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**Review: Visualising Impossible Worlds: A Review of the inVisio Online 'webinar',
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Visualising Impossible Worlds: A Review of the *inVisio* Online ‘webinar’,
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Hosted by Craig Prichard, Massey University, New Zealand and using Adobe Connect © software, contributors and delegates at the *inVisio: Visualising Impossible Worlds* webinar met in cyberspace to explore the implications of advancing computer visualization technologies for contemporary business and social organizations. Through examples as diverse as weather forecasts, dentistry and luxury yacht building we were introduced to the possibilities and implications of visualizing what is actually *impossible* for us to see by virtue of the characteristics of our eyes, bodies, or our place in space and time. A bird’s eye view of weather patterns skidding across the Earth’s surface on BBC TV, and a near-perfect ‘photograph’ of the future design of a luxury yacht’s cabin, were two of the visualizations laid open for analysis by Prichard and three discussants—Donncha Kavanagh, Adam Arvidsson, and Martin Harris.

The ‘webinar’ (read: web–seminar) took place under the banner of *inVisio*—the International Network for Visual Studies in Organization (www.in-visio.org) and was the sixth in a series of seven Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded events. The network was founded in November 2007 in order to bring together academics and practitioners interested in the visual dimensions of business, management, work and organizational life, and seminars have been running throughout 2008 and 2009, with contributions from the Arts, Design, Management Consultancy, and a range of academic business management disciplines, including accounting, tourism management, marketing and human resource management. Beginning with an evening launch event at The Photographers’ Gallery in London, the seminars have covered: the role of visuals in constructing the face and substance of organizations; multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives on visual studies; methods for researching the visual ‘at work’; and techniques of image analysis. However, broader notions of ‘visualization’—especially those afforded by computer technologies—had not yet been addressed by *inVisio* discussions, meaning the webinar was a very welcome and timely addition to the series.

Unlike the previous events, and as its name suggests, this sixth gathering was held online rather than the more usual physical university seminar room. As recognized by Prichard in his introduction, the online ‘setting’ of the webinar was itself an ‘impossible world’ bringing together 16 participants around the globe and across 12 time zones in a semblance of reality which was actually located nowhere, yet experienced everywhere. We were participating in a seminar about visualizing impossible worlds, whilst simultaneously *being* in an impossible visual world! This neat folding in of media and content will frame this review article. Given the remit of *Management Learning*, I intend to recap the subject matter and discussions of the webinar through my own experience of participating in it along with insights from published research about the utility of web-based virtual meetings for the purposes of management learning and education.

