

E-Learning to whose agenda? The Discourse of Enterprise vs. the Discourse of Community.

There are now many competing voices in the E-learning space. Pioneering enthusiasts, and self interested corporate empires; naïve technological progressives and captured University administrators; large IT companies and national training programmes for industry, railways in Australia, tractor maintenance in Russia; rural school communities in New Zealand and Newfoundland now linked in ways that reduce isolation, increase choice and sustain diverse lifestyle options, and reluctant professors being cajoled to put their courses on line, without adequate reward. All these voices have their place, but I'm not sure they understand one another and the different pressures they each face.

I recently completed a thesis reporting a collaborative trial between students in two Universities, one in New Zealand and one in Sweden, using a custom developed groupware application. That research was founded upon a collaborativist model of teaching and learning. It was planned by this initiative to both internationalise the curriculum, and use IT to transform the process of teaching and learning. In my reflections upon the complexity and challenges posed by this learning environment several dilemmas presented themselves. One dilemma arose from a critical incident in which a student upset with the nature of the course had sent me an email stating: "don't forget that students are the customer" and observing that once committed, students were locked into their course of study.

There are a large number of conflicting forces at play here. What is higher education about? Who is it for? Stakeholder vs. consumer models of education? Respective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students. Technology as an enabler of new possibilities. Technology and passive vs. transformative learning models. The globalisation of society and online learning. The nexus between research and teaching.

One way of thinking of this interplay of competing values in higher education is through the concept of a "discourse". A discourse operates as a mechanism in society to define social interaction, prescribe certain rules for that interaction, specify the boundaries of what can be said in a given context and prescribe which actors may legitimately speak or act. In a society we inhabit "discourse webs" in which different cultural perceptions and agendas are advanced. It is like a contest between different stories, either jousting to be told, or to define the rules dictating which stories are permitted to be told.

In the E-Learning environment several discourses contest for space. One key dichotomy for higher education is that between the "discourse of enterprise" and the "discourse of community". The discourse of enterprise comes from a neo-liberal interpretation of society, in which the economically rational or self-interested human being is primary. The cumulative result of each individual maximising self-interest, is held to generate maximal good for the whole.

In the discourse of enterprise humans are defined in a wholly economic frame, with individual lives as an enterprise of the self, like individual businesses engaged in developing their own human capital. The language of the market takes over, and civic culture becomes consumer culture. The citizen is reconceptualized as the sovereign consumer/customer. This discourse, for some time popular with western governments, has now permeated into the areas of social service provision. Patients, parents, passengers and pupils are re-imaged as customers. The power of this discourse is that it links the political, the technological and the ethical by

aligning the political and ethical objectives of neo-liberal governments, the economic objectives of contemporary business and the self actualising capacities of individuals.

Globalisation is part of this same discourse with the enterprise vision of capturing bigger markets, and the use of technology as a vehicle to deliver services on a global scale. E-Learning fits into this picture quite nicely. We even see organizations such as GATT prescribing rules for free trade in educational services, so that global barriers to education delivery can be broken down.

By contrast the discourse of community asserts the right of citizens to function collectively to maintain and build their communities. As opposed to the single utility model of economic rationalism, we see a concept of dual utility both to ourselves and to one another. This discourse has a moral dimension which requires us to make our choices constrained by values such as fairness and justness. The duties we owe one another are emphasised, such as to care for our elderly and educate our young not as isolated individuals but for the wider social good. E-Learning based upon this discourse would not be about grasping bigger markets, but about supporting community building initiatives, and enabling diverse initiatives tailored equitably to the needs of learning communities.

Mass customisation in E-Learning while superficially promising to better meet the needs of all learners, does not meet the requirements of a community discourse. Mass delivery of custom product with self-paced learning options is an individualised instruction model, which devalues group and community learning modes and brings the danger of homogenisation of culture.

There is scope for complementary diversity in the E-Learning space, but if we ignore the community discourse we run the risk of having our culture and communities usurped by the juggernaut corporate models eating inexorably into community space. And let's be honest, in a marketing sense they see an opportunity – in the US the higher education “market” is said to be worth about \$230 billion, mostly delivered by community institutions. The training market by contrast is said to be worth \$75 billion, and mostly delivered by the for-profit sector. However there are some signs in early E-Learning venture failures that the core competencies that are required in the higher education sector are very different from those in the commercial training sector.

I only hope that we can find effective accommodations where communities can provide customised, unique and local forms of education to meet their own needs, augmented by links to other online learning communities and resources in ways which enhance diversity and build local communities rather than create bored captives to globally delivered cheap product creating monoculture online.