New Technologies and Culture

During a recent trip to Barcelona, I noticed a new enterprise in the urban landscape. All over the city, large Internet shops are opening with banks of 50-100 workstations offering access for as low as $1.50/ hour. At first glance, they are just macro versions of the Internet cafés opening in tourist destinations around the world to cater for the new generation of cyber-connected backpackers.

But on closer inspection, there are important differences. They are targeting a domestic market -- the overwhelming majority of customers are young locals -- and the customers spend a lot of time talking to each other and not working on the computers. When I first registered these characteristics, I was a little perplexed. Why aren't they all at home, sitting alone in front of their own computer in their individual bedrooms, just like your average Australian kid?

But then I learnt a few hard facts about life in Barcelona and it started to make sense: these young people live in apartments that are tiny by comparable Australian housing standards, local phone calls are charged by the minute, and ISP monthly charges are relatively expensive. There probably isn't room for a computer at home and it is simply cheaper to go to the Internet shop down the corner. Plus, the local youth tend to go out a lot to meet friends in bars, coffee shops, or squares (among other things, there are no under-age drinking laws that would keep them out of many public places), so this is a cyber-age extension of that social behaviour.

Later, back to Sydney I noticed that, contrary to my earlier perceptions, all the Internet cafés in Australia weren't only targeting backpackers after all. At the foot of the new high-rise residential towers in places such as Central Railway and Chatswood similar businesses to the Barcelona Internet cafés are flourishing, filled with young Australians of Asian descent, paying as much attention to each other as their computer screens.

So apparently there are cultural differences in Internet use.

Enrique Gil Calvo, a Spanish sociologist, maintains that the Internet is not as popular in Spain, not just because of economic or technological reasons, but also because of different cultural norms. According to Gil Calvo (2000), Mediterraneans are still more comfortably integrated in their primary networks of community solidarity and only resort to secondary associations for "utilitarian convenience, and not for existential therapy". To him, the Internet is a form of secondary association, and in the US it is as a substitute to replace the emptiness of the lack of interpersonal bonds. In Southern Europe, Gil Calvo argues, society still enjoys a solid, closely-binding public culture, traditionally identified with the "agora", or the main square, which equips a city with a sense of public life. In contrast, the United States is "an authentic citizenship desert, where the 'public' shines by its absence and
"dispersed privacy predominates". In such societies, he maintains, the Internet flourishes to fight isolation.

Online commerce is also apparently adapting to different social and cultural realities. Aoki (2000) reports that the nascent e-commerce industry in Japan is relying on an extensive network of existing "conbinis" (convenience stores) to solve both the reluctance of the Japanese to pay online by credit card and the lack of large post-boxes to receive goods. Consumers order on the net, but go to their local conbinis to collect and pay for the goods. Aoki (2000) warns that, despite globalisation, an e-commerce company cannot ignore the culture, custom, and societal system of the country to which it is expanding its business. He warns that localisation of e-commerce involves not only language translation but also adoption of local cultures and social systems.

New Technologies and Education

In the field of education, it seems there is a brave new world out there, at least if you believe those promoting the advantages of online teaching and learning. According to the scenarios presented by some commentators, on-demand distance education delivered 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-you' will take over as students desert the hallowed halls of universities.

From the student's point of view, we are told there is apparently a lot to be gained from taking education online. In a recent newspaper supplement on higher education, one student is reported as gushing: "[online education] is a brilliant way of studying ... and better that face-to-face in my opinion. [Students] are far more forthcoming about themselves than students in face-to-face classes". The same article reports that: "Evaluations of students' reactions report that they take more responsibility for their own learning, get a better understanding of curriculums through collaboration, have better peer interaction and communication and gain greater control and management of their own time." (Sydney Morning Herald 12/10/2000)

And university management couldn’t be happier. A recent report of a meeting with a Vice Chancellor of an Australian university quoted him as saying that he wanted all lectures phased out as they were "too inefficient". According to this VC, more on-line lecturers and tutorials were needed with lecturers as "facilitators" of student learning not "experts". When he was questioned about workloads and academic quality, he responded that if present staff is overworked, then the university could bring in on-line academic casuals.

I’m no Luddite, but I am treating all of these predictions about the end of "traditional" education with considerable skepticism. Like many university lecturers, I am embracing new technologies and exploring the advantages that they can provide for students' learning. But, these experiences only serve to confirm that while the technologies may be useful tools, they have considerable limitations.

Some of these may be overcome in the next decades as the technologies evolve even more, but there are other more fundamental problems with learning processes that online education generates that is likely to mean that it may never go beyond the restricted markets already covered by distance education. We may substitute printed distance education folders with CD-Roms and subject websites but, in general, online learning will only continue to exist in a minority niche with which classrooms and tutorials will happily co-exist.

Students, fortunately, are not stupid and are likely to rebel against any attempts at abusing technologies. I was at a recent meeting where it was announced that new agreements with the publishing industry will mean that there will no longer be copyright restrictions on "burning" texts on to CDs or putting them directly on the Internet. In the future, just as we currently work with photocopies, we will be able to electronically distribute articles and book chapters "for legitimate educational purposes". You could see the eyes of some university administrators light up as they calculated the savings: after all, CDs are cheaper to produce than printed folders and course notes. But, students will quickly realise that this is not using new technologies for learning, it is simply passing production costs to them. Distance education students will need to ensure that they have good printing technology at home to produce the materials they want to read on the train or in bed, and on which they highlight the important phrases and write notes in the margins.

