

Editorial

Dr John Craig, University of Huddersfield

Richard Pountney, Sheffield Hallam University

From: John Craig [J.Craig@hud.ac.uk]
Sent: 12 April 2009 13:42
To: 'Pountney, Richard P'
Cc: 'Oliver, Martin'; 'Church, Jonathan'
Subject: ELiSS Editorial

Dear Richard

It is not unusual for a teaching and learning journal to focus attention on e-learning, but I believe that the special edition that you and I are editing is particularly timely for UK higher education as policy and practice are moving forward both at an institutional and national level. For example, in recent years, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has worked with the Joint Information System Committee (JISC) to develop an e-learning strategy (HEFCE, 2005), while the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has undertaken a benchmarking exercise. Change at a local level is evidenced by a recent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Outcomes report, which gathered evidence on e-learning generated through institutional audits conducted between 2004 and 2006. They commented:

„Rapid development in e-learning took place during the period covered by the audit reports considered in this paper. This is reflected in the number of reports which note that e-learning

was regarded as a core activity rather than the preserve of enthusiasts in individual subject areas.”

(QAA, 2008: 1)

More recently, as part of the government-led „debate on the future of higher education“, Sir Ron Cooke (chair of JISC) produced a report on the current status and future prospects of e-learning. While Cooke (2008: 3) identifies UK provision as „world class“ with regard to „networking, content and digital libraries, access management, and many areas of e-learning“, he also suggests that it has begun to „lag behind in generating and making available high quality modern learning and teaching resources“. He offered 12 recommendations, including four specifically addressed at teaching and learning, some of which are already shaping policy development in the sector. For instance, the multimillion pound bidding round launched by JISC in early 2009 to promote the development of open learning resources clearly reflects the thinking outlined in the report.

While there is much to applaud in these developments, I think that there are also issues that need to be considered critically. For example, while there are limitations to any development that is based solely on the activities of individual enthusiasts, it is important to ensure that national strategies and institutional policies support, rather than sideline, the innovative academic and support staff who are creating exciting and inspirational learning opportunities for the students they teach. Many of the papers included within this issue of ELiSS demonstrate the continued importance of such people in making e-learning happen on the ground.

There are other issues that I believe we need to foreground to ensure that the development of e-learning is undertaken on a firm pedagogical basis of benefit to students. As was observed in an earlier generation of literature relating to distance learning, there is a danger

that some technologies lend themselves to industrial (or perhaps one should now say fordist) models of delivery that can impoverish the educational experience for both staff and student (Evans and Nation, 1989). In this regard, the questions that we asked in our initial call for papers are worth revisiting:

- Is e-learning in the social sciences different from e-learning in other disciplines?
- What are the positive and negative experiences of students encountering e-learning? Does it provide a more flexible learning environment and/or (re)create patterns of inclusion/exclusion?
- How can new technologies be used to support critical thinking by students and how can they support co-operative and constructivist learning?
- What are the practical problems encountered in putting e-learning into practice and how can these be overcome?
- How can theoretical and conceptual approaches from the social sciences help us to develop a critical understanding of the implementation and experience of e-learning?
- In what ways does e-learning help or challenge us in reconceptualising the role of the teacher in social sciences?

I would be interested in your thoughts on how the papers that we have assembled address these issues.

John

From: Richard Pountney [R.P.Pountney@shu.ac.uk]
Sent: 22 April 2009 15:27
To: 'Craig, John'
Cc: 'Oliver, Martin'; 'Church, Jonathan'
Subject: Re: ELiSS Editorial

Hi John

First, you raise some interesting questions about where we are with e-learning and the way in which this can be theorised. These issues were at the forefront of the recent C-SAP conference in January 2009 (*The Virtual University? Social Science Critiques of Learning and Teaching in the Age of Digital Reproduction*; www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/events/conference_jan_09/), the proceedings of which address the dramatic changes in the nature and possibilities for learning and teaching in higher education.

There is a sense in which these changes are seen to have resulted in lecturers and students having to face reduced resources, work-intensification and greater management and evaluation. In this context, new technologies are often presented as a panacea to help resolve these problems, seemingly enabling more students to be taught more effectively, in more flexible ways with regard to time and space, and supported by more sophisticated learning and teaching tools. The reality, however, often seems more mixed than this, I would suggest.

