THE MORAL COMPASS OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: INFLUENCING OUR FUTURE

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Abstract: In the ever-evolving landscape of education, understanding how individuals learn and the principles guiding instructional design is essential for success. This paper delves into the intricacies of learning experiences, acknowledging the need for educators to align these experiences with learners' and societal requirements. Amidst the technological advancements and the tumultuous impact of COVID-19, it becomes increasingly challenging to discern the most effective methods for creating learning experiences that cater to our collective future.

Learning experiences encompass a wide spectrum of interactions, courses, and programs that facilitate learning, reflecting the dynamic interplay between pedagogical approaches and technological advancements. As an online college educator with an open-minded approach to technology, this reflective essay aims to explore the boundless possibilities within education while critically evaluating our current stance.

This exploration calls for a synthesis of effective instructional design, a nuanced understanding of learners' needs, and a vision for societal progress. By embracing flexibility and adaptability, we can navigate the complex educational landscape and chart a course towards educational experiences that empower learners and benefit society as a whole.

Keywords: Learning experiences, Instructional design, online education, Pedagogical shifts
Societal needs

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 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,

Govidnarajan 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 politcial discourse" (para. 19) and lead to free college education seems to be about possibilities but not practical realties and sound policy. The culturally entrenched educational institutions are unlikely to be incentivized to offer their services for free.

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 leaner'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 Learning 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 incudes 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	Philanthropic
Unselfish	Humanitarian
Charitable	Benevolent
Altruistic	

Dealing With People Objectively in Order to Be Fair

Understanding	Unbiased
Impartial	Dispassionate
Equitable	Objective

Relating to People in Ethically Appropriate Ways

Civil	Forbearing
Polite	Tolerant
Courteous	Tactful
Respectful	

Being Forthright and Honest

Honest	Loyal
Truthful	Faithful
Integrity	Trustworthy

Relating to People in Commendable Ways

Friendly	Gracious
Obliging	Tender
Cordial	Warm
Kind	Warm-hearted
Gentle	

Being Willing to Forgive in Order to Alleviate Suffering

Forgive	Exonerate
Pardon	Compassionate
Absolve	Merciful

Acting Out of a Concern to Behave Ethically

Scrupulous	Open-minded
Honorable	Evenhanded
Upright	

Acting Out of a Concern for the Feelings of Others

Sympathetic	Compassionate
Empathetic	Considerate
Understanding	

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. Didthey understood 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 takebecause 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.

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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

Selfish	Grasping
Self-conceit	Acquisitive
Self-aggrandizement	Covetous
Greedy	Egotistic
Avaricious	

Rigidity of Mind Which Keeps People from Being Ethical

Prejudice	Unfair
Bias	Chauvinist
Narrow-minded	Jingoist
Bigot	Small-minded
Zealot	Intolerant
Fanatic	

Causing Emotional Discomfort

Disrespectful	Heartless
Rude	Impatience
Ill-mannered	Insensitive
Discourteous	Petty
Unkind	Belligerent
Uncivil	Bellicose
Dishonor	Pugnacious
Hateful	Quarrelsome
Callous	Contentious

Causing Pain or Suffering

Unkind	Merciless
Dominate	Rancorous
Tyrannize	Malignant
Oppress	Pitiless
Bully	Ruthless
Hurt	Vicious
Cruel	Malicious
Brutal	Ill-willed
Inconsiderate	Malevolence
Inhuman	

Refusing to Tell the Truth Due to Self-Interest

Dishonest	Hypocritical
Deceitful	Disingenuous
Lying	False
Untruthful	Disloyal
Insincere	

Unethical Behavior that Results From a Perceived Grievance

Holding a Grudge	Revengeful
Vindictive	Spiteful
Vengeful	