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Everything you think you know about universities and technology is wrong

COMMENT | 21/02/19

wonkhe-digital-skills

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Employability Skills

The technological imperative is writ large across university campuses – helping to create spaces and places for our students to flourish, as we flip, blend and merge our pedagogies to engage the generation "Z " students – the first ones to arrive in HE with internet access from an early age.

The big data affordances of learner analytics with algorithms to monitor, log, and prompt us to intervene has the potential to automate our progression worries and responses. The drivers for change are evident. The current polarisation of the UK "politick" is reflected in policy for higher education in the UK. The needs of employers are paramount, and education for "public good" has been swept away in pressures to have digital savvy and knowledgeable graduates.

However, physical and virtual spaces, no matter how well designed, will not suffice to engage our learners by themselves, nor enable agency in what and why they study. Thus becoming "digital" as a natural part of an emancipatory pedagogy – with tools to discover and enable student voices and student power – is juxtaposed against a tickbox set of competence frameworks and a backdrop of student feedback about their perceived lack of preparation for the digital workplace.

For those engaged with Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM) subjects, the need for graduates with high skills in technology has long been clear. However, employer needs across the whole spectrum of workplaces requires ever more deft and nimble tech savvy graduates – though the UK Parliamentary Committee of Public Accounts points to skills development lagging behind expectations. Similarly a 2018 McKinsey report expects the adoption of automation and AI technologies to transform the workplace as people increasingly interact with ever-smarter machines. These technologies, and that human-machine interaction, could bring numerous benefits; they will also change the skills required of human workers, and this trend is forecast to accelerate from 2016-2030.

Imagine...

The pressures I felt in 2019 to be constantly "there" via text message, email, website, the VLE; the instant messaging and social media to offer my students a personalised experience with feedback via multi-modality – all of this has been taken away by easily programmable artificial intelligence programmes.

I arrive at university and look at my mobile phone. I can see that four of my students are working in a "pod" in the library, and I walk in this way to stop by and say hello, and check they have all the assignment information to hand. I can see another group online, sharing a virtual space and I quickly message them to say I have recorded a podcast about the assessment. Before I get on with my day of meetings, I look at the

questions other student groups have posted in the past 24 hours, and update the system with replies. So my student wanting to ask questions can simply ask, in their own voice, and get signposted to useful, reliable, interactive materials that best fit with their learning style preferences.

Another group of Masters students, working with learners from across the globe, have seamless language translation as they collaborate on a global sustainability challenge. This mash-up of resources personalises the curriculum for my students, and I am able to seamlessly adapt communicating with them into my daily routine. Some of these aspects of learning are already being designed into curricula, and as pedagogy and learner analytics unfold, small incremental changes will take place to embrace and welcome the difference of Individual learners. A solvable challenge – and on the near horizon.

Imagine...

It could be very different. External drivers may have forced a very different reality on us. With Brexit pushing research and educational collaboration down the agenda the political and financial pressures facing all but a small number of elite universities brings challenges. The Augar review imposed a painful financial situation on a country falling out with its neighbours, weakening an already fractured and polarised higher education system. The impact of Augar was unexpected: all but the top universities have collapsed. Workplace apprenticeships are the new “norm” for young people.

My educational offering is different. There is a broad consensus around notions of equality and wealth distribution to enable all to share in the benefits of automation. We are now all paid a universal basic income, along the Finnish model for staying at home, but some of us continue to be educators. The open movement ensures that we can access, curate and create materials and share, we can find interesting people to work with across the globe.

Education is actually for the public good – despite the economic crisis that has led us here. I no longer need a physical presence, and campuses have all been sold off anyway. Technology now means I can offer a very different kind of personalisation, as I can be in different places simultaneously; I can design learning paths for the individual learners who are not fee–paying students in the old way, they pay a small,

state subsidised subscription to our "group" on a monthly basis – it is up to them how much they use the resources. They can study for interest, or for credit – enough credits enable them to go into the workplace – if they really want to. We have realised the benefits of accrediting worldwide open access courses.

The automated system records all the progress in an e-portfolio, which is automatically uploaded into recruitment websites, enabling employers to match and identify learners they may want to make contact with and encourage on the basis of their knowledge and skills – not where they live, the colour of their skin, if they are rich or poor, or have a disability. Work can be part-time, flexible, contribute to community, as all of our efforts are equally recognised.

The era of mixed reality, artificial intelligence and robotics is here, and only the motivated educators educate, and the motivated learners learn, in post-compulsory schooling. Technology, as we see, is not value-neutral, but offers us different choices and ways of structuring and creating digital futures. My students of the past, with the constraints, burdens and financial penalties of not complying with a system of three years full time study as the default have far more freedom, choice, and personalisation of their learning choices. The previous beautiful buildings, as part of the sell-off deals, retain physical community spaces to serve the needs of the local community.

The opposite is also possible – there is the Orwellian '1984' future, built upon new managerialism, inequality and the marketisation of education, an educational horror so beautifully portrayed by David Noble in his Digital Diploma Mills piece.

What does your future hold?

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