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Flexibility as Myth?: New Technologies and Post-Fordism in Higher Education

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Flexibility as Myth?: New Technologies and Post-Fordism in Higher Education

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Abstract:

This paper sets out to explore the notion of 'flexibility' across the university sector. Drawing on literature from industrial sociology, the authors highlight the apparent shift in higher education towards more flexible modes of delivery, which has been attributed to developments in new learning technologies. It is widely argued (Sabel, 1989; Hall & Jacques, 1991) that in the industrial manufacturing sector, new technologies and work practices have enabled a more specialised or flexible production process, which have in turn transformed static 'Fordist' processes into dynamic post-Fordist flexible production systems. Similarly in higher education, the traditional degree course, delivered over a three year period, by lectures, seminars and tutorials, are being supplemented by a more technology enabled and therefore flexible delivery mechanisms. Moreover, in the context of the UK government's widening participation programme and its lifelong learning agenda, a truly 'flexible' education is posited as being increasingly available to all (see Coffield, 2000). These developments have been accompanied by a growing literature on post-Fordism's impact on education (Avis, 1993; Sharp, 1996). However, as in industrial sociology, where claims about post-Fordist production processes have been questioned, (Robbins & Webster, 1988; Pollert, 1991) the authors suggest that the notion of flexibility within an educational context is also suspect and requires further analysis. This paper therefore deconstructs the range of debates around flexibility. If, as the authors suggest, the claims about flexibility in HE are wide of the mark, what exactly is happening to the university sector, and importantly, what are the implications for staff and students?

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TITLE OF PAPER: Is there a policy for networked learning?

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Is there a policy for networked learning?

Networked learning can be considered to be one aspect of an emergent networked society (Castells 1996). As such networked learning is not simply discussed in educational terms but forms part of a wider set of debates concerning the nature of social processes, power and culture. With some notable exceptions networked learning is not discussed as a political choice involving issues of power and control, more usually it is debated as a technical issue, a question of efficiency (Noble 1997, Brabazon 2001, Jones 2001, Clegg et al 2001, Land and Bayne 2001). The literature surrounding networked learning still reflects technological determinist views that argue social change is a necessary consequence of the application of technology (Jones and Steeples 2002). Influential authors continue to describe networked learning in ways that imply the use of networked technology will lead to definite educational outcomes (Bates 1999, Spender 2000). These outcomes include new organisational and management structures, virtual and e-universities, and particular forms of pedagogy that alter traditional relationships between students and staff. This paper takes issue with this view of the relationship between technology and social forms. In particular it questions the idea that there is any technological imperative determining the shape of networked learning.

The context of higher education has been changing alongside the introduction of new technologies into education. The very same technologies that provide the infrastructure of networked learning are implicated in the rapid social changes that have impacted on higher education in recent years. Becher and Trowler (2001) have recently reviewed the changes in academic cultures using the geographic metaphors of landscapes, territories and topography. Mapping networked learning against this changing landscape reveals a strong connection. Higher education is affected by globalisation, massification, changes in the form of state regulation and changing economic relations with industry, the market and a developing managerialism. Networked learning has deep connections to each of these issues. Networked technologies are often the enablers of these changes and the changes are in turn commonly used to justify the further development and use of networked technologies in education.

The paper looks at the United Kingdom as an example of the way in which political issues impact on networked learning. The UK government has promoted networked technologies using a variety of policy initiatives and since the Dearing Report in 1997 these initiatives have been informed by a 20 year vision for higher education. By raising questions about the relationship between government policy and networked or e-learning, the paper tries to establish what choices are being made at the level of national governments. It tries to establish some basic outline of the policy framework for networked learning in the UK and examines some of the key policy initiatives post-Dearing. In particular the paper takes two large

policy initiatives, the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) as examples of current policy.

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TITLE OF PAPER: National strategic drivers and institutional policies for networked learning

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National strategic drivers and institutional policies for networked learning

National strategy and policy for the Higher Education sector and the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), sit within a context of rapid technological change. This provides immense opportunities, whilst at the same time making firm commitments very difficult. There is evidence that this area is maturing; it is becoming integrated into the core business of institutions, and is being considered as part of a more generic learning and teaching debate. This incorporation into institutional culture has been emphasised by Laurillard (ALT, 1999) and matches well with Gibbs' recommendations (Gibbs, 1998). These recommendations have been taken on board in the UK; the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) now requires all HEIs to have in place a clear and demonstrable learning and teaching strategy. In parallel the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has been developing a framework for institutional Information Strategies, as a result most HEIs now have in place an Information Strategy (IS). The focus is on considering the wider implications of ICT within context (JISC, 1996).

