From [David Wiley's blog](#) ("Iterating towards openness") - David is founder of OpenContent.org. After a general discussion about free-being-inevitable (reviewing reviews of Chris Anderson's upcoming book, [Free: The Future of a Radical Price.](#)) he moves to higher education:

> *Competition! Massive amounts of almost-no-barrier-to-entry competition. Much of it will be poor. I suppose you can take some comfort in that. But some of it will be very, very good. And that should scare existing institutions silly. The education game is about to change, and you (your institution) have three choices:*
>
> *1. Innovate your way forward. If you allow your business model to become flexible and responsive, you can feel your way forward, influencing the emergent educational context as it simultaneously influences your business model. (A dynamic system!)*
>
> *2. Wait for others to innovate their way forward. Let them shape the future educational context without your input, and hope that 10 years from now higher education is still a place where your institution is relevant. (If it isn't, you'll have only yourself to blame.)*
>
> *3. Ignore / deny that anything is changing (or will ever change). Higher education is too important, too deeply woven into the fabric of society, too critical for employers, and too big a business to fail. (See you on the other side with GM and AIG.)*
>
> *[...] but higher education will have to deal with [Chris's] thesis as surely as I'm typing this post. As Lehi [taught](#), there are two types of things in this world – "things to act and things to be acted upon." The day is close at hand when each university will have to decide which they are.*

I had been planning to blog about universities and their attitude to the digital world, so this gives me the incentive. The points are general...

In 1992 I got very excited about the power of digital learning and embraced many of the startup ideas. These included the [Globewide Network Academy](#) which is a voluntary organisation (much the same dynamics as Wikipedia, but nearly 10 years ahead). We used MOOs to create VLEs and Marcus Speh ran the first Virtual course on the Web ("Object Oriented design using C++") - the material fell foul of copyright Mordor even then. It won a best-of-the-web in 1994 at WWW1.

These were heady days. I thought the world was changing before my eyes. And I was invited to a Chair in the University of Nottingham to run a virtual course in Computer-Based Drug Design for the pharma industry. It was a technical success (highly rated by the Teaching Quality Assessement) but it didn't have a sustainable business model and after a few years it closed down and I moved to Cambridge. But I have been looking for that spark elsewhere in Higher Education and I haven't seen it.

By contrast, go back to 1970 when Harold Wilson initiated one of the great British achievements of the twentieth century, The Open University. That was stunning. The vision led the technology by a long way – much of the material was posted paper, you could get online access to computer over a teletype (110 baud) for 2 weeks a year, and in some cases people had to climb a mountain to pick up the BBC signals. But again it changed my vision for ever. Anyone could, and did, go to the OU. Even if you couldn't the programs were often stunning. The maths used graphics which – for 1970 – were miles beyond chalk-and-talk.

And now? Where are the universities changing the face of the world? Where communication is infinitely cheap. Where students are wired up with more power than the whole of the world 30 years

ago. Where the Internet is changing democracy – where are the changes in academia? Why, at least, are there few substantial discussions about what education means in a distributed world? It's too easy to see the reverse where education is simply a branded deliverable contract between a customer (student) and a supplier (university).

Well, the internet changes that business very quickly. So unless there are some radically new ideas, Universities may find that others are eating their lunch.

In a later post I want to address the complex and depressing cycle between research and publication and the role of universities.