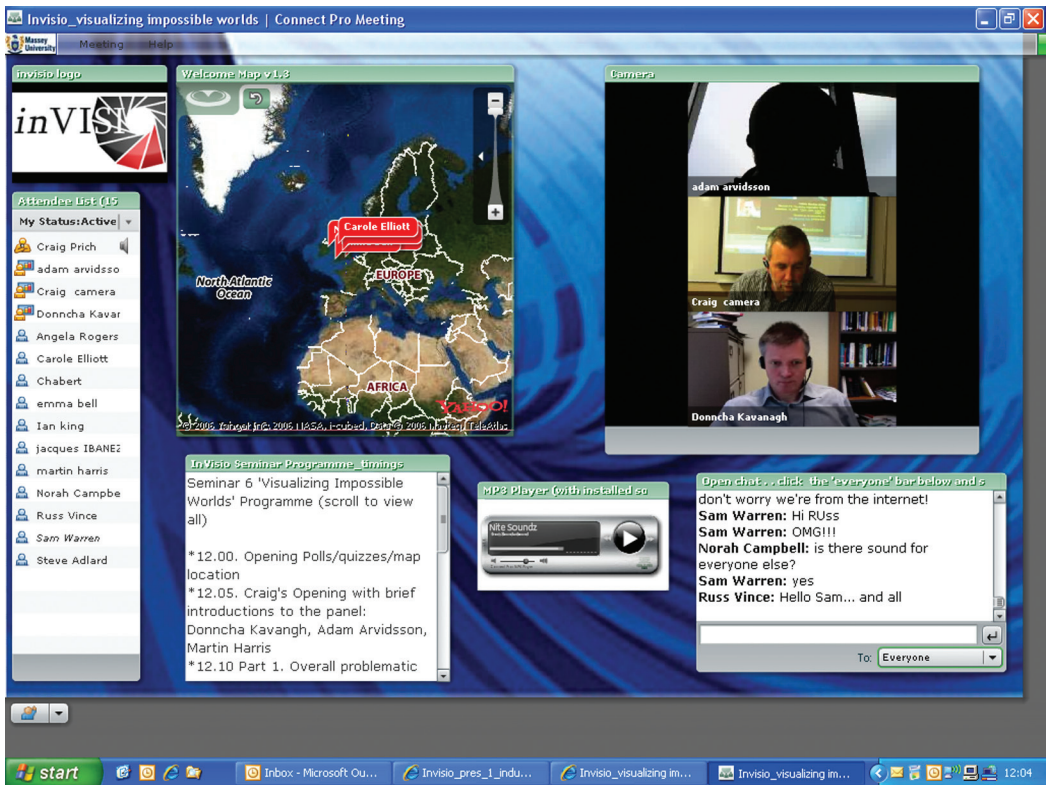


Figure 1. <http://connect.massey.ac.nz/p97603014/>

Being where I am not: Interacting in impossible worlds

To anyone used to distance learning software, the webinar was run in a fairly traditional synchronous online format—a PowerPoint presentation (available to view in advance) narrated during the webinar by a speaker whose face is visible on a webcam screen. This appears in a window alongside the slides and/or video and images s/he is discussing. The presentation was followed by commentary from the three discussants in turn, who were also visible via their webcams, while a chat box remained open for the duration of the event to enable the ‘audience’ to post comments or questions whenever they felt it appropriate (see Figure 1).

As a keen producer of digital learning resources for students, I found it both instructive and enjoyable to feel like a student again, taking part in the webinar. It was indeed quite astonishing to comprehend the fact that the four presenters were in a classroom in New Zealand (11pm); a hotel room in Bangkok (6pm); an office in Dublin (12 noon); and another in Essex, UK (12 noon). Save for some problems with data stalling when videos were played, and a few glitches in sound continuity, the technology worked extremely well and it was soon easy to feel disengaged from my physical location (my dining room at home, surrounded by drying laundry draped on the radiators), and more a part of the ‘impossible world’ of the webinar. Here, I was interacting with people who were not present in a material sense, yet seemed more real than the objects and goings on around me.

It is the sense of ‘being where one is not’ that could also be said to characterize the content of the webinar and not just its form. One of the themes introduced by Prichard in his presentation was that the immersion experienced by viewers of computer visualizations leads to the creation of value. In this context, the ‘value’ of visualization(s), is the labour of viewing. Watching takes effort which can be valorized in the form of the surplus value created by holding the viewer’s attention (say, in recall of and action spurred by advertisements, or ratings figures for TV stations). Using the example of the UK BBC TV weather forecast, Prichard argued that the seemingly ‘real time’ unfolding of weather patterns across a rotating globe holds the viewer’s attention far more than static symbols or voice alone. Indeed, the introduction of the new weather forecasting format caused a raft of complaints from the British public which included disagreement over the relative size of Scotland to England, dislike of the colour chosen to represent the UK, difficulty in deciphering and following the forecast, and reports of motion sickness induced by the moving graphics (Plunkett, 2005). Attention for the wrong reasons, perhaps, but attention nonetheless.

