Matthew Mitchell - Society’s new communities for life-long learning

Abstract

“We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.” Buddha

In recent history our perception of the world and its problems has been dominated by a powerful media utilising a mass communication system. This system provided much of our social communication and in turn determined, in part, how we interpret our world and make the decisions that affect it. It has been argued that mass media was a cultural off-spring of the industrial revolution along with its sibling: formal secular public education (mass education). Both cater to an industrial society’s need for standardisation; both encourage mostly passive reception by individuals of mainstream values, knowledge and world-views. People’s adoption of the internet is eroding this model of social interaction. Instead of passively receiving information without discussion, many people are now openly debating and challenging the messages they have received. Furthermore, rather than being restricted to messages filtered by the mass-media machine, people are now actively engaging in exchanging all manner of content and ideas. In this paper we argue that these new forms of interaction are creating new attitudes and expectations; that there is a growing movement of people who are refusing to accept, without challenge, mainstream messages. This movement is encouraged by increasing evidence of the failure of mainstream world-views, theories and policies. As a result of these failures, and because of the enabling technologies of the internet, people are seeking to develop their own, independent, understanding of the world and its problems. In this paper we present evidence for this movement and we discuss the implications for our traditional education institutions which, until now, have been protected from their critics by the limited social interaction allowed by mass media and the passive reception of ideas encouraged by both these siblings.

1. Introduction

In this paper I draw on a range of views to present the case that some institutions of democratic modern industrial society are susceptible to manipulation by minority dominating powers. Drawing further on the literature I then argue that this manipulation could be used to shape social attitudes with a resulting implementation and acceptance by many people of various social inequalities and injustices. I restrict my discussion of institutions to those associated with the mass-media and, in particular, mass education. In relation to education I draw on the writings of critics who argue that our educational institutions and practices support public manipulation by discouraging independent thought and skill development and encourage passive dependency in individuals which in turn leads to passive acceptance of dominant control. I follow this discussion by presenting evidence that the internet is providing a new form of communication and education that, so far, is somewhat resistant to manipulation for the purposes of maintaining cultural hegemony. I then draw on case-studies and examples to present evidence that this new media is in fact being used in ways that undermine the dominance and control of the traditional power minorities in our society, in particular as a replacement for mass media communication and mass public education. I then describe an opportunity for internet communications to implement alternative theories, such as Ivan Illich’s (1972) radical proposals for educational reform, that until recently have been technically infeasible. Illich’s proposal is attractive as it offers the potential for universal access to life-long learning, in both developed and developing nations, free of political interference. I conclude by identifying some threats to the success of implementing a model
that is consistent with the philosophies of Illich and raising some issues in relation to certification based on informal learning.

2. Education and Dominant Control
Mass compulsory education seems to have always had its critics. Some of the most prominent over the past century include Alex Neill (Neill 1944), Ivan Illich (Illich 1971), John Holt (Holt 1971; 1988) and more recently John Taylor Gatto (Gatto 2006). All these people had significant educational experience on which to base their criticisms. However, despite the identification of what they believed to be serious concerns very few of their proposals have received lasting attention, although some, such as Illich and Holt certainly elicited serious discussion both in education circles and, in Holt’s case, the mainstream press.

Some of these criticisms were directed primarily at educational institutions, others more at content and educational philosophy. However, it may be impossible to treat these independently of each other. Other scholars have, even recently, argued that education is essentially a political process (Kincheloe 2008, p. 31). This implies that educational institutions and educational content will always be subject to manipulation by the dominant forces of each particular place and time. The very fact that a particular politics is dominant suggests that that politics has mainstream support within the community or sufficient control over the community’s dialog to ensure its continued dominance. One may argue that in a democratic society this is right and proper. However, it can also be argued that any such dominance risks excluding the, possibly valid, opinions and ideas of minorities. Critical pedagogues such as Kincheloe (2008, p. 31) argue that democracy requires constant vigilance or dominant powers may come to appropriate the processes set up to support democracy, including educational processes. In this scenario, the dominant ways of thinking come to serve a particular minority whose interests coincide with the interests of those holding power. Many others have expressed similar concerns. Antonio Gramsci claimed that dominant powers used the manipulation of public opinion to gain consensus, to make people accept that their way of viewing the world is the most sensible (Kinchelchoe 2008, p.64). Saul (1993, p. 237) claims that “every word and concept of the wars of democracy and justice has been appropriated by those who traditionally opposed both and who seek power to undo what has been done”. Marcuse (1968, p. 21) suggests we are not as free as we could be stating that: “Political freedom would mean liberation of the individuals from politics over which they have no effective control. Similarly, intellectual freedom would mean the restoration of individual thought now absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination …”; and Burnham (1960, p.163) comments that “Democracy as a political system, moreover, is in no way incompatible with class rule in society”. Finally Wagner (1989, p. 34) discusses the necessity of the ability to question and to think critically suggesting that, in light of the various modern day problems, our very survival may depend on the development of these dispositions.

