Web Based Education – Dare We Achieve the Dream of True Student Empowerment?

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing emphasis upon the provision of education through web delivery services that will allow universities and other educational providers to reach out to a global audience. The benefits for the learner include the prospect of flexible systems that provide greater consumer choice in terms of subject, times and patterns of study, and choice of institution. The availability of such a diverse, rich and accessible opportunity for learners, combined with the larger market place would seem to offer established educational institutions many advantages and benefits. This paper suggests, however, that the growth of such a new and dynamic educational marketplace, populated by a wide range of education providers, will bring with it significant new problems, or rather new incarnations of older problems, that may challenge existence of some current educational providers. These threats are not technical, instead being driven by market related perceptions that may alter provider/student relationships as the web-enabled client-led learning paradigm develops.

INTRODUCTION

On the 28th May 1968 the students and some of the staff took control of Hornsey College of Art, North London, as part of a revolt against what they saw as an education system that did not support the needs of students. They boldly declared that the College was in the control of the students and that they were demanding a new educational structure that would better meet the needs of the students.

The staff and students were striving to achieve a system where 'lecturers' and 'students' become partners engaged on the same task (as opposed to the authoritarian models still in use: lecturer as ruler, pupil as subject; lecturer as priest, student as acolyte" (The Hornsey Affair, 1969).

Although that 'revolution' was unsuccessful, the core educational structures demanded by the staff and students appear to be sound, and perhaps modern web-based education would applaud, and could quickly address, many of the key ideas. The 'revolutionaries' proposed an educational system characterised by the following focal issues:

1. An open system whereby all individual demands can be taken into account whether specialised or comprehensive
2. Subjects to be set up in response to the need of individual or group of students at any moment – thus the curricula will be in a constant state of flux
3. Within the operational curricula of any one moment there will be total freedom of choice of options and combinations available to everyone
4. Complete freedom of individual or group research at any time with or without tutorial assistance
5. A system of invited tutors who are engaged for the duration of a project that involves them. Probably only technical staff will be engaged full time
6. Tutors will be determined as suitable according to student evaluation
7. Tutors are those people who have any information that an individual or group want. They can be drawn from any area of involvement
8. The spatial, social materials and equipment organisation should have an equivalent degree of flexibility in use as embodied in the curricula and tutorial structure outlined above

9. All facilities to be open 168 hours a week throughout the year

(The Hornsey Affair)

This proposal, however educationally attractive at first examination, would appear to have posed several significant problems for the managers of the system that was then in place. Firstly, the process indicated in the student demands would not lend itself to 'easy' management of resources (rooms, staff, facilities) as it requires a lack of rigid arrangement of defined subjects. Secondly, the making available of resources on a twenty-four hour basis would have posed practical problems both in terms of finance and management of the security of those resources. Thirdly, the selection of teaching staff by the students would typically raise issues of the validity of the selection process and 'credentials' of the appointed 'staff', and also of the remuneration of individuals employed on what would be key but, paradoxically, casual contracts. The fundamental problem may well have been that while this would appear to be a truly flexible and student-centred system, a concept to which education frequently pays lip service, its practical application would have had a profoundly threatening impact on existing top-down management systems. Speaking at a meeting with staff and students Sir John Summerson, Chair of the National Council for the Diploma in Art and Design, expressed some of the tensions:

"If you could plan your education for … the type of people who are filling this room at the moment, completely absorbed and dedicated in the problems of art education and their own education, if you could plan education for a body of students who were consistently of that kind, how very much faster you would get along … [but] Education has to be planned on a long-term basis and allow for variations in personality and character that crop up, and for fluctuations year by year … It's got to have some rigid parts to it. It's got to have an Establishment, it's got to have a respectable lid on top of it".

(The Hornsey Affair)

Conventional educational systems certainly do have to have a measure of rigidity in them, given that they rely heavily on an administrative underpinning to regulate rooms bookings, enrollments, graduations, exams and all of the other structures of typical educational systems. The concept of absolute free choice of study pattern, lecturer and so on can be argued as being totally at odds with a well regulated and managed system in which the student

follows prescribed routes at a fixed rate of progress. The availability of web based systems can offer solutions to some of the issues of flexibility of delivery, efficient use of resources etc., but the deeper educational issues of freedom of students to choose staff on the basis of either perceived suitability or on the basis of student reviews may become even more complex and contentious.

