

What Is So Revolutionary About The Internet In Education?

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Abstract: The Internet is making inroads into almost all quarters of our society. Education is no exception to that, nor should it. Exciting new ways of building content, of delivering it, of interacting with our students, indeed of managing our educational 'industry' can be seen to evolve. Even if one may not wholeheartedly support all these innovations, particularly for all those with an inquisitive mind it is inspiring to see education being rethought in so many and fundamental ways. Or is it?

The Internet revolution clearly is a technological revolution. It pushes developments in various fields, education being no exception to that. However, are the new technologies used to innovate education, that is, to bring about a genuine transformation; or do they just substitute older technologies for new ones?

An educational model that is widely implemented these days - although it doesn't always go by this name - is that of the *extended classroom*. As the name suggests, an extended classroom takes the ordinary classroom as its starting point and extends it, mainly spatially. So the dominant didactic model here still is a teacher who addresses a group of students; students and teacher are simultaneously present; the teacher takes the lead; students may ask questions but those only serve to clarify the exposition of the teacher; students seldom interfere with the choice of content, which is the teacher's exclusive realm; students hardly ever have a say in the didactics used, this also is the teacher's prerogative. In the extended classroom, teacher and students may be in different locations, the distance being bridged by television, videoconferencing, audiographics and similar technologies. Put extremely, with the extended classroom one aims to mimick a regular classroom to the largest possible extent. Hence the call for ever larger bandwidth, for systems that allow for 'natural' interactions between the teacher and the remote classroom, etc.

However cleverly designed our communication systems, however large our bandwidth, extended classrooms will always be second best, a substitution for the real thing, only useful as a means to reach out to the remote student, perhaps to serve larger groups of students and achieve some economy of scale. Lecture notes that are being put on the web as a service to the students, or e-mail and newsgroups that deliver additional support only serve to underline the main conclusion: in the extended classroom technology is used to substitute or augment existing teaching modalities.

Obviously, there is nothing inherently wrong with this. Technology is a means to an end and should be used accordingly, that is, how *we* see fit. However, if it is our lack of imagination or if it is the rigidity of our institutions that prevent us from using technology in more creative ways, then we should not rest content. We should reexamine our educational practices and ask ourselves to what extent they were limited by existing technologies and to what extent the new technologies empower us to innovate. And indeed, it is our claim that we only stand at the beginnings of truly innovative educational practices and genuinely new didactic principles.

Distributed learning is a term that is often used in this context. In distributed learning systems, there are no classrooms anymore, no teachers offering students prepackaged chunks of education carefully arranged to conform to the needs and capacities of the average student. Students now occupy center stage, assembling and arranging content that fits their specific needs; they take it in when and where it suits them best, perhaps in a didactic style that optimally matches their learning style. The role of the teacher now is not communicating knowledge, but to make it available, to empower students via intakes and assessments and help them assimilate knowledge, to offer custom support. In distributed learning, technological innovation is not the push behind educational innovation, as is the case in the extended classroom. Rather, the converse holds true, educational

innovation pushing technology. And indeed, distributed learning requires specific technologies that extend beyond the mere facilitation of communication. Technologies are needed for creating learner centered content, for the delivery of such content, for flexible intake and assessment procedures, for portfolio management, etc. In our presentation we will discuss these technologies at some length.