Chapter XVI

The “Pastoral” in Virtual Space: A Tale of Two Systems and How E-Learning Practitioners Re-Make Them

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Abstract

Two online undergraduate media and communications projects, one in Australia (1999-2003), and the second from New Zealand (2004-2005), are analyzed and compared in this chapter. Written by two flexible-learning practitioners, the case study gives the background and contexts of the two projects. We describe how we developed intercultural, pastoral pedagogies suited to contrasting “internationalized” cohorts, despite trends in new “market-driven” universities. The framework used is Michel Foucault’s “pastoral” power, as modelled by Ian Hunter in studies of the milieu of the face-to-face English classroom, and the agency of the teacher in constructing self-reflexive subjectivities (Hunter, 1996). The development of valuable intercultural skills in the student depends in part on the composition of the “internationalized” student groups themselves, and on their and their teacher’s awareness of the formative nature of the software being used. Learning software has the potential to mediate conduct, the choice of what kind of relationships ensue rests with the e-practitioner.
Internationalization Contexts

In a Western university era driven by the massification of educational opportunities, and the privatization of costs caused by a general downturn in state spending on education, many universities in the Australasian region have turned to the global education market in order to survive. Moves toward user-pays education and an emphasis on business-models, as opposed to fully-funded state education and notions of “the public good,” are slowly changing the traditional relationships between universities, their academics, and students, and altering the range of activities in on-campus classrooms, or off-shore locations of study. Pedagogy is changing to meet the changing composition of cohorts. Over the six years of this comparative study, universities in Australia and New Zealand have become nodes in a globalizing system of communities of learning and communication exchanges. A recent Economist report shows mainstream financial journalism’s representation of the phenomenon of international trade in learning:

*Several countries—most notably Australia and New Zealand—are trying to turn education into an export industry.* (The brains business, 2005)

It quotes 2002 OECD figures showing that foreign students comprise 10% of all Australian students. The feature of “internationalization,” which we focus on here, is our experience of developing e-learning strategies in two institutions for the growth in media and communications students under these conditions. Since the mid-1990s, Australian and New Zealand universities have adopted educational technology for most aspects of knowledge and human resource management. Administrators, academics, and students are now subject to an assemblage of new technology services discourses garnered from e-domains outside the academy such as e-commerce with its emphasis on choice and value for money, which has impacted on international student recruitment, and e-government with its emphasis on client services, cost-effectiveness, and transparency, which, along with high student numbers, is altering traditional “pastoral” relationships between academics and their students. This climate brings with it new habits of thought for all concerned: not all productive of the conditions of knowledge seeking, for its own sake. Institutional audits of student “competencies” now emphasize those involved in retrieval and management of vast information resources, as well as particular content acquisition and mastery. E-systems, adopted for information delivery and communication across university libraries, teaching departments, bureaucracies, and university campuses, have become routine. Examples include staff intranets, narrowcast student networks, digital libraries, and external links to partnerships with community and industry, and online enrollment and course delivery. From a teacher’s perspective, the choice of digital platforms and communication protocols is shaped initially by institutional bureaucracies prioritizing their fiscal remit. Dependency on soft funding means that universities aim to reach as many cohorts as possible, as cheaply as possible (see Mazzarol & Hosie [1996] for an early discussion of Australian dependency). As well, even those campuses, which primarily serve on-campus students, use e-learning packages for content delivery in an effort to streamline the management of large numbers.

Institutional decisions about e-learning packages can be made without considering the longer-term constitutive effects on students’ learning of those packages. Crucial differences
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