The Reflective Principle

E-learning: Open sesame

THE POTENTIAL FOR E-LEARNING IS HUGE, BUT THE CURRENT REPORT CARD FOR SCHOOLS WOULD PROBABLY READ 'CAN DO BETTER,' SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

We all seem to be involved in some form of e-learning today, either informally through friends and networks, or formally in courses such as those provided by institutions like Open Universities Australia. The potential for e-learning is great but the current formal providers are not making full use of the real potential of this medium.

E-learning is a product of our learning-driven world. Using the six binary divisions suggested by David Wiley in 'Openness and the future of education,' we can make an assessment of the progress so far achieved in e-learning. As Wiley notes, we're moving from:

1. learning with analog and print media to more flexible digital media

2. learning that's tethered, for example, to a school or even a national curriculum, to mobile learning

3. isolated learning to learning that's connected to peers and teachers, actually or virtually

4. generic learning to learning that's personal and personalised

5. learning as consumers to learning as creators – inventors, re-users, revisers, remixers and redistributors, and

6. learning with closed or copyrighted material to learning with open material that can be copied, shared and changed.

Most e-learning has moved from analog and printed to digital media, while most delivery has become mobile rather than tethered, with interactive access from anywhere using wireless and battery-operated devices untethered by cords or place.

Some e-learning programs have made progress in enabling students to escape their isolation to become real-time connected learners by creating social networking sites and venues for physical meetings. They have provided active hyperlinks rather than passive references for content. They make use of the web for content and of the semantic web, linking systems to content and people to systems, as in package tracking systems.

The challenge of providing personal learning programs that begin with what the learner knows and build on that is proving difficult to achieve. The difficulty seems to be more related to the system, not the technology or the will. Imagine you're an e-learning provider: you can't use copyrighted material such as you find in books or other protected sources, and certainly can't edit or adapt that material to suit the individual learner, without a huge paper trail of permissions.

While learning is about sharing, it seems that protecting intellectual property comes first. It's for this reason that we're seeing the emergence of new learning institutions such as the Open High School of Utah, which prescribes that all educational resources will be sourced from 'open' sources. Such resources are those that can be copied freely and legally, and thus can be adapted, combined with other resources and redistributed. As Wiley explains, 'The potential for personalisation of educational materials…is directly proportional to the openness of the material's licence.'

Similarly, most e-learning is failing to provide opportunities for students, as creators of knowledge, to find appropriate expression. YouTube and other similar sites, meanwhile, have not only provided *opportunities* for expression, they've also *stimulated* people to be creative. Wikipedia likewise has invited people to produce knowledge, not just to consume it. In contrast, very few students produce educational content for the e-learning programs that they take, as there are no real outlets for this work. Where are the YouTube and Wikipedia opportunities in e-learning? As Wiley notes, 'The degree to which people will create new works is related to the existence of open channels for the sharing of their works.'

A move to open-sourced courses and content is a logical next move. Such material can be modified and adapted to suit individuals and programs. It is also cheaper, since there are no textbooks to buy, and it encourages learners in turn to share their work – and the experience of YouTube is that sharing encourages effort.

Recently, I was asked to speak at an e-learning forum. While I had good experiences to draw on, I needed to know more about current thinking in this field. There's nothing like a chance to share knowledge, to make one think, reflect and research – activities that I'm still doing weeks later, in this article. In contrast, I also recently attended an interesting and engaging lecture on social networking that didn't lead me to any subsequent activity. Why not? Because my involvement in the lecture was passive.

Creating new material to be shared in some open way is not only contributing to knowledge, it is personally satisfying and challenging. If e-learning is to be more relevant, it needs to provide opportunities for students to express themselves, to produce and to share. **T**

REFERENCES
Wiley, D. (2010). Openness and the future of education. Available at www.slideshare.net/opencontent/openness-and-the-future-of-education

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