

Productivist Education vs. Contextual Learning: Evaluation and the Place of 'Flexibility' in Discourses of Online Education Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Owen with Rogers (1999) views evaluation as a type of enquiry that is research based and that uses systematic methods and procedures derived from the scientific method to obtain knowledge that can be useful in 'improving' the program evaluated. The purpose of formal evaluation is most often specific, and it may be undertaken for ascertaining accountability, for organisational development or for the generation of knowledge (Kavanagh & Henry, 2002). In essence, however, evaluation is specifically about making value judgements which are based on data collected through observations and descriptions (Huitt, 1999), and this means that evaluation is at least in part a political process. Therefore, as a political process, evaluation may not recognise the value-pluralism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 34) which is often characteristic of the complex milieu which the evaluated program (the evaluand) affects – such as, for example, the social contexts of learners and their dynamics. As a political exercise, the evaluation process can become simply a "ritual of verification" (Power, 1997), which focuses on audit-type research that is used essentially for certification purposes and to comfort those stakeholders who control the program and have commissioned the evaluation. Evaluation can thus become subject to what Bishop (1994, p. 182) has called "...the ideological power of agenda setting".

Within the settings offered by contemporary education systems, this "ideological power" is also discernible in the difference between the use of online educational environments to continue to control and direct the learners' contexts (i.e., to 'educate'), and the use of these environments to complement better and to accommodate learners' needs, learning styles and contexts. This paper provides a largely conceptual discussion which focuses on how productivist education systems can be perpetuated through online educational technologies. Because the whole of this topical theme cannot be covered in detail here, we specifically focus on the notion of 'flexibility', which is a highly contested concept, but which is routinely used inappropriately within education systems that employ online learning environments. This is especially relevant to evaluations of online learning contexts and their effectiveness because an understanding of the discourses which underpin contemporary education is likely to promote a more holistic perspective when engaging with the evaluation process. Not grasping the meaning of flexibility within the perpetuation of productivist education will lead the evaluator to a less than holistic understanding of the worth of an online course for stakeholders, and especially for learners.

EDUCATION OR LEARNING?

As a conceptual aid, it is important to differentiate between productivist education and contextual learning from the outset. Education (in its established productivist tradition) refers to teaching according to pre-determined notions and rules of what learners should do in order to become knowledgeable about (and, often, to have the 'right' attitude towards) something (McClintock, 1999). In Australia, this is exemplified by the competency-based approach currently adopted by the national agency regulating vocational education and training (VET) and adult training, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Central to this approach is an assessment methodology that is primarily concerned with making a difference to the workplace productivity of learners, but that has scant regard for the qualitative dimensions of learning, including the experience of

learning, satisfaction levels and the fulfilment of personal goals. This assessment methodology instead focuses on three key indicators – attitude, knowledge and skills – all of which must be relevant to the work for which the learner is training in the course. Thus, ANTA suggests to assessors:

Assessment should be undertaken as a holistic process that integrates skills, knowledge and attitudes, and their practical application. Knowledge is important for all competencies and assessment must measure whole competence, including those aspects of knowledge, understanding and attitudes which underpin performance. (Australian National Training Authority, 1998, p. 21)

By contrast, we view contextual learning as a response in teaching approaches which is foremost in response to learners' needs. Such teaching is likely to take place through interactive processes that are sufficiently flexible to account for the myriad of individual learning approaches and styles, the varying capacities of individual learners to adapt to or mould a learning environment and the varying degrees of technological proficiency relevant to accessing a course's physical context (such as when the course is delivered online).

A perspective that views education as being part of the discourse of power in modernity can also help to distinguish between education as an exercise of power, and education as empowerment of learners. There are some convincing classical arguments that clarify this perspective in considerably more detail (e.g. Freire, 1970; Illich, 1973). More recently, McClintock's (1999, p. 11) Educators Manifesto proclaims the ubiquitousness of a [Western] educational system which, as a result of the liberal capitalist tradition spanning four centuries, is characterised by elitism and class bias. Furthermore, and to follow this Marxist-informed perspective, the production principles of a liberal capitalist modernity means that the dominant groups in society own "...the systems of pedagogical production [in which] the teachers were the workers, directed by administrators and other specialists; pupils and students, or more generically 'learners,' were their output" (McClintock, 1999, p. 33).

