Chapter VI
Flying Under the Radar:
The Importance of Small Scale E-Learning Innovation within Large-Scale Institutional E-Learning Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that e-learning innovation is best done in an environment that allows for small scale experimentation and development and that this can be made more difficult in an environment that prioritises large scale e-learning systems (i.e., virtual learning environments and content management systems). These larger systems tend to function more as systems for the control and regulation of knowledge production and management, as well as being very resource hungry. The chapter discusses e-learning activities in the Open University (UK), in particular those of the MA in Online and Distance Education programme in the Institute of Educational Technology. This is a case study of e-learning innovation in what has been described as an industrial production model of university education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a discussion of performativity in higher education, and the role that technologies and e-learning play. It describes two ways that e-learning is used for different aspects of performativity: a) to support the control of knowledge production, and b) to enable learners and teachers to innovate and challenge hegemonic systems. It discusses in detail the use of learning technologies over a period of time at the UK Open University (OUUK), and the particular case of the MAODE programme in the University's Institute of Educational Technology (IET). Based on evidence from this programme the chapter argues that such relatively small programmes are key sites for innovation, and have an impact proportionally much greater than their size might predict. Yet because they experiment with methods and technologies out with large-scale institutional systems,

they have to find ways round these: effectively they must fly under the institutional radar. The chapter concludes by arguing that institutional innovation in e-learning could be blocked by a concentration of resources in large-scale virtual learning environments (VLEs) and content management systems (CMSs). Policy makers and managers must avoid too rigid a focus on compliance with institution-wide systems because this closes the spaces available to innovators who want to trial technologies. The adoption of innovation depends on the freedom of innovators and early adopters (Rogers, 1995) to experiment.

PERFORMATIVITY, UNIVERSITIES AND E-LEARNING

The title of this collection implies that e-learning is a key driver for the transformation of universities. However, it is only one driver: e-learning often appears to be adopted as a tool for other drivers, and in particular the driver of performativity. Performativity has been a concept applied to universities since Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984) argued in the 1980s that, in post-modern societies, knowledge had become commodified, and universities were part of this commodification process. Universities may once have seen themselves as semi-autonomous bodies (collegial organisations) that aimed to pursue knowledge and scholarship for its own good; places where the academic workforce could call on the concept of 'academic freedom' to justify their personal authority to decide what they researched and what they taught. Students joined this community as 'novices' and left as 'masters'. However, argued Lyotard, in post-modern societies students are reconceived as customers and knowledge is a commodity ('goods') purchased by them and the State; the operation and control of this he called 'performativity'. This analysis is generally accepted as accurate, whether one supports it or not. David Kirp sums up very well this changing role of universities in the twentieth century in the two quotations he puts in the introduction to his book on the marketing of higher education:

The University is a community of scholars and students engaged in the task of seeking the truth. – Karl Jaspers, The Idea of the University (1946)

Knowledge is a form of venture capital – Michael Crow, Chronicle of Higher Education (2000). (Kirp, 2003, p. 1)

Economies, organisations and individuals depend on commodified knowledge and universities are a vital link in the commodity exchange chain. Consequently those who fund universities want to measure the performance of the institution in its creation and exchange of knowledge, and look for ways to increase institutional efficiency. The rise in the use of performance indicators such as retention data, student satisfaction surveys, and research assessment exercises as the tools of performativity is an indication of this change (Barnett, 1992; Cowen, 1996). Some have challenged the idea that universities really are post-modern institutions, arguing that the tools used for performativity measures are 'a symptom of an excessive belief in rational systems, in objective knowledge and decisionism' (Barnett, 2000, p. 320) and therefore part of late, industrial modernism (advanced Fordism); but there is wide consensus, however you model universities, that performativity has been the main driver of higher education since the 1980s. E-learning and knowledge media are now part of the processes of knowledge commodification; and also, through their ability to track users and measure and control user activity, part of the systems and tools of university performance management.

Lyotard argued that there are two possible ways that information technologies can be used in universities (Roberts, 1998): they can be used for the control and regulation of knowledge production, and/or they can be used by small groups to