

Chapter 5

Educational Technology, Innovation and Habitus: What is the Connection?

Larry McNutt

Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Information and communications technology has radically transformed many aspects of modern life. However, this is in marked contrast to its impact on education. The purpose of this chapter is to explore why educational technology has done little to transform our higher education system. This is in spite of the emergence of the formal role of educational technologist, the improved ICT infrastructure and the evolving recognition of the importance of teaching and learning within the sector. Yet it is also apparent that within a given academic community there are many individually motivated innovators, i.e. those characterised by their willingness to experiment with new approaches and embrace change. Whilst there are also many who resist and avoid any possible alterations (or interference) in how they teach their subject matter. This chapter will argue that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field could provide a suitable lens to investigate why this apparent dichotomy has developed. This will involve a review of what we mean by educational technology; a broad look at the characteristics of innovators in other domains and to consider how applicable their experiences are to education. Finally, I will propose that rather than identifying and classifying shared characteristics of innovators it would be more valuable to examine and capture the innovative educator's habitus.

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible that educational technologists contributed to the current crises facing our planet, i.e. global warming and the collapse of the world

economy? Or perhaps I should rephrase that question and ask did the higher education sector contribute to these unfolding catastrophes? This may seem preposterous, however, I found myself pondering these questions recently, prompted by comments from two authors.

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The first was Anne Goodman who commented that:

I have previously examined education in the broad context of our culture, looking at our present situation as a crisis in which our civilisation and indeed life on earth is threatened. I suggest that the crisis exists because the taken-for-granted assumptions of our society are no longer appropriate and that our education system, which is based on the same assumptions, perpetuates the situation. (2003, p. 3)

This led me to question the role that technology was currently playing in our rapidly changing higher education sector, where education and other public services have been redefined as market commodities. In response colleges and universities have adopted many of the frameworks of successful corporations, e.g. quality assurance frameworks, performance management systems, unit costing and strategic plans. This encroachment of neo-liberalism and commercialism into higher education is the topic addressed by the second author Kathleen Lynch (2006) who writing on this issue says:

The neo-liberal position is fundamentally Hobbesian in character, focusing on creating privatised citizens who care primarily for themselves. The privatised, consumer-led citizenry of the neo-liberal model are reared on a culture of insecurity that induces anxiety, competition, and indifference to those more vulnerable than themselves. (p. 3)

It would appear that our education system reproduces the societal norms that currently prevail. A regime that is dominated by vested professional interests and limits class mobility. This year, in 2009, entrants to higher education will be largely drawn from the same higher socio-economic groups:

Years of research evidence on the patterns of class inequality in education have shown that not only has there been little class mobility in education over the last 50 years but there is little hope of social mobility through education for many even in prosperous countries like the USA. (Lynch, 2006, p. 2)

Yet we live in a society in which we are witnessing significant changes in our daily lives enabled by the same technology which allows us to bank, shop and book exotic holiday destinations from the comfort of our own sitting rooms. The world of technology is at our fingertips and it is having a profound effect on how we experience and view the world. This conundrum is the background to this chapter – to investigate why the transformative capability of technology when deployed in education contributes to the maintenance of the status quo rather than leveraging its capabilities to address these inherent inequalities that characterise the modern higher education sector.

Another trend in higher education in the past decade has been the establishment of Centres for Teaching and Learning and the creation of allied posts such as E-learning Coordinators. In many instances these centres are staffed by educators who have an interest in technology and how it relates to the current challenges in the teaching and learning domain. A key role is to encourage and support academic staff to adopt alternative delivery models that exploit the advantages of digital technology. Oliver (2002) comments on the emergence of the ‘new professionals’ and the importance of ‘learning about how and why these varied groups work, in order to understand how their practices have developed to suit the current nature of institutions in the sector’ (p. 251).

A secondary issue in this area is to also recognise that faced with this ‘cauldron’ of change many academics do not adopt new practices. The question that this scenario poses is described by Gunter (2000) as to ‘why the individual researcher, lecturer, or professor does what he/she does and

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