Researching our practice has a part to play in exposing this reality, and the keynote talk at the conference, given by Martin Oliver and reproduced in this special issue, questions whether research on technology in higher education is helping us move forward or whether it is a case of 'groundhog day', in which we are doomed to repeat our mistakes. I share his concern for recent policy developments, some of which you mention: for example, the drive to be „a world leader in e-learning“ (Cooke, 2008) and the power that technology,

However, in reply to your question on what we know about e-learning in the social sciences, we should, perhaps, start with the understandings that can be elicited from the papers in this issue. A tag cloud created from the text of the abstracts and key words of papers (see attached) would suggest a strong emphasis on learning and teaching, a student-centred approach and the intention to enhance with technology. This reflects the findings of the C-SAP scoping survey (www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/subject_areas/elearning/) of e-learning usage and perceptions of use across a number and range of social science staff, explored by Darren Marsh and myself in this issue. For example, we suggest that there is an awareness of web tools for pedagogical use within an institutional virtual learning environment (VLE), and the significant advantages of this when working in group situations. However, we report participants' concern for the quality needed in order to offer materials openly and the difficulty perceived in repurposing bespoke resources developed by others.

A willingness to embrace new contexts for learning and teaching is evident, as you might expect, in the papers published in this issue. In terms of subject matter and format, half of the papers draw upon rich media to exemplify cases or to deliver their message (by the way, I think the traditional sense of „paper“, frequently mentioned in the tag cloud, has evolved in the context of this issue). The topics range from blogging, podcasts, Google, video and aspects of Web 2.0, with a growing emphasis on the global infrastructure for information and services (O'Reilly, 2006). The way social and collaborative software is becoming essential for education (Anderson, 2007) provokes a challenge that complicates the everyday life of teachers, I feel, while at the same time offering a previously unequalled pedagogical opportunity. Underlying this are the social–constructivist contexts that many teachers profess to favour, and the likelihood that the learning process involved will be unpredictable (and often tacit) in several ways: in the learning content itself; in the take-up of the tools and type of VLE available; and in the learning paths that students prefer to take (Herrington and Oliver, 2000). The choice of pedagogical method would seem to be often influenced by the

learning and learning theories that teachers believe in, which in turn affects how pedagogical processes are expressed and represented in VLEs (Pountney and Aspden, 2005). How to connect learning theories to design for learning effectively would benefit from an ontological examination of the way in which technology is applied to enhance learning and teaching (Paulsson, 2008), and Church and Oliver echo this, I feel.

In reviewing the papers in this issue, therefore, I would ask what is distinctive about the social science curriculum itself, John, and what pedagogical approaches to e-learning work best?

Richard

From: John Craig [J.Craig@hud.ac.uk]
Sent: 24 April 2009 17:16
To: 'Pountney, Richard P'
Cc: 'Oliver, Martin'; 'Church, Jonathan'
Subject: Re: Re: ELiSS Editorial

Dear Richard

I would like to begin by trying to answer the questions raised at the end of your reply. That is, what is distinctive about the social science curriculum and what pedagogical approaches to e-learning work best? These are difficult questions to answer, but I hope that through exploring some of the themes in the articles included in this issue, I might be able to tease out the beginnings of a response.

As you note, there are a range of different technologies that are explored in this issue, such as „blogging, podcasts, Google, video and aspects of Web 2.0“. Although these and other approaches are often collectively termed e-learning, each is a distinctive form of communication, presenting both teachers and learners with different sets of opportunities and constraints. Each can also be used in a range of ways and facilitate very different approaches to learning. For example, video lectures and podcasts could simply be used as modern methods through which didactic models of education could be pursued. Indeed, where teachers and educational developers feel themselves under constant pressure to introduce technology in response to top-down policy drivers, as explored in the article by Macias and Richter, we should not be surprised if opportunities to enhance student learning opportunities become secondary.

