

Good and bad eLearning

How do we tell one from the other?

John Connell

looks at some of the thorny issues arising out of the use of technology in teaching and learning – and ‘creepy treehouse syndrome.’

It has become *de rigueur*, even amongst strong advocates for the use of digital technology in education, to begin any discussion of eLearning with an affirmation that the 'e' is an unnecessary prefix to the 'learning.' The most common argument is that it's all about learning, that the technology is a mere bit player in the learning process, and that the technology is, after all, 'just a tool.'

I don't buy this argument. At least, I don't buy it when the eLearning in question is good eLearning as opposed to bad eLearning, hence the title of this article. I also feel that this particular argument is a consequence of a mindset that can come close on occasions to a form of bad faith – a disingenuous attempt to persuade the naysayers that the technology is really nothing to worry about.

I want to propose some criteria and some reasoning that will offer, I believe, a way to differentiate between good eLearning and bad eLearning. My argument will be highly subjective – and I don't apologise for that – but my subjectivity will serve a purpose if it generates discussion, and further argument, around some thorny issues arising out of the conscious and planned use of technology in teaching and learning.

Let's start with bad eLearning. Here I'm able to make use of my personal learning network (PLN) because I asked this very question on my blog – at <http://tinyurl.com/n4vldt> – a few weeks ago, in preparation for a keynote talk I was giving at a conference at Brunel University, London.

Some of those who commented on my post offered their own definitions of bad eLearning. For instance, Doug Belshaw, recently appointed as Director of eLearning for a new community high school in the north-east of England, wrote 'Bad eLearning is when you try to do something just because you can and just because it is using technology.' Doug, though, also maintained the argument that I don't buy, by adding, 'I'm a Director of eLearning, but I just ignore the 'e' – it's all about the learning.'

Jenny Luca, Head of Information Services at Toorak College, Melbourne, defined bad eLearning as 'relying on the technology to do the teaching for you; thinking that a new tool will substitute for engagement and interest in your students.'

I find myself in broad agreement with both Doug and Jenny's definitions. It's an unfortunate fact that, for much of the relatively short period since 'microcomputers' and other digital tech-

nologies made their disruptive appearance in our classrooms, their use has largely fallen within the bounds of the bad eLearning that they describe. The technology was there, so we found ways of using it.

Of course, as always in education, there was much soul-searching about the appropriate pedagogical or philosophical basis for what we were doing, but such thinking tended to come *ex post facto* and seldom convincingly. As Stephen Heppell notes, in his preface to *ICT, Pedagogy, and the Curriculum: Subject to change*, 'we continually make the error of subjugating technology to our present practice rather than allowing it to free us from the tyranny of past mistakes.'

Extending such definitions just a little, we might agree that using software or hardware merely to 'dress up' our teaching, or as a short-term motivational tool for students, or as a gimmick to catch attention, was never likely to be mistaken for universally-effective, pedagogically-sound instances of eLearning.

Indeed, Chris Lott, who blogs at <http://tinyurl.com/lhcums>, describes the thoughtless use of online environments as a decorative wrap around our teaching as 'creepy treehouse syndrome' to describe an online place designed by adults to lure kids in for purposes of learning.

Jared Stein, Director of Instructional Design Services at Utah Valley University, picked up Lott's coinage and offered some dictionary-type definitions for it – at <http://tinyurl.com/3vvqz> – amongst them, these two:

'n. Any institutionally-created, operated or controlled environment in which participants are lured in either by mimicking pre-existing open or naturally-formed environments, or by force, through a system of punishments or rewards.

'n. Any system or environment that repulses a target user due to its closeness to or representation of an oppressive or overbearing institution.'

From this perspective, there could be immediate problems that might arise through the use of virtual learning environments of various kinds, or even through the use of freely available web 2.0 social networking and other tools in ways that might be viewed by students as inappropriate or intrusive.

The teacher or lecturer who uses Twitter or Facebook or Bebo or whatever as a medium for the sharing of ideas, discussion, assignments and

so on with his or her students risks being perceived as intruding on students' personal and social territories.

As Stein observed, 'Though such systems may be seen as innovative or problem-solving to the institution, they may repulse some users who see them as an infringement on the sanctity of their peer groups, or as having the potential for institutional violations of their privacy, liberty, ownership or creativity. Some users may simply object to the influence of the institution.'

Even from these brief references, it's clear that eLearning is a minefield, full of traps lying in wait for the incautious teacher. How do we even begin, then, to create instances of good eLearning? I would suggest we do this by going back, in

the best traditions of the Scottish Enlightenment, to first principles. Your first principles, however, may not be the same as my first principles – this is precisely where the subjectivity of my argument arises.

