

Do Values in Online Learning in Higher Education Really Matter to Our Collective Future?

Liz Johnson, UNC Charlotte

Senior Lecturer in Computer Science

Elizabeth@uncc.edu 1 704/293 1482

Masters in Human Development and Learning, UNC Charlotte

Masters in Ethics, UNC Charlotte

Doctorate, the George Washington University

Abstract

Who does the future belong to? Individuals, a collective society, or both? Furthermore, what role does online education in higher education play in that future? During 2021 over 220 million students attended colleges and universities globally with many forced to take classes online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹The eLearning market is projected to be 325 billion in the year 2025.²So do we let global forces of the pandemic and economics sweep us away or do we pause briefly to evaluate how we *can* and *should* proceed? The purpose of this reflective essay is to critique the current policy and values of online learning in high education. This is done in the context of a collective future that is built on adding positive values to the world, by the means of online learning.

Keywords: online learning, eLearning, values, ethics, policy

Introduction

“The key to success is to appreciate how people learn, understand the thought process that goes into instructional design, what works well, and a range of achieving goals,” according to Buff (eLearning Industry, 2021, para. 1). However, I assert it is critical to take into account that educators should also create policies so design experiences meet learners’ needs and societal needs. The problem is there is so much technology and chaos from COVID-19, it is hard to know what will work best for creating learning experiences that benefit our collective future. Learning experiences are defined as “any interaction, course, program, or other experience in which learning takes place...and reflects larger pedagogical and technological shifts” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013, paras. 1-2). My point of view is as an educator that teaches online college courses and is open to the possibilities of technology. The purpose of this reflective essay is to explore possibilities because when nothing is set in stone anything is possible and critique where we are.

Overview

There seems to be extensive literature on the future of online learning and the role technology can play. For example, Borden claims the field of education has been going through “an explosive period of transformation that embraces the digital age,” which is even more critical given the continued COVID-19 pandemic challenges (Borden, 2011, para. 1). Borden states “we” need to create and embrace a “solid framework for online learning” (para. 19) but offers no input on what the framework *could* or *should* be or guidelines for policy. Further, Govindnarajan and Srivastava (2020) claim the pandemic is forcing global experimentation and is just the precise disruption higher education needs. They claim that higher education needs dramatic reform because of the rising costs. This in turn makes college unaffordable for many.

However, their arguments that the global experiment will “enrich political discourse” (para. 19) and lead to free college education seems to be about possibilities but not practical realities and sound policy. The culturally entrenched educational institutions are unlikely to be incentivized to offer their services for free.

¹ World Bank, Higher Education. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/tertiaryeducation#1>.

² Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2018/07/31/e-learning-climbing-to-325-billion-by-2025-uf-canvas-absorb-schooling-moodle/?sh=62c439243b39>.

Analysis

So what does the crystal ball of the future of higher education look like? Well, that depends on who you ask, their intentions, and their policy. Kim and Bonk (2006) suggest that budgetary challenges and dramatically changing landscapes are creating the perfect e-storm, “linking pedagogy, technology, and learner’s needs” (p. 22). Though their study did not actually investigate methods of online teaching and learning practices. This study serves as yet another example of countless educational research that tells “what” can work but scant on how and why (Johnson, 2016). Avida (2020) offers possibilities with the intent of empowering learners and facilitating their understanding of the world. Though, whose idea of the world should it be? He is a CEO and a capitalist with the goal to continue build his award winning eLearning company. His company has laudable goals of being flexible in time and space so learning can take place anytime, from anywhere, from any device but at a cost. Then how does the burden of the course being available anytime impact the instructor’s schedule and quality of life? Do instructors lose something when they try and be all thing to all students at all times?

Additionally, Nguyen (2015) demonstrates that the most effective means to improve student outcomes is through adaptive software that individualizes student learning and includes the “best practices” (p. 316) of gamification. This type approach was implemented last year at UNC Charlotte in the computer science department with positive results. However, the software was expensive and required considerable preparatory time, extensive time during class delivery, and time after the semester for analyses. This approach while ideal, is currently resource prohibitive. So as Nguyen (2015) states, “more research is needed,” but again where does the additional demand for research fit into tight institutional budgets? (p. 315). Though, firms like Carnegie Learning are targeting the market of neuroeducation or brain-based learning with personalized tutoring and feedback in real-time. So they can bring your classroom vision to life but for a cost (Harmon, 2021). Finally, Schroeder recognizes the ultimate possibility that “we’re going to be able to more completely serve the individual student and reach that holy grail of personalized learning as we use it to drive adaptive learning” (Harmon, 2021, para. 28).