An education system that employs new communication technologies in a way that perpetuates hegemonic and productivist learning contexts suggests that we continue to view education as largely a factory-like process of production, in which educators suppress pedagogical self-awareness, especially among students (McClintock, 1999, p. 34). In this system the teachers are also subjected to the exercise of power, because the new educational technologies allow for the commodification of instruction more readily, where teachers are becoming no more than the labour in "...a production process designed for the efficient creation of instructional commodities, and hence become subject to all the pressures that have befallen production workers in other industries undergoing rapid technological transformation from above" (Noble, 1998, n.p.).

THE NEW EDUCATION and SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE EVALUATOR

A contemporary learning context is described by Evans (2003, pp. 9-10) as consisting of the independent learner and the interdependence among that person, the educational system and other learners (the "interdependent learning milieu"). This, however, does not establish the actual extent of the independence of the learner within this milieu. Rather, it fixes firmly the educational system as a power construct, since "[t]he process of learning depends on those who have constructed the knowledge, skills or values to be learned and those who have designed and planned the ways they will be taught and learned" (Evans, 2003, p. 9). Furthermore, educational technologists who shape learning contexts seldom account for or reflect on power as being or becoming an issue in these contexts, and choices for such things as teaching strategies are as much ideological as scientific-rational in nature (Evans & Nation, 1993, p. 208).

Within such an environment, it may be useful for the evaluator to view the actors in the educational context which is being evaluated (the evaluand) as two separate stakeholder

groups: providers and consumers (Prior, 2001). In the context of online education, the group 'providers' includes teaching professionals and support staff, such as information technology technologists. The group 'consumers' includes learners and their extended communities. Such a conceptualisation of the stakeholders may prompt the evaluator to realise that a more holistic evaluation should not be simply research that is directed to one group alone (which typically are the 'consumers'), but that it should also include the 'providers', who are usually those who control and have commissioned the evaluation (Prior, 2001).

Evaluations of courses delivered online should also benefit from an appreciation that the interaction of the learner with the educational system can be affected by the learner's own context. This context includes her/his physical setting, personal commitments and social positioning in her/his family and at work. The learner's own context appears not to be taken seriously within contemporary educational systems in Australia, even when the increased use of new communication and education technologies can facilitate more flexibility in course delivery. This is demonstrated by the now routine constraints placed on students by the majority of education courses that are delivered online by higher education institutions. These constraints include: strict time frames for 'progress', assignment submission deadlines, mandatory online exercises, mandatory participation in online chat rooms and so on. The same rigidities of time limits and hurdle-based assessment that have been employed in conventional, face-to-face teaching and older distance education continue to be perpetuated with the aid of the new educational technologies. The learner's context (social/cultural/economic settings and relationships, knowledge base, capacities, and physical setting) continues to be largely unaccounted for when new educational technologies are used.

Therefore, it may be useful to the evaluator of online courses to reflect on the use of the term 'flexible learning', which is so readily employed by promoters of off-campus courses to refer to courses that are still delivered largely as 'distance education' (or 'correspondence') courses, which may perhaps be supplemented with online readings repositories and bulletin boards. Flexible learning is not the same as 'distance education' (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p. 9); rather, it refers to

...a movement away from a situation in which key decisions about learning dimensions are made in advance by the instructor or institution, towards a situation where the learner has a range of options from which to choose with respect to these key dimensions. (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p. 10)

It follows, then, that 'flexible learning' should be about the empowerment of the learner to the extent that he or she can choose when, how and where to engage in the learning context – and when s/he does so s/he is enabled to access "...an information world which reacts to his or her own pace of learning" (Benjamin, 1994, p. 49).

We need to establish immediately that we are not arguing here for an anarchic approach to teaching (is this even possible?). Rather, we highlight how new education and communication technologies may be used either to perpetuate a hierarchical and productivist approach to teaching or, by contrast, to circumvent such an approach. The evaluator may benefit from reflecting on whether the application of new educational technologies will present learners with different, even if new, hurdles, and whether these are even deliberately constructed and imposed within the educational system. In such a case, 'flexibility' may mean not only that learners would have to learn to use some complex software that is the core of online learning platforms but also that they may have to navigate regularly through a contorted and specialised online interface that is 'logically' set out to educate, rather than to enhance learning experiences.