The above indicates that ICT is moving from peripheral innovations and developments to underpinning and affecting all aspects of learning and teaching within institutions. However, it is also clear that the "ICT-debate" should not be addressed in isolation, but needs to be considered within the wider context. National strategic thinking has a profound effect and influence on funding mechanisms. There is evidence of an increased prominence of the importance of ICT. For example, the National Grid for Learning (NGfL), Learndirect and the e-university are major initiatives. The shift towards embedding ICT is well illustrated by the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP), where the last phase clearly shifted from development of materials to integration (HEFCE, 1997). Recent UK calls for proposals from JISC confirm the above, with a great focus on developing 'joined-up' technologies and providing a solid technical infrastructure with a critical mass of materials through the development of a Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER).

A related driver in the UK is the teaching quality assessment process. Institutions are required to provide baseline documentation and evidence their achievements against a set of six quality indicators, covering the teaching, learning and assessment process and procedures and the supporting resources and infrastructure. In part support of this, the institutional strand of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund states that institutional learning and teaching strategy "will play a crucial role in improving learning and teaching in HE".

ICT evidently now impacts across all aspects of the teaching, learning and research provision within institutions. The importance of ICT (and its potential impact) means that it cannot be marginalised, or its use considered in isolation. Rather there is a need to integrate ICT strategy and policy across all levels, embed it firmly into relevant policy and practice.

This paper highlights some of the current national drivers with respect to ICT in UK Higher Education and in particular the increasing importance which is being placed on the establishment of higher-level strategic thinking to support appropriate and timely use of ICT to support learning and research. It will also relate this national thinking to developments at a local level with a case study of the development of ICT and its relationship to institutional strategies at the University of Bristol.

Supported Autonomy: The Politics of Networked Learning

Abstract

This paper sets out a social-theoretical background to networked learning and introduces the principle of supported autonomy. But, contemporary education policy drivers, economic and political, do not so much support autonomy as limit it in the interest of preserving hierarchies. A supported autonomy model is essentially anti-hierarchical. Learning Technology practice involves the production of C&IT artefacts (VLEs, CACL, adaptive intelligent systems, etc), which are used in Networked Learning engagements as tools to shape educational discourses. This paper uses use mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001) to investigate the significance conveyed by such tools and networked learning in the discourse that they shape and asks the question if, within such an environment, student-centred, problem-posing methods might be practiced. It then sets out a "landscape architecture" (Miller 2001) of a distributed, learner-centred, universal, secure, networked, open-systems, standards-based managed learning environment.

Preface

Miller (2001) sets out three constituent component "architectures" that together comprise an "Information Architecture: technical architecture, functional architecture, and landscape architecture, and declares that, "Partly, these architectures form a philosophical basis within which developments may be undertaken, [but] it remains important that such architectures not be driven forward solely in a technological context, but that their design, implementation and evolution continually be informed by institutional and user requirements and aspirations."

This paper is one of three related papers, which together propose, model and pilot components of a distributed, learner-centred, universal, secure, networked, open-systems, standards-based managed learning environment.

Paper 1 (is this paper).

Paper 2 (in preparation with Bernie Garrett for publication in 2003) describes a technical architecture at a high level of abstraction for adaptive intelligent systems that are themselves social actors with nexus(es) of practice identical in kind to human social actors (i.e. people,) only limited in complexity by current technology. This paper further argues from the theoretical background of Paper 1 that systems developed in response to and in support of hierarchical authoritarian policies will necessarily be "stunted from birth": of limited intelligence with narrow pathways within which adaptive variety will be constrained.

Paper 3 (awaiting decision on project funding) will arise from analysis of a project to develop and pilot in systems a functional architecture for a

learner-centred cross-institutional managed learning environment with supra-institutional (distributed) authentication and access control and a distributed learning hub (DLH). There are many questions that arise from the proposal of distributed authentication and access control. These range from data protection issues to rather larger questions that touch on the civil liberties debate. The inversion of an institution-based student information system by modelling a supra-institutional system risks replacing many small institutions with one "super" institution, without actually changing the focus of the model from the institution to the learner.