So mostly a rosy picture has been presented on the future of online learning and its potential so far. However, it is disturbing that there was no mention in the articles on ethics, policies, and creating learning experiences that benefit our collective future. So what really *should* be the purpose of education in the future? Well, that depends on intent, context, and your ultimate goal of what is possible. According to Inge (2018), “the aim of education is not the knowledge of facts, but as values” (para.1). So if online learning is the future, then should we not take responsibility for what values *should* be integrated? If the context is a collective future, then objective values should be integrated with facts into online learning and experiences. For example, objective ethical standards of values can be derived from ethical standards and concepts like from Paul & Elder (2013)(See Appendix A).Additionally, ethics is usually taught in the context of what is missing or wrong. However, there is also the option to add value to our collective future by integrating Paul and Elder’s (2013, p. 21) standards of Concepts Depicting Ethical Behavior and Motivation (See Figure 1 below).

Concepts Depicting Ethical Behavior or Motivation	
Going Beyond What is Obligatory to Improve the Lives of Others Generous Unselfish Charitable Altruistic Philanthropic Humanitarian Benevolent	Dealing With People Objectively in Order to Be Fair Understanding Impartial Equitable Unbiased Dispassionate Objective
Relating to People in Ethically Appropriate Ways Civil Polite Courteous Respectful Forbearing Tolerant Tactful	Being Forthright and Honest Honest Truthful Integrity Loyal Faithful Trustworthy
Relating to People in Commendable Ways Friendly Obliging Cordial Kind Gentle Gracious Tender Warm Warm-hearted	Being Willing to Forgive in Order to Alleviate Suffering Forgive Pardon Absolve Exonerate Compassionate Merciful
Acting Out of a Concern to Behave Ethically Scrupulous Honorable Upright Open-minded Evenhanded	Acting Out of a Concern for the Feelings of Others Sympathetic Empathetic Understanding Compassionate Considerate

Figure 1. Paul and Elder's (2013) Ethical Concepts

Being aware of the previous concepts and integrating them into policy and online learning experiences can positively contribute to a collective future based on objective ethical values. Whereby the goal is not to have ethics take over subject content online, there are non-intrusive ways to implement this type of approach. For example, at the end of each online assignment I give for my online classes, I ask students for feedback in checkoff form or yes or no. Did they understand the assignment, did they ask help if needed, did they do their best, and did they meet the highest level of ethics. During the Fall 2021 semester I gave a final reflective exam, whereby students were required to state what experiences were most beneficial. I was surprised that so many of them revealed that "meeting the highest ethical standards" was not only beneficial but a source of personal growth, awareness, and pride.

Conclusion

Therefore, I conclude that that technology has the power to facilitate the transformation of knowledge into a basic human right, by the means of integrating ethical policy and values into online learning. There is unlimited potential in the context of "our collective future" by adding ethical values and integrating creative applications online. However, access to all human experience should not be a basic human right, as suggested by the tech monopolist Mae Hollandin *The Circle* (Eggers, 2013). There are boundaries we collectively will need to discern. Furthermore, designers of online learning need to acknowledge that an interrelated understanding of life is needed in order to tackle wicked societal problems that will only become more intractable. An approach like this supports Mridha's (2021) optimism that, "the whole purpose of

education is to transfer and transform knowledge for the future generations so that they can transcend their lives and humanity as a whole” (para. 1).

This conclusion is significant because there is time *now* to contemplate, acknowledge, and recognize the values and contexts that *can* be included into online learning and *should* be included. Spencer (n.d.) stated, “the great aim of education is not knowledge but action” (para. 1). That brings to mind two major questions. First, what societal actions do we want students to take because of online learning? Then what policy actions should be taken individually and collectively by educators and designers? Those answers will depend on the personal, institutional, and societal values that are prioritized. If we focus on a value-laden future that serves the collective good, we can be better prepared and equipped to shape change in the present. This approach can provide an enhanced version of our current collective and the hope we can seize the unlimited potential of technology and human creativity...for the greater good so *all* humans can thrive.