Based on the ideas of these writers we will assume that there are no guarantees that modern democracies and institutions will in fact serve the “greater good”. The failure of public education systems to respond to a range of criticisms over recent decades is one example of this. In fact, in commenting on how the same calls for change were being made in the 1980’s as in the 1950’s (after Sputnik) Tharp and Gallimore (1986, p. 3) note that attempts at change have produced only superficial results. They continue on to cite Rosenholtz (Gallimore 1986, p 514) who describes how schools “can at once be innovative and unchanging”. We will also assume that public perceptions may be manipulated by these same institutions to preserve cultural hegemony and serve dominant powers as argued by the authors presented above. Gerbner (in McLendon 1963, pp. 98-104 ) also connects our public schools to systems of dominance. He describes public schools as one of two sibling institutions that are the offspring of the industrial revolution. These siblings were: public
schools and mass media. Gerbner stated that the former played the role of formal public education while the later the role of informal public education.

3. Alternative Education
A number of authors have identified the need to reform our educational institutions for the modern world. Margaret Mead (in McLendon 1963, pp. 289-295) argued that our education system may not be suitable for the world in 1959 with increasing automation, global communication, and where the world and its knowledge are changing at a rapid pace. Mead argued that what was needed was a change from vertical transmission, based on an experienced teacher passing on knowledge to young students, to lateral transmission, where informed people pass on knowledge to uninformed. In Mead's proposal formal compulsory education is restricted to primary education and from then education is undertaken in any amount and at any stage of the individual's life. Similar arguments were made in a proposal for deschooling by Ivan Illich in the 1970's (Illich 1971). However, Illich took these ideas further by suggesting networks for connecting the informed with the uninformed as well as extending the library system to include a wide variety of physical learning objects. Illich's proposal is for informal learning where people can learn from models, peers and mentors. Holt (1971) also argued for the reform of schools. Despite receiving a lot of media and academic attention, he realised that any significant reform program was doomed to failure leading him to suggest that the best possible course of action for people concerned about schools would be to home school their children (Holt 1981). More recently Gatto (2006) has made similar calls for the removal of the requirement of children to attend schools.

4. Arguments against Reform
In this section I identify some criticisms of potential education reform proposals and I then outline how many of the aspects of these reforms that have been argued as infeasible have, in fact, to some extent now been successfully demonstrated; most commonly based around support from online communication tools. Later in Section 5 I discuss these demonstrations further.

While Holt, Gatto and others have highlighted problems with our education system and have articulated principles on which its replacement should be based, it is Illich who has proposed the most comprehensive system with which to replace it. Not only does Illich’s (1971) proposal offer the potential to cover all levels of learning, from primary to tertiary, it is also aimed at populations in both developing and developed nations. Therefore, it is Illich’s proposal and the arguments against it I will address here, firstly dismissing common criticisms and secondly linking to the evidence from online communities that systems congruent with Illich’s proposal are indeed feasible and, in some cases, already emerging.

