Chapter XVI

Potential Futures of E-Learning

For what is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the Joyntes but so many Wheeles, giving motion to the whole Body.... Art goes yet further; imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, Man. For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH or STATE (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man. (Hobbes, 1973)

Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the argument that underpins this book. The bulk of the chapter is then concerned with the future, both far away and near at hand. It makes few definite predictions, but does give examples of possible paths for e-learning over the next few years, bearing in mind the potential benefits that have been explored through the past few chapters, and the potential dangers that stand in the way of success.
The Argument of This Book in 10 Stages

In brief, the argument that underpins this book can be summarised as follows:

1. A person’s learning trajectory may be seen as an ongoing series of activities that are intended to enable learning to occur.
2. Transactional distance, a measurement of the relative degrees of structure and dialogue in a learning transaction, may be mapped to a single dimension of transactional control, albeit with some loss of descriptive power.
3. Dialogue may be seen as negotiated control, while structure may be seen as teacher control. It is impossible to have both at once because no one can be both in control and out of control at once in the same context.
4. Transactional control is concerned with who makes decisions about the activities undertaken to enable learning, and who decides upon changes in a learning trajectory. Control is a compound of many factors, both extrinsic and intrinsic to the activity, is typically distributed among participants in the activity, and may be considered at a wide range of hierarchical scales.
5. The ideal for any learner is to be able to choose whether to take control or to relinquish it, at every scale and every step along a learning trajectory. Many traditional institutional approaches to teaching militate against this, although dialogue (especially one-to-one) is effective if conducted openly and on equal terms.
7. Social software, in which the group is a first-class object within the system, offers the potential for the learner’s choices to strongly affect the environment and the environment to strongly affect the learner’s choices.
8. In some senses, social software allows learners to engage in a form of dialogue as well as to benefit from the resulting structure, thereby providing both high and low transactional distance, not at the same time, but under the continuous control of the learners.
9. Because transactional distance maps to transactional control, such software applied in an educational context may allow learners either to choose their own learning trajectories or to have those choices made for them.
10. In such an environment, the self-organising feedback loop derived from the collective intelligence of its inhabitants offers the potential for a qualitatively different and (probably) better learning experience.
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