

## Across The Ditch - February 2009

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2009 has arrived and the New Zealand adult education and training area is entering a period of uncertainty. At the start of the new parliamentary term, the new government has signalled its intention to target its education policy on expanding school based apprenticeships and trade training and establishing specialised trades academies<sup>1</sup>. There has been little to indicate that other learning and development areas are to have any priority and the only reference they have made in this regard is the vow to curtail bureaucracy.

Cost cutting across the public service is also a priority and this, together with the economic downturn also pressuring budgets in the private sector, means that training and development budgets are being scrutinised more closely. Many of my training and development colleagues are bracing for a difficult period ahead and I expect more news in this area in the coming months.

On a more positive note, some learning initiatives are already underway and this year, legacy funding suggests exciting developments.

Almost a year ago, there were reports coming out of Christchurch's Canterbury University that virtual reality was rapidly growing as a key learning tool. Students were being given the opportunity to learn about subjects such as memory and cognitive learning through video games, while Victoria University of Wellington has been using the Internet phenomenon Second Life in its film courses to teach virtual film-making techniques<sup>2</sup>.

This year, virtual reality teaching techniques at Canterbury University are benefiting from a NZ\$1.77m grant allocated prior to the election from the government's "Encouraging and Supporting Innovation Fund"<sup>3</sup>. Moving beyond video games it is planned that students will be able to overcome the limitations of standard learning techniques by entering a 3D world. Students will be able to explore objects that would otherwise be too small to witness or experience situations considered too dangerous to visit in the real world.

For example, it is anticipated that audiology students will be able to "shrink" so they can walk inside the inner ear. Chemical engineering students will be able to enter vats where chemical reactions are taking place.

Whilst the technology is being developed for the tertiary science subjects, Canterbury University HitLab director Mark Billingham, who is leading the project, has said he anticipates the technology will spread to training in many professions where on-the-job training is challenging due to dangerous circumstances, such as the police<sup>4</sup>.

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There are undoubtedly many situations when training needs to be done prior to letting learners loose in the real work environment. Yet one real challenge that many trainers face is how to simulate real-life conditions during training scenarios. Another is to create the meaningful “hands-on” learning experiences so important to kinaesthetic learners.

As technology becomes more sophisticated, and virtual reality environments move from the experimental to more mainstream I feel we, as learning professionals, should be applauding the potential to offer experiences that simulate real-life conditions, or even enhance the real world by allowing our students “go where no one has gone before”<sup>5</sup>.

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## References

- 1 - <http://beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech+throne+0>
- 2 - <http://www.stuff.co.nz/4411509a24096.html>
- 3 - <http://www.stuff.co.nz/4807156a11.html>
- 4 - Rebecca Todd - The Press, Thursday, 01 January 2009
- 5 - Opening credits of “Star Trek, The Next Generation” television series.

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