As may have been expected, the students and staff did not achieve their idealised learning environment, possibly partly as a result of their overt frontal attack on the Establishment. Other writers were also attacking the system, equally strongly, but through the medium of writing rather than direct confrontation.

'DE-SCHOOLING'

Ivan Illich (1971) was a strong critic of the prevailing school system, stating that it tended to confuse process and substance, leading to a position where:

"The pupil is thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new."

He suggested 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"

This statement echoes some of the key concerns of the Hornsey revolutionaries but also includes an element of public interaction with the educational system. Illich was also stronger in his condemnation of the prevailing educational system, arguing that:

"Learners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based on whether they possess a certificate or a diploma. Nor should the public be forced to support, through a regressive taxation, a huge professional apparatus of educators and buildings which in fact restricts the public's chances for learning to the services the profession is willing to put on the market. It should use modern technology to make free speech, free assembly, and a free press truly universal and, therefore, fully educational."

Here we can see the seeds of an open, technology-based educational system that challenges the notion of 'professional apparatus of educators and buildings'. He challenges the idea of the educator as the guardian and communicator of knowledge, suggesting that the focus of education should be that of broadening horizons and reducing mystique:

Illich suggested that schools are designed on the assumption that 'there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly successions; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets'. As a consequence of this assumption he believed that 'An individual with a schooled mind conceives of the world as a pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags'. The role of new educational institutions would be to break apart this pyramid and to facilitate access for the learner: 'to allow him to look into the windows of the control room or the parliament, if he cannot get in by the door. Moreover, such new institutions should be channels to which the learner would have access without credentials or pedigree—public spaces in which peers and elders outside his immediate horizon would become available'.

He also identifies as a key element the freedom of the learner to choose their teacher, again echoing the essential flavour of points five, six and seven of the Hornsey demands:

"In a deschooled society professionals could no longer claim the trust of their clients on the basis of their curricular pedigree, or ensure their standing by simply referring their clients to other professionals who approved of their schooling."

Illich suggested a way in which such a peer-based network could be implemented using the technology of the time:

"The user would identify himself by name and address and describe the activity for which he sought a peer. A computer would send him back the names and addresses of all those who had inserted the same description. … In its most rudimentary form, communication between client and computer could be established by return mail. In big cities typewriter terminals could provide instantaneous responses. The only way to retrieve a name and address from the computer would be to list an activity for which a peer was sought. People using the system would become known only to their potential peers. … A complement to the computer could be a network of bulletin boards and classified newspaper ads, listing the activities for which the computer could not produce a match. No names would have to be given. Interested readers would then introduce their names into the system."

Today the web would enable such a system to be implemented with little difficulty – and Illich seems to have foreseen and partially addressed some of the security and privacy issues that such a system would pose. He also raises an important idea when he repeatedly uses the term 'peers' rather than 'teachers' and 'learners'. Rogers and Groombridge (1976) describe the experiments with 'learning exchanges' which also build on this peer to peer learning support:

'Apart from its practical value, the idea of a learning exchange is symbolically important. It takes a stage further the implementation of an assumption which runs through adult education, sometimes submerged but often overt and acknowledged - that the human species is not divided into a small group of clever teachers and a large group of not so clever students. Learning exchanges presupposes the client may, if he wishes, change sides or offer both to teach and to learn"

They note that learning exchanges (which Illich described as 'learning webs', a prophetic term) could take the form of 'loose but strong' links between a variety of participants, and would not need to be built in the traditional education sector. They point to practical examples of learning exchanges in non-traditional settings:

'The first of these was probably the one started at Centreprise, the east London bookshop-come-centre for community action. People saw that the learning exchange was easy to use, like dealing through postcard advertisements in newsagent shops or exchanging goods through swap shop programmes on local radio'

Once again the analogues mentioned here are available in a web environment. Possibly one difference is that the ability of, for example, Amazon.com to add on a for-profit educational structure that could be linked to its other products and services would be easier and faster than in the 1970's. Bring in the idea of them becoming able to confer some kind of qualification and the educational world takes on an interesting aspect that may enable the realisation of the visions of earlier educators.