We should start, where we can, with the core purpose of education, and here we could identify many and varied attempts to define that core purpose.

Although I'm not a de-schooler in any real sense, I am fond of quoting the three purposes offered by Ivan Illich in his book *Deschooling Society*, the whole text of which is available online and easily discovered by searching. Illich wrote that, 'A good educational system should

have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known.'

The first of the three purposes is uncontroversial, if still far from being achieved anywhere in the world, but the other two should give us pause for thought in terms of, on the one hand, the inherent reciprocity in the relationship between teacher and learner, a powerful element of that relationship which is rarely given its due place in the industrial model of schooling still serving as the dominant educational paradigm even today,

and the central role of education in ensuring a healthy civic society and a working democracy. Indeed, Illich's last purpose reminds me of the deeply political nature of education, that the act of teaching is an inherently political act, a point with which Jerome Bruner agreed. As he put it, in *The Relevance of Education*, 'Pedagogical theory is not only technical but cultural, ideological and political. If it is to have any impact, it must be self-consciously all of these.'

If we use technology in education in a purely technical way – as though 'it's just a tool' – and ignore the 'cultural, ideological and political' aspects of teaching and learning, the resulting eLearning is more likely to be bad than good, or at best neutral in its effects. Education's fundamental role in the reproduction of the societies we live in – a role, incidentally, that rarely extends to the deliberate and conscious reproduction of discrete cultures and ideologies, other than the dominant ones, within those societies – should be at the heart of every teacher's thinking. The teacher who doesn't ponder such issues simply reinforces the *status quo*, and that in itself is a political act.

Despite writing some four decades ago, Illich's thinking on education, while it descends on occasion into naïve utopianism, contains a set of core ideas and an ethic that I believe is proving useful and viable today in a way that was simply not possible in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Illich's concept of learning webs, for instance, outlined in *Deschooling Society*, written at a time when the technology available to create such webs consisted of the phone and the cassette tape recorder, is only now, with the flowering of social technologies on the web, really becoming viable.

Moreover, the technological developments that are making Illich's vision achievable have also, I believe, changed the very nature of what it means to be educated. The dramatic shifts in social and search technologies, centred on the web, should cause us to think carefully whenever we relegate technology in learning to 'just a tool.'

What are these shifts?

The deeply social nature of the technologies and digital platforms available today, an ever-expanding set of tools that continue to offer new possibilities for self-expression and for collective expression almost on a daily basis, for information gathering through search, and for forms of collaborative learning and working that have simply

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not existed before, already put in question many of the long-held assumptions that have been part and parcel of schooling for so long.

The nature of what it means to know, the role of the teacher in the learning process, the relationship between teacher and learner, the diminishing importance of prescribed content within curricula, the inadequacy, some might argue irrelevance, of the school building as a self-contained place within which learning is supposed to happen, the questionable efficacy of arbitrary 'standards' to be tested over and over again during a young person's school career – all of these are happening because of the underlying technological basis of the society we now inhabit.

We can no longer be entirely comfortable with the notion of the teacher as the fount of all wisdom. Of course, that absolutely should not, as some might have it, detract from the criticality of the teacher's subject and pedagogical expertise and authority, but teachers have to recognise that learners today simply don't depend on their teachers in the way they have done for hundreds of years, a reality that makes the job of the teacher more complex, not less.

And, oddly, yet another example of Illich's thinking is becoming more and more relevant today. In his difficult but compelling book, *Tools for Conviviality*, he defined conviviality as, 'individual freedom realised in personal interdependence, and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value.' He went on, 'I choose the term "conviviality"...to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment., and this is in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment.'

'Individual freedom realised in personal interdependence' – what better way to describe the nature of the relationships we have to nurture in education today?

The quality of personal interdependence in learning now achievable on a global scale, through web technologies, is immeasurably greater than it was before. My PLN, for example, spans every continent and extends across domains of expertise, knowledge and experience that were never matched, in times past, even by the most widely-travelled of scholars. That should be, and can be, just as true for the young people in our schools

today. Where it's not, we must ask why that is the case.

So, what is good eLearning?

I would want to look for any technology-based learning that is built on careful consideration of the purpose of the learning, that allows the relationships between teacher and learner, and between learner and information to open up, that avoids the worst features of 'creepy treehouse syndrome,' that recognises the 'cultural, ideological and political' impact of education, that permits the learner genuine and increasing autonomy in their learning as they grow and learn, that continues to recognise the importance of the changing role of the teacher or, more likely, teachers, and that enables learners to build and nurture their own rich, heterogenous personal learning networks.

A combination of some or all of these factors, I believe, will make good eLearning possible.

That's a tall order, I know.

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LINKS:

<http://www.jobnconnell.co.uk/blog>

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