The aim, it seems to me, should be to discover and develop the potential of these technologies to support approaches to learning based on the active engagement of students. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. Pete Woodcock discusses his use of a worksheet to help students engage with his video lectures, while Jason Ralph, Simon Lightfoot and Naomi Head explore the ways in which students have created their own podcasts as part of the learning process. Further examples are provided by Steven Curtis and his colleagues from The Scholarship of Engagement Project as they explore the ways in which blogging provided an opportunity for students to undertake reflective learning while on placement and by Christina Leston-Banderia as she discusses how she has used e-learning to support students in the development of their critical thinking skills. Dave Middleton also emphasises the role of interactivity in the learning experience of students using multimedia resources in the context of exploring research methods. In each case, the authors are focusing on how the technologies they have employed can support the underlying processes of student learning and have generally conceptualised this within a constructivist approach.

The question about how distinctive this is in relation to the social science disciplines is also an interesting one. Clearly a range of technologies that we have been discussing is used across higher education to support learning in all sorts of disciplines (from architecture to zoology). However, there may also be distinguishing features of the learning process in social science that interact with e-learning, and some of the authors suggest that there are. Jason Ralph and his colleagues, for example, note the potential challenge faced by students of contemporary politics in accessing academic analysis of current events. He refers to the recent accession of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States and the important changes in foreign policy that this has given rise to. It will be some time before books and academic journal articles analysing these changes are available, but they are properly the subject of current teaching and discussion. The proliferation of podcasts and other forms of electronic publishing opens up access to a range of new resources that can help students to overcome this. Of course, the process of navigating through this new world of online resources and identifying which will be useful for the task at hand has itself become a key academic skill. Indeed, Stephen Thornton addresses this very issue in his paper on developing students' information literacy skills. He suggests that these are not just important academic skills, but that they are also essential for the practice of active citizenship in the twenty-first century. Both of these examples are from articles written by authors who share my own academic background in politics. It would be interesting to hear the views of readers in other areas, such as anthropology, sociology and criminology, to see if they share these perspectives.

John

From: Richard Pountney [R.P.Pountney@shu.ac.uk]
Sent: 26 April 2009 09:12
To: 'Craig, John'
Cc: 'Oliver, Martin', 'Church, Jonathan'
Subject: Re:Re:Re: ELiSS Editorial

Hi John

I agree that there is strong evidence of research into practice in these papers in which the affordance of technology to enhance learning and teaching is highlighted. However, as Holley and Oliver remind us in this issue, many e-learning interventions do little to change existing classroom practice, and the students' struggle to create a context in which they can learn successfully is exacerbated by the politics of the „push“ to e-learning. What becomes clearer, when looking at it in this light, is the level of contextuality that each microsituation depends upon, including, for example, learner preferences. Not only is this a characteristic of the localised approach with which we have become familiar, it is also a sign of the tendency for the production of teaching and learning resources to be individualised and to some extent kept private. In developing what is considered to be relevant material for a particular learning activity, our colleagues in social science draw on the broad disciplinary frameworks and institutional structures that are available to them, and the guidance of subject benchmark statements.

This degree of choice, or perhaps discretion, in determining materials and activities is often additionally informed by networks (or communities?) of practice (including C-SAP) (Wenger, 1998) and what is tacitly understood to be good practice. The act of deriving from these models and applying them to our own contexts is what we might consider to be designing for learning (JISC, 2006). This includes the choices that teachers and learners make at various points: these are partly based on the bookends that are course planning and evaluation *and*

the „in action“ incidents that occur at critical moments of learning. It is the „will to learn“ and the inspiring (and inspired) teacher (Barnett, 2007) applied to learning about, with and through technology-enhanced learning that are key factors in this.