'Flexibility' may also mean that learners are required to participate in synchronous and asynchronous online discussions that take place according to a set of rules which assume that learners will find them as being suitable within their own situations and capacities to participate. Last, but not least, 'flexibility' may be taken to mean that learners have to follow strict study timetables, and submit online assignments and undertake assessment

tasks on particular dates. The evaluator may therefore also reflect on whether the new communication technologies employed in the delivery of a particular online education course enhance learning experiences more flexibly than in the classroom, or even by contrast to the more conventional distance teaching approaches.

Indeed, a recent Australian study (Bofinger & Whateley, 2002) indicates that many of the learners who engaged with online learning environments reported generally negative learning experiences. The data collected from that research conducted with learners enrolled in off-campus courses, some of whom are also from a non-English speaking background, show that:

- Learning experiences through distance education have often been confusing, difficult and unpleasant for students.
- Speaking retrospectively, the students have detailed how courses were much more time consuming when compared with on-campus learning experiences.
- Flexibility (beyond the occasional assignment submission extension) was not usually permitted in a way that allowed students to use their own context and capacities more efficiently.
- The educational processes imposed on learners shaped personal contexts through such requirements as strictly paced reading regimens, assignment tasks and compulsory residential/weekend schools that did not account for students' own circumstances.
- Overall, the system was characterised by standardisation in the delivery of education, in which every learner was viewed in the same way, and in which there was little attempt made to learn from the 'students' it produced.

It is also pertinent to note that the anachronistic character of the hierarchical and productivist educational system will become even more evident as an imminent generation of learners will arrive in the higher education system. This is because interactive technologies are becoming a fundamental and integral component of social life more generally, and are losing their initial novelty value, especially to younger people. Young people are becoming what Veen (2002) refers to as the "Homo Zappiens" – presently the 3-16 years olds who prefer to interact with others through technology (television and remote, personal computer and mouse, mobile telephone), and who view society itself as information technology. As learners, Homo Zappiens are already taking responsibility for and are increasingly in charge of information flows, creating virtual communities as a means of enhancing their learning experiences. Learning for them "...is enhanced by confrontation with complex interactive experiences, [and is] a non-linear process of adaptation using associative and creative thinking" (Veen, 2002, n.p.).

Lastly, the evaluator should understand that the provision of the current information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the support subsystem which are in combination such an integral part of organisations that deliver adult training and higher education online control the means through which teachers and learners use new ICTs. However, such technologies are increasingly becoming easy to understand and use, as well as cost effective. This will very likely affect the power exercised within educational organisations by ICT subsystems. This is not only because the incoming Homo Zappiens will be likely to reject control over choice and use of ICTs within their learning experiences, but also because teachers and learners can now easily access a very large number of user-friendly and cheap or even free software packages which they can readily use to organise, upload, facilitate and maintain online courses on their own, and with minimal technical help. The ICT subsystem will find that it will have to retreat into the role that it performs most effectively: providing basis hardware support services and basic online technology maintenance as required (for example, providing and maintaining server space on request from teachers who will design, upload and maintain their own websites for teaching interactive courses online).

CONCLUSION

An evaluation of the efficacy of an online course delivery will benefit from a conceptual

understanding of the role of ideology and power in influencing how such a course will use new ICTs. We suggest that one of the biggest obstacles to effective online interaction is not the technology itself, but its use to perpetuate a particular educational discourse. By perpetuating this discourse in the digital age, it is likely that education systems cannot easily dismantle barriers to teaching and learning. Because, in practical terms, the new online education delivery approaches have been colonised by the discourse of productivist education and control, teachers, learners and evaluators find themselves constrained in various ways within boundaries set by this discourse.

Ultimately, however, the use of new technologies can also present opportunities for confronting the productivist educational discourse in very practical ways, as McClintock (1999, p. 128) suggests:

As digital resources become the infrastructure for education, it becomes much more feasible to test whether or not paternalistic efforts to accelerate the pace of learning are in fact counter productive and whether both time and value can be gained by ceasing to understand the business of the student as learning what teachers teach and instead recognizing it to be what the student's name suggests, studying those things that the student finds significant.

In view of this attitude, evaluators are likely to find that they need to become more reflective in their practice, more responsive to the needs of learners and more critical of the system as a whole as they engage in research that seeks to understand critically the effects of online learning environments on learners. Evaluators and teachers are also likely to become more aware that teaching processes could, through the use of new technologies, be freed from control systems. In light of this, evaluative questions could also focus on how new technologies may be used to capitalise more readily on the diversity of the learners' contexts, rather than to continue to replicate and legitimise the productivist educational discourse.

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