It is perhaps easier to see the direct ‘value’ of computer visualization in Prichard’s second example—precision milling equipment for dental treatment. Here, a series of photographic images taken by the dentist are combined by computer to produce an immensely-detailed map of dental cavities. This acts as a blueprint for the mill to turn out perfectly-fitting fillings for teeth, creating value by saving time and automating hitherto expensive craft skills, all whilst eliminating errors. Prichard’s third examples—hyper-realistic ‘artist impressions’ of luxury yachts co-created by clients; and detailed 3D ‘maintenance maps’ of complex machinery—also demonstrate how value from visualization might also be extracted in the form of price premiums for ‘elite’ services based on state of the art technologies such as these.

To understand *why* visuals seem to engender attention, the concept of ‘imagination’ was invoked as the second of a three-fold conceptual framework. Drawing on Lacan, Prichard argued that visual images *demand* our immediate involvement in ways that text does not. If we are a sighted person, when confronted with an image it is pretty much impossible not to see it, and in the act of seeing, we usually ‘read’ it, unlike when confronted with a page of text that we by and large are free to ignore. Following from this, Prichard suggests that images are most ‘successful’ in holding our attention when they tap into fantasies that nourish the ‘ego ideal’. Fantasies of flying and omnipotent observation permeate all three of Prichard’s cases of computer visualization. In the example of the weather map noted earlier, the viewer is placed as if they were literally flying above and across the world, god-like. In the dentistry illustration, mastery of nature is conferred to the viewer as the computer maps out every contour and crevice of a tooth in situ inside our own head, which we would never otherwise be able to see. Finally, it is the viewer’s control of the future that is implied in intricate software in relation to luxury yacht design, allowing clients to move about and ‘consume’ as well as design their yet-to-be-built vessels. This last example suggests that maybe computer visualization is not so much a tool of *de*-sign, in the sense that it produces a blueprint for moving one from sign (idea) to object (reality), but instead may represent a technology of *hyper*-signification as the designer and client collaborate in moving from sign to object via simulacra—objects more perfect than they can ever be once produced (see Justesen and Mouritsen, 2009 on this point).

Other examples offered during the webinar included Google Maps, GPS tracking and Satellite Navigation systems which could all be argued to tap into a panoptical desire. To this we could add a whole list of scientific technologies ranging from the electron microscope and colour spectrometers to the MRI scanner. All these things enable us to ‘see’ what it is impossible for us to see from our small crevice of space and time and call into question what it means ‘to see’ (Elkins, 1999).

Changing the rules of engagement?

Interestingly, and as I have found elsewhere in online seminars (Gilmore and Warren, 2007), whilst some rules of the classroom are relaxed in online settings (banter and jokes are more acceptable, for example) others are still obeyed. For example, just as members of the audience are reluctant to interrupt a speaker during a conference presentation—preferring to wait until the familiar ten minutes for Q&A at the end—so few, apart from me, ‘spoke out’ in the chat box during Prichard’s presentation. To type while others are speaking may seem as rude as loudly whispering or obviously passing notes to one’s neighbours during a conference presentation. Indeed, I had only done so to see if I could draw discussion among participants at the same time Prichard was talking to test my hypothesis that technologies do not—by themselves—change established rules of engagement in learning environments. And from Prichard’s reactions as he was ‘interrupted’ by my messages flashing up on his screen, I was acutely aware of my own feelings that this was not the ‘right’ thing to be doing. This was also later confirmed during a conversation with another of the webinar participants. Since I was known to everyone present as a lead member of the *inVisio* steering group, he commented that it seemed appropriate for *me* to post remarks in this way, but did not feel so appropriate for him. This raises similar issues to those I have encountered before; whilst power dynamics can be reduced or altered in the online setting, the space is by no means entirely democratic simply by virtue of the fact that physical bodies cannot be seen (Gilmore and Warren, 2007). This is rather at odds with the espoused wisdom in organizational behaviour textbooks that online participation in virtual meetings and teams, for example, combats the identity politics at play in workplace communications. It also—ironically in a seemingly playful and informal online space—suggests a need for a structured approach to outlining the ‘rules of the session’ upfront, a kind of webinar etiquette that would help the audience know when and how they would be able to participate.