The involvement, also, of learners in this process, in what we might call a pedagogy of participation (Merchant, 2009), is promoted by online developments such as social networking tools (eg Facebook), shared reflective spaces (eg Twitter) and the collaborative construction of knowledge (eg wikis). Mixed (and remixed) together, these tools are the potential means by which learners are now constructing their „learning lives“ (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). The term „automatic age“, coined half a century ago by Norbert Wiener (1954), has become even more relevant in the current era of information and communication abundance, and continues to present us with ethical issues to do with our social and moral existence: if a society can be better understood through a study of messages and communication facilities that belong to it then we can consider the future development of these facilities, increasingly mediated by machines, to play an essential role (Bynum, 2005). We need to know more about this:

„To live effectively is to live with adequate information. Thus communication and control belong to the essence of man’s inner life, even as they belong to his life in society.“

(Wiener, 1954)

It appears to me, John, that the landscape of learning and teaching is changing before us, and that it is the polished repertoires of our current curricular practice (Anderson, 1998) that

face the greatest challenge. The conditions and factors for creativity in responding to this are varied and complex but are not beyond us. What do others think?

Richard

From: Jonathan Church [church@arcadia.edu]
Sent: 28 April 2009 23:27
To: 'Craig, John'; 'Pountney, Richard P.'
Cc: 'Oliver, Martin'
Subject: Re:Re:Re:Re: ELiSS Editorial

Dear John and Richard

Thanks for including me in this conversation. A few years ago one of my students quipped that “technology was the stuff one hadn’t grown up with.” So for me creating a podcast is fumbling with „technology” to teach while for him it was just something else that educators do, often badly (cf. Ito et al, 2008; Johnson, Levine & Smith 2009). This is one of the reasons why there is the Groundhog Day phenomenon that Oliver discusses as we keep attempting to assess, audit and evaluate the affect of „new technology” on pedagogical practice in terms of knowledge transfer. In this model, the relationship between faculty, students, and knowledge is very susceptible to what I have called a neoliberal logic as one calculates how much knowledge is passed by subject matter experts to consumers. Does technology create „good value”?

However, if one thinks that the mission of the university is scholarly production in the rather broad sense as outlined by Ernest Boyer (1990), then our assessment of instructional design and new media is, as Richard mentioned, dependent on whether students and faculty have

new abilities and opportunities to produce knowledge together as members of larger communities of practice. For both students and members of faculty terms of assessment and assumptions about professional identity will differ quite radically if framed by the neoliberal logic of the privatized transactions of good value, as opposed to a frame which values the collaborative production of openly available scholarship.

Best wishes

Jon

From: Martin Oliver [m.oliver@ioe.ac.uk]
Sent: 29 April 2009 08:47
To: 'Craig, John'; 'Pountney, Richard P.'
Cc: 'Church, Joanthan'
Subject: Re:Re:Re:Re:Re: ELiSS Editorial

Dear John and Richard,

Thank you for the invitation to participate at the end of your editorial exchange. What clearer signal of the values and commitments of the discipline could there be than this encouragement of engagement and debate?

The „polished repertoires of our current curricular practice“ may indeed face the greatest challenge as learning and teaching changes, but I would suggest that there is change, and there is change. While there may indeed be a push to take up technology in Higher Education, writers like Cuban have argued (e.g. 2002) that academics“ non-use reflects the

fact that they didn't ask for this in the first place. Where they do ask for technology, its uptake is greater.

What I think this illustrates is the point I reach at the end of my contribution to this issue: that whilst very similar patterns of research may indeed repeat time and again as new technologies emerge, we should see this as a necessary thing, not a failure. In case studies of academic development Sara Price and I explored the apparent conundrum that there seems to be constant, almost relentless, change as new technologies are rolled out year upon year, and yet academics are consistently criticised for their resistance to change (2007). What is happening, we argued, is that we have failed to understand the situation in sufficient detail. There is „churn“, but in most cases this takes place at the operational level of teachers' day-to-day practice. By contrast, we suggested, teachers are consistent in defending what they see as the strategic purpose and values of education. At the level of values, there is resistance and stability; at the level of enactment, there is change and development, some of which may strengthen the core values and others of which are undertaken to shore them up in the face of challenges from elsewhere.

Maybe this stratified view would help provide purchase on the question of what makes the social science curriculum distinctive. The apparent similarity of teaching approaches compared with other disciplines is a distraction; what may be important are the values that these practices are mobilised to support. It is precisely this – the principles and values that are important to social scientists – that I think the papers in this issue help us to understand.

To be continued, I guess 😊

Martin

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