Chapter 14

Personal Learning Environments: Concept or Technology?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and critiques how the notion of PLEs has been conceptualised and discussed in literature so far. It interprets the variability of its interpretations and conceptualisations as the expression of a fundamental contradiction between patterns of activity and digital instrumentation in formal education on one hand, and individual experimentation and experience within the digital realm on the other. It is suggested to place this contradiction in the larger socio-historic context of an ongoing media transformation. Thus, the paper argues against the prevalent tendency to base the conceptualisation of PLEs almost exclusively on Web 2.0 technologies that are currently available or emerging, while underlying patterns of control and responsibility often remain untouched. Instead, it proposes to scrutinise these patterns and to focus educational efforts on supporting adult learners to model their learning activities and potential (personal learning) environments while exploring the digital realm.

INTRODUCTION

It seems fair to say that in recent years the notion of “Personal Learning Environments” (PLEs) emerged mainly as a sort of counter-concept to the centralised provision of institutionally owned and controlled landscapes of tools and services in formal education. Fundamentally, it allowed its proponents to address and question the severe limitations of the mainstream approach to the mediation of teaching and studying activities with digital technologies. The emergence and growing
dissemination of loosely-coupled, networked tools and services and their surrounding practices in particular inspired some scholars to speculate about a transformation of the monolithic, centralised systems that dominated and are still dominating formal education. Downes (2005), for example wrote: “The e-learning application, therefore, begins to look very much like a blogging tool. It represents one node in a web of content, connected to other nodes and content creation services used by other students. It becomes … a personal learning center, where content is reused and remixed according to the student’s own needs and interests. It becomes, indeed, not a single application, but a collection of interoperating applications - an environment rather than a system” (section on “E-Learning 2.0).

Looking back two years later Downes (2007) reflected that “through 2005 and 2006, the concept of the Personal Learning Environment (PLE) slowly began to take form in the educational technology community, coalescing with a ‘Future VLE’ diagram released by CETIS’s Scott Wilson” (p. 19).

Indeed, retrospectively it appears that the visual representation of Wilson’s Future Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (Wilson, 2005) served as a sort of anchor for the discourse on Personal Learning Environments for quite some time. According to Severance et al. (2008) the CETIS (Centre for Educational Technology & Interoperability Standards) group however, traces some of the ideas that drove the early stage of this discourse to an unpublished paper by Oliver and Liber (2001).

Be that as it may, Johnson et al. (2006) suggested that over the years the discourse gradually developed around a number of foci that can be interpreted as an expression of a desire for:

- The integration of technologically mediated activities across all aspects of life.
- A removal of barriers to the use and combination of tools and services.
- Mediated collaboration and co-creation.

We will argue later in this paper that these “desires” actually occur in a specific socio-historic context and that they can also be read as an expression of a rising contradiction experienced in various activity systems and in formal education in particular.

A WIDE RANGE OF INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS

There are clear signs that over the years a wide range of conceptualisations and interpretations have surfaced in the ongoing debates and exchanges. Attwell (2007b), for example, reported his experience at a conference in the following terms: “there was no consensus on what a Personal Learning Environment (PLE) might be. The only thing most people seemed to agree on was that it was not a software application. Instead it was more of a new approach to using technologies for learning” (p. 1). Even this minimal consensus appears to be rather questionable after a thorough literature review on the topic. Kolas and Staupe (2007) also contested that “the variety of interpretation illustrates how diffuse the PLE concept still is” (p. 750). Johnson and Liber (2008) only recently asserted that “within this label, however, a number of practices and descriptions have emerged - not all of which are compatible, and discussions have raged as to the interpretation of the terms” (p. 3). This doesn’t sound much different from what Johnson et al. (2006) had concluded already two years earlier: “This is a title that embraces a variety of different interpretations, and this essential ambiguity is reflected in the discourse that has emerged around it … That such
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