'TEACHER' CREDIBILITY

Illich suggests that:

"Instead of placing trust in professionals, it should be possible, at any time, for any potential client to consult with other experienced clients of a professional about their satisfaction with him by means of another peer network easily set up by computer, or by a number of other means. Such networks could be seen as public utilities which permitted students to choose their teachers or patients their healers."

Even if peers were proven, through such a register of satisfied clients for example, to be able to demonstrate and communicate their expert knowledge in a way that satisfied the learner, traditional educators may still feel that such an individual lacks 'credibility'

Illich also recognises the problem of the 'expert' becoming a leader more through charismatic than pedagogic attributes:

"Charlatans, demagogues, proselytizers, corrupt masters, and simoniacal priests, tricksters, miracle workers, and messiahs have proven capable of assuming leadership roles and thus show the dangers of any dependence of a disciple on the master. Different societies have taken different measures to defend themselves against these counterfeit teachers. … Our society relies on certification by schools. It is doubtful that this procedure provides a better screening, but if it should be claimed that it does, then the counterclaim can be made that it does so at the cost of making personal discipleship almost vanish."

Given evidence suggesting that consumers in general are cautious about trusting web based transactions, the idea of placing trust in someone who is outside the formal educational structure and who may also be located anywhere in the world may be problematic. However, a register of satisfied clients, freely available to be consulted, may be one way to reduce this lack of trust. Rogers and Groombridge (1976) highlight the difficulty facing educational 'consumers' purchasing 'education; from a web based provider, remarking that:

"No doubt parts of the solution will stem from a recognition that adults may indeed often be the best judges of whether they are getting what they want. And illiterate adults will not mind whether his tutor is being vouched for and certificated by some validating organisation if in fact he succeeds in learning how to write. On the other hand, people are notoriously unable to tell whether their lack of progress in mastering some skill or body of knowledge is due to poor teaching or their own stupidity and lack of talent."

One solution may be to 'police' the activities of those who claim to be educators, possibly by some national or international body as Rogers and Groombridge suggest:

"No doubt those setting up learning exchanges will meet a range of practical problems. Even Illich acknowledges that "public matching devices would be abused for exploitative and immoral purposes". They might also suffer from straight educational imperfections. There are after all incompetent teachers, and how does the learning exchange protect its clients from charlatans? Does it or should it do spot checks on the competence of tutors on offer, rather as a classified advertisement manager has to verify the bona fides of advertisers?" Rogers and Groombridge (1976)

If such a mechanism were to be established presumably it would also need to carry out rigorous checks of the formal systems from a 'consumer' perspective, something that may cause problems for the formal system that espouses to be more than a commercial marketing tool for education as a product.

TRUE FLEXIBILITY OF LEARNING

The Hornsey students were seeking twenty-four hour access to learning resources and clearly this is a major feature of web based delivery systems. However the idea that students could join a subject at any time, from their place of work or residence, in any sequence, from any programme of study, using a collection of subjects from providers of their choice, on the basis of recommendation rather than demonstration of formal teaching recognition may prove to be somewhat problematic. If the learner simply wants to learn to satisfy their appetite for learning then they are operating as a normal consumer and would be able to judge the value and quality of the process on their own perceived outcomes. However, problems would probably arise if that learner wishes to translate the collection of 'learnings' into a 'recognised' qualification. The problems of accreditation of prior learning would surface and lead to difficulties for formal education in terms of equivalence of the various elements of study. This whole situation is an exact parallel to the development of the Extension movement in the UK in the 19th century. Marriott (1981) records that in 1891 an obscure educational magazine, the University Extension Journal, offered a rash prediction:

'Before long some university will seize the unequalled opportunity... will boldly lay down a curriculum of study for degrees on new lines suited to the needs of those who desire to carry on their intellectual culture side by side with a regular business of life'

Between 1884 and 1897 there was a proposal to create a part-time teaching university organised along entirely novel lines that would have embodied some quite remarkable ideas:

i. admission of any person likely to benefit, irrespective of age, sex or social status;

ii. imposition of the fewest possible requirements in the way of entry qualifications or matriculation;

iii. a programme of part-time study, under university teachers, extending over eight years or more and leading to a degree;

iv. a curriculum designed to meet the needs of those who were bound to remain in their usual occupations, being a modular structure made up of the smallest educationally viable units;

v. examinations based largely on the assessment of each course as it was taken, with little reliance on set-piece tests;

vi. courses offered in any place where an acceptable teacher could make himself available, the university to be based on the recognition of teaching and not of formal institutions.

