

Why do I care about interactive learning environments?

Pericles 'asher Rospigliosi

I have been involved in e-learning since the late 1990's when I worked as a software developer and project manager organising transnational teams who built web based news publishing systems. This was an era of high optimism for the potential of technology to change the world for the better. ZDNet where I worked had the mission statement "believe in technology" and I did. Twenty years later I more frequently ask myself, why do I care about interactive learning environments and online learning, and I have to work a little harder to be clear on where the answer takes me.

I believe that online learning and technology aided learning can enhance the human condition. Learning plays a key role in the process that has done most to alleviate human suffering. This process is the the project of the accumulation of knowledge aiding material advancement. The scientific revolution and the changes it has brought about in the way we live cannot be overstated. In the two decades since I first put together an interactive learning environment with the project teams at ZDNet there has been an unparalleled improvement in the lot of the global poor. The Millennium Goals that seemed massively aspirational in 1990 have largely been achieved. The two most critical for the poor; the halving of extreme poverty and the near doubling of children who get some education, were both realised by 2015. In those same two decades, participation in Higher Education in the UK has grown to a level where nearly half of all school leavers now take part in HE. And globally there has been a rapid expansion in access to knowledge and learning. The ubiquity of internet access and the rapid growth of platforms for knowledge sharing, such as Youtube, knowledge organising, such as Wikipedia and for mass education, the emergence of many MOOCs, have augmented the Millennium Goals related to increasing access to education among the poor and among girls.

It seems that the last twenty years have brought incredible improvements in life to those in the world who need change most, and that interactive learning environments have played a part in widening participation and giving access to knowledge and learning. Why then would I ask the question, "why do I care about interactive learning environments?" My answer relates to the growth of the neo-liberal system which seems to me to have co-opted some of the wonderful gains that humanity has achieved. The same twenty years in which internet access has become ubiquitous, and some key global improvements aspired to among the United Nations in the Millennium Goals, were achieved, have also been years in which inequality within nations has widened. Many of the risks which once were shouldered collectively by society, have moved to the individual. The growth in inequality has been accompanied by a reduction in social mobility, at least among many western economies. These changes in society are indications of changes in social justice, even if they are occurring at a time when individual liberty and rights are flourishing. I cannot claim to know what they are caused by, but they are accompaniments to the systems of mass Higher Education and self service learning that interactive learning environment play a part in enabling.

There are times when I find myself reviewing papers for this journal, that seem underpinned by assumptions about education solely for the most instrumental of ends. If the goal of interactive learning was to remove the need for teachers who care about their students, and the world they are shaping together, I might not be able to "believe in technology". There are ways in which online tutoring and self service learning might further an agenda of cost cutting and management control of learning – and undermine the important values and beliefs that go with teaching and learning. This cost cutting drive for rationalisation may give cause to advocate that the same algorithms that are used to monetise our online social lives in the attention economy (Wu, 2017) are what can best select the learning for our students. This is not what I understand as an interactive learning environment. For me it is a place for the social construction of knowledge. And, it is in the project of the construction of knowledge, that I believe this journal can make a really valuable difference.

This issue of Interactive Learning Environments has a really exciting range of papers, that explore a wide variety of ways that technology can enhance learning in and out of the formal learning environment. It is encouraging to see the ways educators are helping students to use their mobiles in learning. Two papers investigate the ways that use of the smartphone can add to what happened in the classroom. Hsu looks at the interactions between peers in a flipped class while Ataş and Delialioğlu make a qualitative analysis of how students use their phones to interact with questions in lectures. Away from the classroom Efstathiou et al. use augmented reality to foster primary school students' historical reasoning in non-formal settings. Arenas-Gaitán et al. also highlight the importance of mobile away from the classroom, their analysis of the needs of 90 Chilean engineering students found WhatsApp and Dropbox were their most valued study tools.

The importance of social engagement and answering questions together are highlighted in three classroom based studies. Li and Stylianides offer an examination of the roles of the teacher and students during a problem-based learning. The impact of just in time formative assessment is examined by Ponce et al. while looking at effects on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. The acknowledgement of how talking about diversity together enriches students appreciation of each other, is foregrounded by Crocitto et al. in their thoughtful strategy for peer learning. Two papers propose how students can benefit from working together using innovative games. Santos et al. use a geometry laboratory, Sung and Hwang create a map for students to explore, both studies show the importance of collaborative knowledge construction.

I hope you find as much of value in these articles I did. If your ideas about the value of the project of the accumulation of knowledge, or the role of Interactive Learning Environments in that project, lead you challenge my analysis and opinion – please email me and say so. It is in an environment of critical discussion that the highest forms of interactive learning occur.

Asher Rospigliosi (a.rospigliosi@brighton.ac.uk)

Reference

Wu, T. (2017). *The attention merchants: The epic scramble to get inside our heads*. Vintage.