Another element that seemed less successful in a webinar format was the traditional ‘presenter speaks, audience listens’ norm. During both Prichard’s and the discussants’ presentations, I found it harder than usual to concentrate on what was being said, despite, as I allude to earlier, finding the subject of discussion fascinating and the whole experience strangely immersive. Several times I lost focus during 10–15 minutes of listening/ watching someone talking on my screen, whereas I am certain this wouldn’t have been the case had I been present in the same room as the speaker at a ‘normal’ seminar. For me, this points to the need for two things:

1. A different mode of presentation in webinars to avoid the ‘talking head’ syndrome;
2. A need to introduce interactivity to proceedings.

As academics and educators we are brought up on a diet of 20-minute conference presentations and 50-minute lecture slots during which *we* hold the stage. If we are honest, we do not *really* mean it when we encourage the audience to ask questions as we go along, indeed we probably only offer this invitation because we know that people will rarely, if ever, take us up on our invitation, since they also know the rules of the game! Only when a teaching session extends to 90 minutes or two hours would most of us seriously consider building in an interactive exercise that invites participation from the students. However, time seems to be *much* shorter in cyberspace. Several things seem to compound this: the lack of physicality of the speaker in terms of movement, gesture etc.; the absent co-proximity of fellow delegates/students; and limited eye-contact with the speaker (given the usual configuration of the webcams) all reduce what Aswath Damodaran (2008: 96) calls the ‘magic of the classroom’—that special connection good presenters have with their audience, and which, for the audience, can make time seem to fly by. Having a physical presentation—whether

at a conference or in a lecture—seems to demand that we be responsive as an audience in ways that are not apparent in the online webinar. For one, the speaker can immediately see if we are puzzled, bored or enjoying ourselves. Even if we do not speak or otherwise participate for some time, there is an element of interaction just by being there and being seen. If we accept this as a reasonable explanation, then it follows that alternative forms of engagement need to be introduced to involve the audience far more than one would normally expect. Returning to the *inVisio* webinar, one example that sprang to my mind was that Prichard could have asked the audience how *they* considered the theoretical framework he had outlined could be applied to the examples of computer visualization he had chosen, and which I have briefly sketched out earlier.

With the above in mind, it seems to me that both participating *and* presenting in a webinar require different skill-sets than those we, as predominantly face-to-face educators, have been schooled in. In my experience, there seems to be an assumption in Higher Education that making the switch to online learning (or ‘blended learning’ as is now more commonplace) is simply a case of uploading one’s materials, learning how to use the platform and showing what a jolly modern university we are for providing our students with such state-of-the-art learning facilities. This is despite writers such as Salmon (2000) having long been at pains to point out that designing and delivering online courses requires a different approach to information design, and engagement with students in order to make virtual learning environments a truly effective alternative to traditional physical classroom teaching.

Digital natives and multi-tasking

As well as considering e-learning as an *alternative* to traditional forms of teaching and presentation, recent thinking on so-called ‘Generation Y’ learners suggests that Internet technologies (especially Web 2.0) may be used to great effect in the classroom alongside the physical (or in this case virtual-via-webcam) speaker. Specifically in the present case, this would involve toggling between PC screens to Google interesting points made by the speaker before posting links in the chat box for the rest of the class to see; for instance, rather than listening to a single monologue from the presenter (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005; Proserpio, 2009). In a face-to-face setting, it means encouraging students to bring their laptops to a wirelessly-enabled classroom in order to perform ‘online’ tasks while simultaneously participating by listening to the ‘offline’ lecture. This may seem strange to us as university teachers, given that in the typical lecture hall, students presently do not even seem to take hand-written notes! The reasoning behind these ideas is that ‘Generation Y’ learners apparently have radically different learning styles to their predecessors. For example, these students are argued to learn at high speeds, enjoy multi-tasking between information sources—making random ‘hypertext’ connections between ideas as they do so—and be particularly adept at processing visual and dynamic information (Prensky, cited in Bennett et al., 2008). The Adobe Connect © software used for the webinar seemed ideally suited for multi-tasking of this nature. Inspired by the speakers’ discussions, during the webinar I managed to nip off to Google for information on interesting points that were being raised, for example ‘do blind people have problems with ego formation given they cannot undergo a Lacanian mirror stage?’. I also took a trip to Amazon.co.uk to find out the price and availability of Bruce Sterling’s (2009) *The Caraytids* recommended by Adam Arvidsson, one of the discussants, and emailed two colleagues inviting them to join the webinar—all whilst following the threads being discussed and making manual notes for this review. Of course, it’s possible that I have a form of academic ADHD, and/or that the demands of the modern knowledge intensive workplace have trained me in such practices (Appelbaum et al., 2008), but given that these software packages afford such potential, and coupled

