Chapter VI
Disintermediated Education

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, it is argued that one of the benefits of IT is its role in enabling the disintermediation of education to provide an environment in which all can participate. In the context of this chapter however, the focus is on the role of the Internet as a disintermediating technology. There are many ramifications to this but the focus is upon the implications as far as education is concerned. The controlling mechanisms of education have been cost and geographical access. The Internet has changed both of these through its disintermediating function, potentially allowing access to all. The purpose of this chapter is to theorise this in considering the prognosis for development in various parts of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional models of learning focus upon the needs of students in terms of preferred learning styles and learning needs with teaching strategy dependant upon those factors. All such models consider the learning process as an interaction between teacher and learner (Crowther & Carter, 2002), with technology providing the subordinate role of supporting the learning and teaching strategies. It has been argued however (Davies & Crowther, 1995; Crowther & Davies 1996) that there is a largely unquestioning acceptance discourse that the subject matters being taught are appropriate for the needs of students. Consequently the only topic for debate within the discourse is the mechanism for transferring the knowledge contained within these subjects from the holders of that knowledge (the academics in higher education) to the persons desirous of receiving that knowledge (the students). The problem with this approach to learning is that it is predicated in the traditional mode of students attending at a location in order to receive wisdom

from the teacher. While this has been established for centuries and works fine in developed countries it is problematic in less developed countries where geographical distance and cost make prohibitive barriers. In this chapter therefore, we argue that one of the benefits of IT is its role in enabling the disintermediation of education to provide an environment in which all can participate. And education is of course essential to change developing countries into developed countries.

The Internet is often portrayed as a panacea for the enabling and empowering of individuals and grass-roots activity: a 'distributed' technology capable of providing a counter-balance or even an alternative, to the omnipresent and omnipotent organisations and institutions of the twenty-first century. Indeed, there exist some powerful examples of successful e-collectivism and online action (Holmes & Grieco, 2000; Steward et al., 2000; Hogan & Greene, 2002). However, despite such successes the virtual world that is emerging and unravelling before us continues to be contested space; on the one hand, the Internet is an enabling technology that allows for the empowerment of grass-root networks, through the liberation of their communication paths and practices, and the potentialities for network building and boundary-spanning. On the other hand, in the struggle for the retention of 'old economy' positions, as well as the development of 'new economy' power-bases, organisations and institutions are strategising and manoeuvring in order to constrain and shape such networks and communications. This containment can occur, for example, through technological means (e.g., surveillance and 'walled gardens') and the structuring of the virtual world (e.g., portals).

Much of the discourse surrounding the opportunities available through the Internet is concerned at a societal level with the effects of internet technology upon society, and only by implication, upon individuals within society. It is however only at the level of the individual that these changes can take place. Indeed, access to the Internet and the ability to communicate via this technology to other individuals, without regard to time and place, can be considered to be a revolutionary redistribution of power (Russell, 1975). Moreover, the disciplinary practices of society (Foucault, 1977) breakdown when the Internet is used because of the lack of spatial contiguity between communicants[1] and because of the effective anonymity of the communication which prevents the normalising surveillance mechanisms of society (Clegg, 1989) to intercede in that communication.

Meanwhile, over the last quarter of a century higher education in the most Western countries has been transformed. In the UK, for example, this has meant a change from an elite activity, in which only 5% of school leavers participated, to a mass activity in which over 40% of school leavers participate. The government has plans to expand this further over the next few years to ensure that 50% of school leavers participate. This trend has been paralleled throughout the Western world, while in other parts of the world there has been a similar trend towards a greater participation in higher education, albeit starting from a lower base. For many would-be participants in higher education from many countries around the world the opportunity to study at a university is desirable but the opportunity to study at a university in the Western world is even more desirable and the limiting factor to the achievement of this desire is the cost involved. Nevertheless, a significant and increasing number of young people do manage to achieve this desire. This inevitably means of course that wealth is one factor which determines a person's access to higher education. Those lacking this wealth tend to study at universities in their own country—provided of course that they have the necessary wealth to even do this. For those without the financial resources to study at a university in this manner, there is recourse to other options. Thus around 30 years ago the UK established its Open University to enable those otherwise unable to attend university to participate in higher

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