There seem to be two broad categories of criticism of Illich’s proposal. The first relates to the desirability of his proposed ideas, the second relates to the feasibility of implementing his ideas. Some academic arguments regarding the desirability of de-schooling are discussed in Bowen and Hobson (1987, pp 389-397). The first argument Bowen and Hobson (1987) present relates to abstract values and thinking. They question whether having learners involved in concrete operations can lead to the generation and communication of abstract ideas. At the time they were writing this proposition was largely untested, however, it is now clear that the internet can support the creation, development and communication of abstract ideas supplementing any concrete activities people may be involved in. Such communication of ideas is discussed further in Section 5. Bowen and Hobson’s (1987) second concern is whether or not school’s have failed as Illich claims. They point to our high levels of
technology as indicating the success of our schools. However, society and social progress are much more than just high technology (Winner 1992). Furthermore, the evidence of Gatto (2006) and the detailed analysis of Holt (1971) suggest that there are problems with our existing education system, or at the very least enough questions to justify considering alternatives. It is by far from clear that alternatives would be unable to support our high levels of technology, in fact it more likely that that technology is enabled through informal and freely undertaken learning and development by people with varying levels of technical skill. The success of the Open Source movement is evidence of this. Bowen and Hobson’s (1987) third line of argument relates to learning webs. They question whether it would not become formalised and organised so that it is in effect a school therefore defeating the purpose of creating it. Furthermore, would such a network be used by those who are illiterate or unmotivated? It is possible that these networks could become formalised. I believe the greatest risk of this comes from the need for certification. I address this issue in Section 6. Those who are unmotivated are unlikely to be motivated by our current system, so the largest concern here is the illiterate. Firstly, I would like to point out, that compulsory education does not guarantee high levels of literacy (Gatto 2006), however, whatever education system we have literacy can be addressed by locally provided face-to-face teaching. However, this need not be compulsory. Bowen and Hobson’s (1987) final argument is that the very fact that Illich can criticise schools is an indication of the success of our system as one that develops and allows independent thought. Of course, the problem here is that it is one thing to be allowed to think a particular way, quite another to be allowed to act. Schools are still compulsory nearly 40 years after Illich’s proposal. As Marcuse (1968) suggests in his quote in Section 2, it is quite safe to allow criticism when it poses no possible threat to the status-quo.

We now turn to another critic of Illich, Dore (1976). Dore (1976) focuses first on the technological infeasibility of Illich’s (1971) proposals and then argues that Illich’s educational philosophy is misguided. At this point, he introduces Freire into his argument. Dore’s implied connect between Friere’s ideas on education as critical pedagogy with Illich’s ideas seems to be based on the fact that both give substantial consideration to people in developing nations. Leaving aside the fact that a criticism of philosophical association is not a criticism of Illich’s ideas I admit that there are some similarities in the ideas of Freire and Illich, however, there are also substantial differences. Illich (1971) provides a unique and specific proposal on what is required from infrastructure and systems for education. Nevertheless, let us consider this attack of Dore’s (1976) as being one on critical pedagogy. The basis of Dore’s argument is that in impoverished nations, the most important issue is the development of skills that will allow improvements in the standard of living, and in particular material needs. He argues that in such places education should be focused on “Self-regarding achievement learning”, or “the ability to do jobs conscientiously well” (Dore 1976). Note, that this is the exact opposite of the argument by Bowen and Hobson (1986), who criticised Illich’s proposals because it would not allow the creation, development and communication of abstract ideas. If we are concerned about people’s freedom and their ability to control their own destiny then education systems must support more than mere work based skill development and both Dore (1976) and I seem to believe that Illich’s proposal can. Furthermore, in his emphasis on learning skills in developing nations Dore seems to be suggesting that people in these nations should be happy to accept oppressive regimes, as long as they improve their standards of living. However, as Wagner (1989, p. 29) points out, education that does not allow for reflection and being critical risks creating regimes which require unquestioned obedience of authority such as the Nazi regime. The final criticism Dore (1976) raises is a similar concern to Bowen and Hobson’s (1986) about the ability of the system to support less-gifted students, however, as I argued earlier, Illich’s proposal does not necessarily exclude extensions, if in fact it is ever demonstrated that such people are not prospering under his proposal.
Dore (1976) includes in his discussion several issues he regards as pre-requisites for Illich’s (1971) idea to be successful. In discussing these pre-requisites he raises concerns about their feasibility in practice. His first pre-requisite is the creation of store-front learning centres with things to learn from, along with computerised directories to these and the re-emergence of repairable consumables. In relation to the use of these resources Dore (1976) questions the level of commitment expected from skill-teachers. The second pre-requisite Dore (1976) identifies is the peer-matching system which will allow learners to find other people interested in the same topics. Dore’s (1976) third pre-requisite includes three kinds of educational specialists. These are: 1) Administrators who keep the networks of skill-models and peer-matching operating; 2) Pedagogical advisors who assist people in finding the resources they need and using the available facilities; and 3) The Educational Leader, a role Dore (1976) denigrates as requiring individuals with the combined traits of Nobel prize winner and Socratic guru. In the next section I discuss how many of these pre-requisites can be, and are being, implemented using internet infrastructure and technologies by online learning communities.