with reported shifts in learning styles of the ‘digital natives’ of the ‘net generation’ it does rather call into question what we mean when we ask our students (and ourselves) to ‘stay on task’.

Witnessing one’s own children seemingly immersed in three simultaneous MSN chat conversations, posting updates on Twitter, and downloading music, all while ‘doing their homework’ may persuade us intuitively that these arguments are valid. However, it seems that claims about this brave new world of learners need treating with some caution. Research has shown that allowing students to bring their laptops to a WIFI-enabled classroom means they are later unable to recall very much of the material delivered during the lecture, when compared to the students who were not permitted to use similar devices (Hembrook and Gay, 2003). Benbunan-Fich and Truman (2009) similarly investigated the use of laptops during business meetings and found 76 per cent of their use was for ‘off task’ reasons. These findings are an interesting antidote to what Bennett et al. (2008) have referred to as an ‘academic moral panic’ that our traditional learning and teaching methods are no longer adequate for a new generation of students and increasingly, as these ‘digital natives’ grow-up, executive managers.

Conclusions

Much debate during the ‘discussion’ part of the webinar was concerned with whether computer visualizations actually create *new* worlds rather than just represent old ones in a different way. After all, one imagines that the products of the first cartographers and photographers aroused similar sentiments about the transformative powers of their visualizations. As such we considered whether we might more accurately be talking about advances in *technology*, rather than visualization. But how productive is it to distinguish between the two? As Donncha Kavanagh pointed out during the webinar, there has been a shift towards the visual in computer programming and away from mathematic/systematic principles and it seems, to me at least, that advances in popular computing—such as operating systems, graphics and gaming—are first and foremost those that *look* more real, fantastic and/or appealing to use. Contrast the widespread uptake of these technologies with radical advances in digital *smell* technologies that are largely unheard of (see for example posts on <http://digiscents.com/blog/>), and the importance of visuality as a marker for technological progress seems clear.

As the *inVisio* seminar series has established, paying attention to visual issues is no longer tangential to the management role. ‘Visual competence’ (Müller, 2008) is something that will become increasingly important to managers as software packages democratize desktop publishing and design work for strategic organizational images such as annual reports and the production of marketing communications, for example. The move towards ‘personal web-pages’ exemplifies this, with most professionals coming under pressure to not only establish a web presence, but one which they update and control themselves—either through social/professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn, or via the corporate website. In turn, those tasked with producing strategic organizational images will do so for an ever more ‘visually literate’ group of stakeholders, with easy access to an array of unofficial and competing sources of information about corporations. For example, the power of the visual was seen very recently in the UK media in the case of a Transport for London worker ‘caught’ by a passer-by’s mobile camera-phone in the act of verbally abusing an old man trying to board an underground train (BBC News, 2009). Furthermore, (cynical and jaded?) consumers are regularly bombarded by sophisticated CGI-enhanced imagery in television advertisements and clever online marketing campaigns: marketers have already begun to sell ‘impossible worlds’ and this *inVisio* webinar was a welcome step in reminding us that management education (and our own practice as researchers) would be well advised to keep up.

