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E-learning from experience: balancing the e-vangelists' gospel with the wisdom of the world. (0056)

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Abstract

This presentation will draw on published research, reflective experience at the University of Greenwich and my previous work on models of the scholarship of learning and teaching, strategic planning and organisation culture. Its aim is to counter the enthusiasm of pioneers in presenting and promoting e-learning, with lessons from the operational reality within a range of HEIs. The development of Web 2.0 has reached a stage where critical reflection on experience up to now is essential before further significant investment of staff time and other resources is made [Hughes, 2009]. This collation of research and experience suggests that there are issues still to resolve from the first stages of development.

Paper summary

There are a number of over-simple assumptions and assertions connected to e-learning that need fuller examination. This is not advocating Luddism, but trying to balance the sometimes blind [or at least one-eyed] enthusiastic advocacy of pioneers [Njenga and Fourie, 2010]. The haunting memory of the E-University may be fading and its lessons forgotten, so I lead towards 10 issues as an agenda for consideration for those pushing developments forward.

1. Developments arise from a staff drive as much as from student demand, and ...
2. The teacher-student digital divide is over-stated.

This comes from attributing views to students that many do not have, and an embarrassed belief that universities and their staff lose credibility if they are not seen to be at the cutting edge of new technology. Yet many studies show that in blended learning situations...

3. Student feedback shows a preference for more face to face contact over technology mediated processes [Catling and Mason, 2009, Mitchell and Forer, 2010].

Some research, [e.g. Bye, Smith and Rallis, 2009], distorts research findings in support of a staff preference for e-learning over more traditional methods. Other work shows under-use of e-based provision even where attempts are made to make it quasi-mandatory [Orton-Johnson, 2008]

4. There is political pressure to be seen to be using technology in the current zeitgeist [Schneckenberg, 2009].

There is a perception that young people use e-based social networking extensively, and that HE should build on that, but students resist staff access to their Facebook pages and university organised chatrooms, blogs etc are underutilised. Students see a functional distinction between the processes and have different expectations of the academic context. There is, though a shift in staff roles [Hanson, 2009]

5. The use of 'e-learning tools' leads to basic discoveries about pedagogy and sometimes innovations that should/could have been introduced in a f2f mode.

A recent example came up at Greenwich, where a tutor responded to student feedback on teaching, for the first time using issues raised by students as an agenda for a subsequent session ['I had not thought of doing that!']. One early example I remember from an international conference was a US professor who introduced electronic submission of assignments. He then enthused that this allowed him to comment on the text of an early formative assignment and that this feedback enhanced student retention – established knowledge among mature, developed f2f teachers. That recalls a 'Song of Reproduction' by Flanders and Swan, where 'with tone control at a single touch, I can make Caruso sound like Hutch; but I never did care for music much, it's the high fidelity'. So the technology assumes importance above the teaching approach, rather than adding value to it. In some cases it is a false façade: assignments submitted electronically are printed off by clerical staff before being given to academics to mark

6. Much of what is included under e-learning is e-administration. Gonzalez [2010] found three elements of e-learning among staff: information and documentation, communication and networked learning; most conceptions focused on the first two. But, despite such claims, putting the course handbook, or even assignment questions, on a website or within a VLE is NOT e-learning.

7. There are under-examined, and unresolved, issues relating to economic capital [to invest in hardware and software packages], to learning style preferences [linked to gender differences among other student factors] and culture [particularly for international students]. [Hughes, 2009, 2010 Keller *et al*, 2009]
8. Claims on costs are dubious if FEC rules are applied and activity based costing is adopted.

Greville Rumble's work dispelled the myth that distance learning was a cheap option other than at industrial production levels such as the Open University. The cost profile is very different from that of campus based full-time attendance, yet senior staff resist adapting resource allocation models to the contingencies of the situations. Part of that is attributable to the invisible nature of the work, particularly if students are not on campus. But conversely...

9. There are dangers from the accessibility to the secret garden of the curriculum through e-based records.

So, for students, there is a detailed record of their participation in web-based discussion groups: not only their virtual presence, but a transcript of their contributions. For teaching staff there is easy observation of their interaction with students, both quantitatively [number of postings, speed of response] and qualitatively [tone and content]. Those records are also available to the corporate management who can pursue an e-panopticon [Brosnan, 2000], so that one London University, where senior staff were approached after the 7/7 bombings to allow access to emails and web interactions by staff and students, could provide a full record [not, in the event, made available after the initial approach was followed by a withdrawal of the request].

10. If an institution is serious about shifting the arena for learning and the process involved, it needs to assess its situation against the ten criteria set out by Tony Bates [1999].

One case study [Forsyth *et al*, 2010] gives staff rankings of institutional blockages. I will use Stewart *et al* [2010] as a case study of a catalogue of project disasters.

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Appendix

Embedding ICT Bates - List of 12 Organisational Strategies for Change

- 1 A vision for teaching and learning
- 2 Funding re-allocation
- 3 Strategies for inclusion
- 4 Technology infrastructure
- 5 People infrastructure
- 6 Student computer access