Whose game are we playing? Learning, digital technology and crises of identity

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For the first half of this year my title was: 'Head of the Division e-Learning' and, for the second half of the year, it has become: 'Electronic Learning Media Team Leader'. The change was brought about by a move from one university to another. Besides institutional differences with regard to philosophical underpinnings, structure and context, this seemingly innocuous change in title occasioned, for me, an interrogation of the theoretical assumptions that underlie what – for the purposes of this discussion - we may call the enterprise of e-learning.

Traditionally, this enterprise has been grounded in conceptions of learning and technological tools have been viewed as the means by which learning and teaching goals might be achieved. In this regard, the e-learning enterprise has been implicitly defined as pedagogical in nature. One of the assumptions underlying this definition is that technological tools are 'neutral vehicles' that 'deliver' education. This assumption is the subject of a debate in the literature, begun supposedly by Clark [1] and Kozma [2], on the subject of digital media as being either a passive vehicle or an active agent in the learning process. If we ignore, for a moment, the complexities of these opposing views, and consider the theoretical markings on the pitch, we will notice that we have unwittingly strolled into another game where there are a different set of conjectures in operation. We are now subject to the tenets of media theory.

McLuhan [3] contends not only that media are agents, but, further, that the practice of separating media off from content stems from a misunderstanding of the fact that media and content are one and the same thing. In addition, he claims that media are essentially the extensions of human sensory perception and, as such, an attempt at extending personhood beyond the confines of the physical body. At this point, we are reminded of the playing field we had left in order to emerge where we now find ourselves. What does this mean for learning? Well, if media are high-definition extensions of our senses, then learning is something which happens in a set of nested, structurally-coupled systems, of which the human being is one. In short, as suggested by Connectivism [4], the anthropological view of learning is replaced a view which envisages learning as an emergent property of dynamic, ecologically-conceived, complex systems. We have strayed onto yet another foreign pitch where the markings seem to suggest that we might be subject to the conjecturers of complexity theory.

If it is true that such complex systems are dynamic, ecological – and subject to unforeseen change – and it is also true that human beings are inextricably interwoven into the fabric of such systems, it is conceivable that learning, as emergent property, is at least partly influenced by the changing structures of such systems. Research into neuroplasticity [5], in fact, argues that it is not only our learning that is shaped by the media extensions of our senses into complex dynamic systems, but the very structure of our brains themselves. In short, we are shaped as much by the tools that we use as we shape those tools for our use. The observant player will have noticed that the markings underfoot have again changed and that we are now in the world of anatomy and biochemistry. The implication for our chosen enterprise is clear: learning and the ability of the brain to adapt its structure are inextricably entwined.

Having traversed a number of pitches with widely differing markings, we might – as those in the business of thinking about learning and technology – be forgiven for experiencing a crisis of identity. It is no longer clear to us whether we are educationalists, media theorists, complexity theorists or involved in psychosomatic studies. What we are experiencing is a profound theoretical dislocation which leaves the enterprise of e-learning with foundations that are invisible to us. Although it is virtually impossible to say who we are now, we do know that we are no longer the fresh-faced educationalists who glibly believed that pedagogy should shape technology.

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