In terms of a tool for management learning, as I have observed earlier, webinars seem to require different ‘rules of engagement’ to the class and meeting rooms we are more used to. The unfamiliarity of the online context also (for me) threw more normally instances of teaching and learning into stark relief. In my own teaching of overseas Masters students, for example, I find it is easy to *say* I empathize with the students’ unfamiliarity with UK learning environments and expectations, but I also find it impossible to really *feel* how disorientating it must be for them. Indeed, it can be frustrating when students from different cultures seem to fail to grasp what is required of them even after (what I consider to be!) intensive support. But when participating in the *inVisio* webinar, I underwent an unexpected sense of disorientation that helped me (re)experience, in some small way, how new and overseas students must feel in an alien environment where it is unclear how they should behave and what is expected of them. Of course, these observations are equally applicable to the use of virtual meetings, video-conferences and webinars in organizations where communication across cultures takes place.

Prichard’s ‘labour of viewing’ is also illuminating when applied to the work involved in taking part in a webinar as a learning experience. There is indeed an undeniable immersive capacity of the visual; thus visuality adds value to the learning environment by sustaining the learner’s attention. I certainly found listening without *interactive* (or at least moving) visuals requires a lot of concentration as voices become disembodied. Consequently, webinars should be immersive and interactive in ways that are less vital to consider in ‘offline’ communications. This seems particularly pertinent if we continue to see an increase in the use of webinar/online learning tools in management education. A recent (2008) Joint Information Services Council (JISC)-funded study of the UK higher education sector found tangible benefits of e-learning in all areas of the student experience, both in relation to the integration of digital teaching and learning methods into traditional courses and through greater provision of distance learning, further supporting the view that e-learning methods are here to stay even if claims of radical shifts in student skills and preferences seem to be exaggerated. Likewise, speaking as a New Zealander with enormous distances to travel to attend academic conferences in the northern hemisphere, Prichard rightly pointed out the potential of webinars to reduce the academic carbon footprint and increase international collaboration, suggesting that activities like the *inVisio* webinar might not be such a novelty in the future.

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How Managers have Learnt to Lead: Exploring the Development of Leadership Practice
Steve Kempster. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 253 pp. ISBN 9780230220959 (hbk)

How to find a gap in the market for books on leadership? Search for an underpinning assumption that the other books take for granted. That is what Steve Kempster has done in reviewing the leadership literature and deciding to focus on the process of learning about leadership, which he sees as pivotal to leader development. This distances his book from the majority of the literature which focuses much more on the content of leadership—what it is, where it can be found, who has acquired it. Kempster takes us with him on his journey of exploration through the swamps of lived experience, asking the question 'how is leadership learnt?'

Most of us involved in leadership development have fallen into the trap of suggesting that we can isolate what leadership looks like, define it and then offer that definition or set of tools to aspiring leaders. Come and get it, trainers cry—instant leadership will be yours. Kempster suggests billions of dollars are spent each year on such attempts at leadership development. But employers are notorious at failing to evaluate development events, especially those targeting senior people or high flyers. Is there somewhere here a belief that any development activity, which gets people of similar aspirations together and gives them some content to chew over, is a good thing? Where is the value appraisal of this expenditure?

Kempster suggests that if we turn to academic literature to date, we find some consensus around the idea that it is contextualized informal learning, not formal interventions, which develop managers. We spend our time seeking out the gourmet recipe, when it was the sandwich-making and kitchen nightmares which turned us into experts. Is this the same for leadership learning, he asks?

This book offers a qualitative research study into how the contexts in which people work develop tacit as well as formal knowledge, aiming to avoid the largely positivist approaches of other studies on leadership. A processual systemic perspective is promoted, which sees leadership as constructing leadership learning and vice versa. Taking mountaineer Chris Bonnington as a stimulus, Kempster identifies seven key themes from lived experience which have influenced