5. The New Communities

In this section I present several examples of online learning communities and relate these to Illich’s (1971) proposal. During and following this discussion I identify issues associated with learning in these communities, such as credentialing and potential problems for learners and the communities in general.

One of the major issues I have raised in relation to learning is the ability to question existing cultural hegemonies and how they may serve dominant powers. The first example I have selected could be seen by many to be directly related to this. Its membership seems in large part to be driven by a desire to better understand the forces determining our economic environment and to seek explanations for recent failures of economic policy, such as the failure for the mainstream theories to predict the current global financial crisis (GFC) by expecting a continuation of recent trends (Federal Reserve Board 2004). The example is an online community based around discussions of economics. This community is lead by Professor Steve Keen from the University of Western Sydney. Professor Keen created a blog site (debtdeflation.com) where he posts technical articles he has written on the topic of economics. He also provides links to a variety of related articles by others. Registered users can post comments, thoughts and questions related to his articles and it is by studying these posts that the true nature of the community becomes evident. Users typically act in the role of students, although some appear to also be economic academics themselves or in various related industry roles. These students act as peer learners often engaging in discussion between themselves on economics related issues. They frequently post links to relevant sources and articles and often make reference to their own experiences from business and social contexts. Occasionally these students ask questions of Professor Keen who typically responds, correcting misconceptions and directing students to relevant resources. In this sense, Professor Keen seems to fit the role of Educational Leader very well, providing both the high level expertise and Socratic questioning alluded to by Dore (1976). Furthermore, Professor Keen is leading a potentially large number of students with up to 10,000 unique people accessing his site each day (Keen 2009). Of course this site does not demonstrate all of features of Illich’s (1971) proposal. For example, while it might support an ad-hoc form of peer-matching, it does not support the ability for interested student to locate this, or other similar, resources. A web search might reveal some of the content on the site, but not its underlying nature. The fact that there is no central repository of educational related sites arises from the distributed nature of the internet, however, clearly the potential exists for one or more such repositories being created. In fact, the absence of a centrally controlled and organised repository is most likely a net advantage overall, as it reduces the risk of censorship by the controlling organisation or formalisation of the system. Censorship and
formal control by authority are two possible threats to the success of on-line alternative education systems in the medium to long term. It may be possible that censorship schemes, such as one proposed by the Australian government (Conway 2007) could at some stage be extended to try and restrict access to the resources of the internet to those that support the existing cultural hegemony.

Store front learning centres as proposed by Illich (1971) would be extensions of the public library system, however, instead of providing just books they would provide a wider variety of learning objects including physical objects. I argue that virtual representations of these physical objects are entirely possible, and many already exist, on the internet. Another feature of these learning centre libraries is information repositories which are independent of the mainstream media in which, according to Gerbner (in McLendon 1963, pp. 98-104), we may include publishers. Many such repositories exist including democracynow.org, an independent news agency that will not accept corporate or government sponsorship or advertising. Another is newrules.org provided by the 30 year old Institute for Local Self-Reliance which describes itself as a non-profit research and educational organisation operating on public donations. Both these sites appear to be the product of people who are concerned respectively about the ability of existing dominant institutions and media to provide democratic outcomes. Both of these sites would seem to support what Bowen and Hobson (1986) refer to as “abstract thought”, however, I recognise that there is also the need to support the hands on skills required by Dore (1976). While not excluding the possible future role of physical objects in brick-and-mortar store-fronts or real-world skill sessions organised through online forums (such as provided by permablitz.net), skill development can be achieved to some extent on-line by simulated objects both in two and three dimensions. Many sites support two-dimensional software that allow simulation of science experiments, electronics, and the possibility even exists to simulate surgery online from sites such as EdHeads.org (virtual hip surgery). Furthermore, Scilab, Gnuplot and a number of other powerful learning and simulation tools are available free online. Three dimensional virtual worlds also offer the ability to learn and explore representations of real-world objects and environments (Meskó 2008).