But, as I said earlier, it is not these technological
issues that provide the real limitations to learning processes. I urge anyone seduced by the idea of providing purely online education to take a few online classes, as I recently have, to get a real sense of what it is like to be an online education user. I am doing an in-house university teaching certificate to up-grade my skills and one of the subjects is provided entirely online. I also recently did a short introductory writing course offered free by a private online academy as a way of attracting students to their longer, fee-paying courses. Both courses provided the latest innovations in online text and bulletin board type "tutorials" for communication with instructors and students.

I found these experiences alienating and considerably limited in scope. The material online was either limited -- in the case of the private course - or of such complex nature through hyperlinking that it had to be printed out and considerable time spent in constructing a useable "textbook". I quickly found that there is no effective electronic equivalent of skimming back through pages to remind myself of something I had read. Or at least, any equivalent offered was a time consuming journey through a maze of online pages.

Even worse was the disconnection with my colleagues and instructors. Learning about teaching and about writing requires intense dialogue with other teachers and writers and no amount of e-mail or short notes on a bulletin board came close to creating the conversations with peers that I craved. The bulletin board of the private academy was quickly filled with the most empty compliments about the short writings we would post that it very soon sounded more like a positive therapy session than a writing class.

And instead of reveling in the flexibility it gave me to attend to my studies anytime, I profoundly resented the burden of having yet one more thing perpetually appearing like a Scarlet Letter on my "to do" list. One of the things I most like about scheduled face-to-face classes is that they mark off hours in a week that I dedicate to learning and mark the rhythm of my "homework".

Finally, I couldn't get over the idea that the main issue here was about saving the relevant organisation money in terms of space, teacher job classifications and, in the case of my employer, staff release time.

Did I learn anything in these online courses? Probably. Did I learn as much as the equivalent time and effort of real contact with the other participants in the course? Most definitely not. Did it engender a certain resentment for the process? Most definitely.

It is these limitations which will mean that student-consumers, and ultimately that all those concerned with ensuring that education provides a real benefit, will use online education for only restricted purposes.

Fortunately, among all the pro-technology hype, there are some educational specialists warning that distance education is both expensive and currently of questionable success. Bodain and Robert (2000) argue that new developments should not be technology-centred but student- and content-centered and that new technologies should only be used where it can be demonstrated that they provide advantages to the users and not just to the providers.

Most of the criticism of online education, of course, can be traced back to criticisms of all distance education. And that takes me back to the issue of culture. Distance education debates in Australia are predicated on a basic assumption that it is a legitimate delivery mode and indeed, through institutions such as the School of the Air, it maintains an almost mythical place in the Australian psyche. There has been a boom in distance education in Australia and there is no doubt that it has provided opportunities to many people without easy access because of distance, time or mobility restrictions to benefit from education.

But in many ways it is a very Australian phenomenon. Distance education in most other countries continue to labour under the old "correspondence course" prejudices. They are the relatively cheap, fairly questionable degrees you read about in ads on the back of comics and matchbooks and are a much smaller part of the education system than in Australia. The nascent online version of this education is so far being treated with a similar contempt.

Moreover, "culture" also becomes an issue when we consider preferences for a more "social" form of learning than online education can provide.
traits identified by Gil Calvo. Other, more Anglo-Saxon, consumer/students may in fact enjoy the privacy and individuality that online education provides. Perhaps, despite my skepticism, online education will take over in the Anglo-Saxon world and I will have to find refuge in the Spanish education system.

References


Gil Calvo, Enrique (2000) Internet, Tocqueville y el genio del lugar, in El Pais, 14/04/00 Consulted on 14/04/00 at: http://www.elpais.es/p/d/20000414/opinion/calvo.htm

Bodain, Yan Jean-Marc Robert (2000), 'Investigating Distance Learning on the Internet' in proceedings from 10th Annual INET Conference of The Internet Society (ISOC), Yokahama, July 2000. Consulted on 27/10/00 at:
  http://www.isoc.org/inet2000/cdproceedings/6a/6a_4.htm

A Personal Comment

I recently attended a lecture by Lord Nolan, the author of a 1997 British report on Standards in Public life. In the older scheme of things, the timing of his visit to Sydney felt right -- some two to three years after a significant initiative in Europe, an eminent author finally comes to our shore and his ideas get wider exposure and become integrated into domestic discourse. This used to be the time it took for ideas to get here, or from here overseas.

But, in this era of cyber-communications, I had already stumbled across the full text of the Nolan Report over a year ago while surfing the Internet and had included it in the readings for an ethics readings I had flagged for possible replacement, as it might be considered out of date!

These little moments of thinking "gee-things-are-changing-fast" happen to all of us often enough (ever notice that they are happening more often?), so I won't enumerate anecdotes, but I would like to reflect on some questions of the impact that the Internet is having on my professional life and my interests. These are seemingly disconnected musings, connected only be the fact that as a university educator who has just moved back to Australia after 8 years in Spain, these are the things most on my mind.

Not communicating

the editor
who hates him
never gives him a chance
until he dies

and he
unaware of it
keeps sending in his stuff
until he dies, too

his last remark
as his first
remains the same:

no need to return the rejection
use the back for whatever

Ouyang Yu