Chapter 1
Beyond Control:
Will Blended Learning Subvert National Curricula?

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning seems to entail a relatively innocuous set of techniques, but closer examination reveals some of these carry implicit assumptions—of constructivist philosophy, peer collaboration, and situative learning—which may make their export to other countries and national cultures problematic. They also provide a route to the Internet: a storehouse of Westernised, unauthorized, and anarchic content. So will blended learning subvert national curricula? This chapter contributes to the debate by examining the milieu of national educational policy, relating it to forms of knowledge. Web 2.0 applications and open educational resources are discussed in relation to the growing gap between traditional curricula and the digitally-enabled communities of mass collectivism and direct action. Blended learning is shown to pose cultural threats, but also open opportunities, and whether these threats can be turned to advantage depends crucially upon how national policies are formulated and implemented. The conclusion poses key questions for policy-makers and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

A significant expression of the national identity of a country is the way in which it orients its educational system. National curricula – used here to include those statutory declarations of the aims and content of schooling and higher education of a country, as well as the nationally distinctive features of its educational institutions – embody particular, and in some cases unique, views of the world, reflecting that country’s shared national values and history as well as its social, economic and technological priorities.

Generally speaking, national curricula and the educational institutions which transmit their values, are relatively static and have not kept pace with the changing practices and needs of an emerging 21st Century knowledge economy. By some analyses it is
in procedural know-how rather than formal propositional knowledge that economic competitiveness increasingly lies. There is perhaps a greater mismatch between these two facets of knowledge in Developing Countries, where new technologies and knowledge-intensive occupations are less established; but in most countries strong associations exist between new technologies, aspirations of modernity, and perceived wealth. It is for these reasons that students may be tempted to look beyond the confines of national curricula for more relevant vocational preparation.

Open Educational Resources is a term given to educational content and materials which are made available at little or no cost, generally for use in not-for-profit education. Where in the past there were physical and financial constraints on the distribution of educational resources in printed form, the arrival of the World Wide Web has removed almost all barriers to dissemination. The quantity and variety – and latterly quality – of Open Educational Resources has grown rapidly; however, it is currently dominated by English-language materials from the USA and UK, and so reflects the national and socio-cultural orientations of these countries.

The World Wide Web has developed substantially over the last two decades, but in the early days adopted a ‘broadcast’ metaphor whereby information was typically presented by an organisation or authority for access by the individual. The last few years have seen explosive growth in a far more interactive and symmetric use of this technology, in what has come to be known as Web 2.0. Principally used for social networking, Web 2.0 also enables informal and peer-to-peer interaction and learning unconstrained by the limitations of time and space. It is similarly not culture-neutral but embodies ideas of individualistic expression, democratic and active learner engagement, pluralism and the acceptance of multiple representations of ‘truth’, which are identified with Western countries.

To this digital divide can be added a generational component; for the young people who have grown up with digital technologies, there is impatience with print-bound media and the ethos and approach of traditional educational institutions. What these students regard as a reluctant adoption of new technologies by their teachers may reinforce a desire to reject their national system in favour of what they see as more relevant digital materials and practices. These views are further advanced when there is an identification of the latter with progress, prosperity and vocational opportunity.

It can be seen that the greater employment of Blended Learning – incorporating elements of traditional methods alongside eLearning – within national educational systems across the world will inevitably promote online access to Web-based educational resources. The danger for national curricula is that learners, perhaps impelled by vocational ambitions or simply a desire for social engagement, will go beyond state-prescribed requirements to explore Open Educational Resources and Web 2.0 applications. This access to unsanctioned content is likely to present challenges to the authority and relevance of all national educational systems, but in non-Western countries may present challenges also to their social and cultural values.

The debate around Blended Learning has so far focused on the immediate practicalities of educational technology and pedagogical practice; but the important dimension of socio-cultural and policy issues must also be confronted. There appear to be two distinct sets of issues: pertaining firstly to Open Educational Resources and secondly to Web 2.0. The first concerns relatively minor questions of whether the importation of ‘foreign’ resources is always a bad thing, and to what extent the dangers of Western bias might be offset by the utility of high quality and vocationally relevant materials. The second set of issues is more worrying however, as a change of learner focus, from meeting statutory and institutional requirements to the pursuit of in-
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