This University of the Future would "not be a chartered body like existing universities but a floating aggregation of voluntary agencies: not so much organised as tending to co-operate" Once again we see a glimpse of the possible web-enabled educational world we now stand on the edge of.

There was, as may be anticipated, resistance from the established universities of the time, essentially Oxford and Cambridge, who felt that the accreditation of study under such a system could lead to demands for recognition of this external study as part of their own degree provision - "a backstairs to a degree". Practical examples of attacks on the high walls that surrounded early universities in order to grant a diverse group of learners access to education on a full time or part time basis can be found in the last two decades of the 19th century in the UK. Marriott refers to the 'missionary Dons", who were;

'College fellows from Oxford and Cambridge and professors

from London [who] were taking themselves off into the province's to meet the clients of mechanics institutes, middle-class women's educational associations and societies of working people, trying to give them some better educational fare than the genteel amusements that were commonly available. These were the missionary Dons, men often closely connected with the demand for academic reform but cherishing a conception of university extension more broad and generous than those generally discussed within the university walls'.

These are the types of people who would no doubt have greeted the idea of web-enabled education, able to reach a global population and offer a rich learning environment, with huge enthusiasm. It represents not only an exciting learning environment but also has an anarchic element that would allow the testing and development of new forms of education in a somewhat covert and dynamic way.

Marriott notes that Moulton pleaded for elasticity, questioning the wisdom of increasing the numbers of universities and along with them the likelihood of retaining the rigidity that characterised the systems. Moulton suggested that "The true policy is: not to multiply the degree-giving bodies, introducing confusions and impairing the value of degrees (eg their antiquity): but, to introduce elasticity into the machinery of testing for degrees". Courses could be provided by a wide range of agencies; the existing universities could control the quality of teaching by scrutiny of syllabuses, and could award their existing degrees on the recommendation of a board of examiners nominated by all those taking part in the scheme. As Marriott comments, 'There one finds an imaginative contribution to the theory of academical reform; the essential point was that the university should be identified with teaching of a proper standard and not with fixed institutions carrying the label of higher education'. Pursuing this line of thought Moulton once provocatively announced: "University education, as I understand it, has nothing to do with universities. I mean that university education has no necessary connection with universities".

CONCLUSION

True empowerment of learners would require that the conditions demanded by the Hornsey students, along with those explored in the early 19th century, be implemented. Learners would have free choice of where to study and who to lead them along the path of learning; they would want complete freedom to choose the subject and sequence of subjects; they would want to be free to study when and where was most appropriate to them; they would want to be able to select or deselect providers on the basis of evidence freely available to all participants; and they would want to be able to have their studies acknowledged as being of a standard appropriate for recognition in terms of university certification. This empowerment represents a radical change for many current educational systems, but some believe that radical change is the only kind of change that will lead to improvements in the education system. Milton Friedman (1995) commented that 'I believe the only way to make major improvement in our educational system is through privatization to the point at which a substantial fraction of all educational services is rendered to individuals by private enterprises. Nothing else will destroy or even greatly weaken the power of the current educational establishment – a necessary pre-condition for radical improvement in our education system.'.

The total destruction of the formal 'Educational Establishment' seems as unlikely now as it was in the 19th century or the 1960's, given the power and vested interests of the traditional universities and their more recent counterparts. However, the continued expansion of the web combined with growth in 'educational consumerism' may well be the vehicle that leads to that weakening of the formal, highly structured and essentially self-serving 'Establishment' and to an empowerment of the learner. Growth in third party vocationally oriented providers, responding to profit-making opportunities, and the ability of non-traditional organisations to grant degrees will complicate the scene and may help re-shape the current, essentially monopolistic, educational provision. The pervasive, web-enabled, environment may offer the route to the fulfilment of the dream of true student empowerment – but paradoxically may also lead to the demise of some of those educational providers who currently see it as their future.

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