6. The Future

At this point in time it appears that people’s ongoing awareness of the world’s problems and the seeming failures of policy makers to adequately resolve them will continue to drive interest and use of online resources. In many cases these sites, such as permablitz.net, allow people to undertake not only action, but active learning in emerging learning communities; some entirely online, others a hybrid of online organisation and communication and real world interaction. This possibility may cause many to question the value of the more passive learning provided by our mass-education systems which range from primary school to undergraduate programs. Already there is evidence, although marginal, of online communities as a means of challenging cultural hegemonies. One example being the creation of a facebook group and web-site calling for fundamental review of the content of undergraduate text books claiming the existing books encourage miseducation (Toxic Textbooks 2009).

However, despite all the potential there are a number of barriers which currently prevent alternative online education becoming a serious contender to mainstream institutions. There are three impediments that are particularly apparent: 1) Accreditation; 2) Directories to educational sites; and 3) Availability of educational leaders.

The first impediment, accreditation is perhaps the most complex of the three. Credentialling is a critical component of our education system and it important as credentials are used to assess people not only for various positions of responsibility, but also allows people to make
authoritative statements. Credentialling is not only a critical component of our education system, but also a major source of motivation for many students. For these reasons associating people with their achievements is necessary for any system that seeks to allow people to make judgements about the abilities of other people. However, solving this problem for alternative education may also allow us to overcome a limitation of our current system, which is its inability to allow our institutions to value and recognise learning and achievement outside of the formal system. An recent example of this may be the difficulties faced by Peter Andrews in gaining respect and acknowledgement of his ideas and achievements in relation to land improvement by either scientific or government agencies (Australian Story 2009). In resolving this issue, perhaps we need to look at the recognition systems currently associated with open source projects and people’s professional contribution to discussion forums. Given that a new credentialing system can support multiple means of demonstrating achievements, contributions and competence then a remaining concern, which exists even now, is to ensure that we can identify the person who is really responsible for the item or act in question. This is closely linked to the plagiarism concerns currently plaguing our traditional institutions.

In comparison to accreditation and credentialing, the remaining two impediments seem more amenable to solution, however, each presents its own problems. In relation to directories, there is currently no list of educational sites. Users may find the content of Professor Steve Keen’s debtdeflation.com site using current search engines, but its true nature may not be obviously apparent. Having one institution create a central directory risks censorship and control by the responsible organisation while allowing a large number of directories may make it difficult for people to trust the judgement of the directory producers in assessing or ranking the reputation of the forums they list and describe. It seems possible that a solution to this may arise organically, in a manner similar to existing search engines, where a few sites provide directories and develop a reputation around their service. Finally, we have the issue of Educational Leaders. Not everyone is prepared to act as Professor Keen has acted. It requires substantial amounts of time. Without highly qualified leaders, either from traditional or new education systems, then the quality of the sites and the education they provide may be low. This links back to the credentialing problem, if educational leaders are to rise from this system, how can we establish their qualifications/achievements?

If these three problems can be solved, then society stands to gain a variety of benefits. Firstly, we will have avenues to recognise learning taking place outside of traditional institutions and as such we will be better placed to take advantage of contributions to human knowledge that are developed in these forums. Secondly, along with other projects, such as One Laptop Per Child (One Laptop Per Child 2009), we open up the potential to allow access to education and recognition of learning to groups of people who may be currently disenfranchised in our educational system, allowing educational development independent of wealth and geographical location along with a corresponding increase in social justice.

References