References

- Aimprosoft. (2021). *Online education trends: eLearning predictions for 2021-2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.aimprosoft.com/blog/elearning-trends-in-online-education-and-learning/>.
- Avida, D. (2020). *What does the future look like for online learning?* *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2021/07/20/what-does-the-future-look-like-for-online-learning/?sh=29cfe37a19d7>.
- Borden, J. (2011). The future of online learning. *eLearn*, 2011(8). Retrieved from <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2016016.2024704>.
- Eggars, D. (2013). *The circle*. Vineyard Books. Educational Reform Glossary. (2013). *Learning experience*. Retrieved from <https://www.edglossary.org/learning-experience/>. eLearning Industry, 2021. 23 *Inspiring eLearning quotes for eLearning professionals*. Retrieved from <https://elearningindustry.com/inspirational-elearning-quotes-for-elearning-professionals>.
- Govindarajan, V., & Srivastava, A. (2020). What the future of virtual learning could mean for the future of higher ed. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-the-shift-to-virtual-learning-could-mean-for-the-future-of-higher-ed>.
- Harman, J. (2021). *Online learning and the future of education with Ray Schroeder*. Leading Learning Podcast. Retrieved from <https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode-193-ray-schroeder/>.
- Inge quote. (2018). Quote Investigator. Retrieved from <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/09/15/values/>.
- Johnson, L. 2016. A complexity context to NC charter school classroom interactions and climate: Achievement gap impacts. (Publication No. 10099551). [Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database.
- Mridha quote. (2021). Goodreads Quotes. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7914833-the-whole-purpose-of-education-is-to-transfer-and-transform>.
- Nguyen, T. (2015). The effectiveness of online eLearning: beyond no significant difference and future horizons. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 11(2).
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2013). *Understanding the foundations of ethical reasoning*. The Foundation for Critical Thinking. *Spencer quote*. (n.d.). BrainyQuote. Retrieved from https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/herbert_spencer_109568.

Appendix A: Objective Ethical Standards (Paul & Elder, 2013)

I. Ethical principles are inherent in ethical concepts:

1. Universal ethical principles (pp. 23-24)

Most ethical principles are clear, though application to cases may not be.

Clear cut-ethically wrong to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others

Unethical in-and-of-themselves:

Slavery

Genocide

Torture

Sexism

Racism

Murder

Assault

Rape

Fraud

Deceit

Intimidation

Putting person in jail without telling chargers or give them an opportunity to defend (due process in the US)

Putting person in jail and/or punishing solely for political or religious views

2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (pp. 24-25)

Common standards of ethical principles

All humans born free and are in dignity and rights

All have the right to life, liberty, and security or person

No one held in slavery or servitude

No one subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading torture or punishment

All have the right to a standard of living adequate for health & well-being family and self

All have the right to education

All have the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association

All before the law & entitled without discrimination

II. Concepts Depicting Unethical Behavior (Paul & Elder, 2013, p. 23)

Concepts Depicting Unethical Behavior or Motivation

Using Intellectual Skills to Get Others to Act Against their Own Best Interest			
Cunning	Double-dealing	Mislead	
Sly	Cheat	Beguile	
Crafty	Defraud	Delude	
Trickery	Swindle	Betray	
Wily	Dupe	Misrepresent	
Duplicitous	Deceive	Use Subterfuge	
Ignoring the Rights and Needs of Others to Get What You Want		Rigidity of Mind Which Keeps People from Being Ethical	
Selfish	Grasping	Prejudice	Unfair
Self-conceit	Acquisitive	Bias	Chauvinist
Self-aggrandizement	Covetous	Narrow-minded	Jingoist
Greedy	Egotistic	Bigot	Small-minded
Avaricious		Zealot	Intolerant
		Fanatic	
Causing Emotional Discomfort		Causing Pain or Suffering	
Disrespectful	Heartless	Unkind	Merciless
Rude	Impatience	Dominate	Rancorous
Ill-mannered	Insensitive	Tyrannize	Malignant
Discourteous	Petty	Oppress	Pitiless
Unkind	Belligerent	Bully	Ruthless
Uncivil	Bellicose	Hurt	Vicious
Dishonor	Pugnacious	Cruel	Malicious
Hateful	Quarrelsome	Brutal	Ill-willed
Callous	Contentious	Inconsiderate	Malevolence
		Inhuman	
Refusing to Tell the Truth Due to Self-Interest		Unethical Behavior that Results From a Perceived Grievance	
Dishonest	Hypocritical	Holding a Grudge	Revengeful
Deceitful	Disingenuous	Vindictive	Spiteful
Lying	False	Vengeful	
Untruthful	Disloyal		
Insincere			