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Out with the old, in with the new? Questions concerning the role of the teacher in 21st century education

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My current research project (Ferreira, 2007) consists of a small study of the potential impact of Open Educational Resources (OERs), with OERs understood in broad terms to include not only 'content' but also resources such as software tools, relevant documentation and good-practice guides (Margulies, 2005, quoted in OECD, 2007 p. 31). I am interested in gaining some insight into the issues surrounding engagement with OERs, specifically, issues impinging on participation in online learning contexts that are hosted by an institution offering a substantial OER environment without offering associated certification of learning.

As I began outlining this proposal, serendipity struck in the shape of two relatively heated conversations about OERs and the idea of the Web 2.0, one with a colleague in my own institution who has a respectable track record in innovative uses of educational technologies, another with a freelance learning facilitator, a very experienced professional who is currently engaged in full-time voluntary work. 'Without a teacher, learning is difficult and, often, impossible'. 'It took me six months to find my way around something I could have learnt in a week, if I had some stepping stones'. 'Even strongly motivated groups of learners quickly collapse without a teacher'. I was reminded of another widespread view, of the Web generally, and OERs, in particular, as 'a modern version of a library'. In a world in which marketing and media discourses are strongly represented in widespread ideas such as 'content is free; it's a matter of editorialising', what is the role of such a library? Crucially, is there anything left for the 'teacher' in this scenario?

Within the context of OERs, teacher engagement remains a problematic proposition despite the rapid institutional support that the movement has gained (Smith & Casserly, 2006). A recent study on the attitudes to the rights and rewards for contributors to open repositories (Bates *et al.*, 2007) identifies a number of very tangible concerns that are not easily allayed by claims such as that 'for most faculty, open educational resource initiatives are no more of a threat than the university library' (Wiley, 2006). In my own experience as part of a team supporting the development of an institutional OER initiative, much time has been spent discussing with academic colleagues, those who create the resources being made available by the project, assumed pros and cons of engagement with what some may view as a 'cause' worthy of much more evangelism, whilst others view with scepticism, and, often, varied degrees of cynicism.

Part of the institutional rhetoric surrounding the OER initiative in which I have worked included practical ideas in terms of benefits to staff. In addition to the idea of sharing 'legacy' resources, i.e. course materials no longer in use, two aspects have been highlighted: the ability to support pilots of new ideas that can be subsequently incorporated into the main university provision, and the possibility of showcasing the existing learning provision offered by the institution with the creation of open-access 'samples' or 'tasters' and, therefore, (assumedly) contribute to raising the number of formal registrations in courses. Nevertheless, buy-in from colleagues has been an elusive commodity to secure (Ferreira & Heap, 2006). Some of the underlying concerns do not seem to revolve around the difficulties in actually assessing whether there is a correlation between usage of the OER repository and migration to the formal provision of the institution. Whilst some of the underlying concerns amongst colleagues seem to revolve around views that construe 'openness' as a potentially destabilising element,

less reactionary views revolve around concerns with 'quality' as something that can be assessed, measured, and used as evidence of 'success': 'quality' of learning resources, 'quality' of the learning experience afforded by the involvement of a teacher and 'quality' of the individuals produced by such experiences.

But are these concerns rooted only in politics and its questions of power?

As McWilliam (2005) points out, the 'tension remains between the "democratic classroom" as an ideological ideal, and the role formal educational institutions continue to play as credentialers [sic] and reporters to industry and the professions'. However, the location provided by academic discourses, their structures and categories, provides one amongst many possible locations for knowledge to be created and situated. Indeed, media and policy discourses, 'market' pressures and corporate 'culture' pose many challenges to previously established boundaries and threaten this 'credentialer' role of universities. In particular, the growing requirements for professional development for teachers raises several questions regarding 'competence', 'capability', 'skills' and many other terms often found in statements attempting to regulate professional practice. Whilst policy discourses construe teaching as an 'expert' activity, 'professionalism' and 'expertise' have become deeply problematic notions. As Edwards *et al.* (2004 p. 55) point out,

'in the media and elsewhere experts and expertise have become subject to greater distrust ... standards of competence are developed upon the basis of evidence of what already competent practitioners do. Assessments and curricula are built on those standards, the logos for which stands in sharp contrast with the more reified, "arty-farty", "trendy" theory or, even worse, "jargon" of experts.'

The availability of the Web has been undoubtedly contributing to a generalised dispute over the meanings and significance of 'expertise'. In an often extreme critique of the impact of the Internet on contemporary life, Keen (2007) appeals to the 'infinite monkey theorem' to describe what he sees as an absurd portrayal of the significance of some categories of 'user-contributed content'. The theory claims that 'if you provide infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters, some monkeys somewhere will eventually create a masterpiece – a play by Shakespeare, a Platonic dialogue, or an economic treatise by Adam Smith' (p. 2). Although this is, in my view, too radical a description, Keen goes on to question the validity of a world in which 'everyone is broadcasting themselves' (p. 15), a world of noise in which actually listening, an essential part of the learning process, is relegated a secondary role.

In inviting us 'to remember and to forget' what we know about pedagogy, McWilliam (*op. cit.*) neatly summarises the challenges facing educators in this world of contestation and change. She provides a critique of what she describes as the 'seven deadly habits' that underlie traditional approaches to pedagogy. Amongst these habits, she lists 'Teachers should know more than students'; 'Teachers lead, students follow' and 'Curriculum must be set in advance', all of which have come under heavy fire in current discourses surrounding the potentials of the Web 2.0 in education. McWilliam's invitation, however, is to re-think tacit assumptions that underlie practice, not to abandon it altogether.

But is this merely a form of inertia masking the inevitable question of whether teaching is about to become – or has already done so – superfluous? If my two colleagues mentioned above are in any way representative of existing, perhaps predominant in some quarters, views on the relationship between teaching and learning, rumours announcing the demise of the teacher would seem, however, premature. Indeed, Mason (2006) is positive in this regard by suggesting that 'the role of the teacher/trainer/tutor is

changing rapidly, but there is no evidence that the role is diminishing, it is rather evolving'. The question remains, however: in what ways in this role 'evolving'?

In this presentation I would like to offer some preliminary findings from my research, drawing, in particular, upon conversations such as those mentioned above. The work has included an action research element in the guise of two case-studies of learning situations located at the interface between 'informal' and 'formal' learning, and I will be using examples taken from these studies to illustrate a broader discussion of the key question 'are traditional teachers now obsolete or can they adapt to new styles of teaching and training?'.

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