the world on equal terms, to exchange ideas and learn from peers, learn that they ARE peers and learn not to seek to do battle with them. Video-sharing allows us to do this.

In his book Here comes Everybody (Shirky, 2008) , Clay Shirkey points out how 'ridiculously easy' it is to form a group using today's internet media[17]. So we have public communications and we have the spontaneous creation of a multitude of groups focused on their own concerns. Guided by their intentions, the next step for these collectives is action, to do something together. This step is not so 'ridiculously easy'. But it is essential. It needs, as we have said a kernel, as germinator and a few committed individuals to set the ball rolling. Assuming a common interest and suitable access, the snowball must grow. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't.

It is estimated that "96% of teens and tweens use social networks"[18] . Our pupils already belong to the generation of 'screenagers'[19] who have grown up with the new media. They are users and

[16] **Minimally Invasive Education** (or **MIE**) is a term used to describe how children learn in unsupervised environments, principally though access to online computing. It is a term that relates to the current proposal. The Hole in the Wall experiment has left a mark on popular culture. Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup read about Mitra's experiment and was inspired to write his debut novel Q and A - this subsequently went on to become the movie Slumdog Millionaire.

[17] "Why did groups form more slowly in the past? Because when you add more people to a group, there are disproportionately more connections (a group of 5 has 10 connections, a group of 15 has 105.) For this reason groups broke down. Now, maintaining these links is easier to produce. This is known as "ridiculously easy group formation," a key attribute of the Internet. The "reply all" function of e-mail was the first truly social function of the Internet. Having a group conversation became as easy as clicking a button" (Shirky, 2008)

[18] Jarvis, J "Friendship on the Web will thrive and make a fortune". (2007). *media Guardian*, 3 December, p.6.

[19] An apt term, coined by Douglas Rushkoff in Rushkoff, D (2006). *Screenagers: Lessons in Chaos from Digital Kids*. London: Hampton Press.

potential users. This points clearly towards the use of online technologies including social network sites eg YouTube and Facebook

My own hopes for We-Think are for an open web access, with pupils and any young (another issue lurks here) people posting their perceptions of their world and these perceptions being responded to by others, any others. Assuming consistency of subject matter (or finding ways/hacks to ensure that) should lead to the spontaneous user-generated teaching materials and classroom resources. Without teacher intervention, new material – which may need to be 'moderated' – will broaden the canvas and offer a range of perspectives on any given subject. these perspectives are then discussed face to face in the classroom, or with skype to reach out even further. These discussions are where the final learning takes place – until another video sequel moves the discourse on again.

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