Who Owns the E-learning Curriculum?

Denise Kirkpatrick
Director
Teaching and Learning Centre
University of New England
Armidale, New South Wales

Paper presented to Victoria University of Technology
Ethics and E-learning Conference

Introduction

E-learning has been enthusiastically embraced by institutions, administrators and individuals who recognise its potential to increase access to resources and information, open up new markets and provide a competitive edge. Teachers and learners have responded in a variety of ways ranging from enthusiastic adoption to scepticism and mistrust. The insertion of new technologies into higher education presents both opportunities and threats for teachers and learners. In this paper I want to focus on questions relating to ownership of the curriculum.

Questions of curriculum

The notion of curriculum ownership is in itself problematic. My consideration of curriculum ‘ownership’ is informed by the following view of curriculum:

Central ideas of curriculum are clear enough: These are the concepts of structure, sequence, and completion … Without structure, sequence and completion we can have learning, we can have teaching, we can have education but we cannot have curriculum. And structure, sequence and completion are all universal notions that require the intervention of organizations and institutions to establish them in the public domain. (Reid, 1999, p. 188)

Critical questions about curriculum relate to who makes curriculum decisions, the type of curriculum decisions that are made, and the authority for such decisions. Curriculum is more than the content that is taught and learned; it becomes the site on which generations struggle to define themselves and the
world. With these views of curriculum in mind, essential questions about curriculum relate to what it means to educate and the purpose of a university education.

Drawing on the work of Bernstein, university curriculum can be thought of as comprising:

- Particular domains of disciplinary or professional knowledge;
- Particular systems of pedagogy (ways of teaching and learning);
- Particular protocols of assessment and evaluation; and
- Particular forms of organisation (including the calculation and allocation of resources).

This implies an understanding of curriculum as more than a practice, and incorporates an institutional dimension. It implies concern with organizational issues at every level and demands attention to resourcing and other issues than those relating to matters of knowledge.

Again, this directs attention to questions about who can and who should ‘own’ and be responsible for the dimensions of the curriculum map which may include:

- Knowledge (what is taught);
- Pedagogy (how it is taught);
- Forms of assessment;
- Focus of assessment and evaluation;
- Organisation of programs (entry, structure, and completion); and
- Distribution and allocation of resources.

New technologies and curriculum
Such questions of ownership and responsibility are critical in relation to all forms or modes of teaching and learning but the insertion of new technologies raises additional questions and exerts pressure to consider how new forms of organisation and pedagogies may change the ownership of curriculum.
The reasons for this are varied. In part it is because of the associations between the emergence of new technologies, the new ways of delivering education that are made possible by these technologies and the associated economic, social and knowledge changes that occurring. The rise of the corporate university, for-profit universities delivering online courses, and the growth of university-industry collaborations exert a material influence on our perception of emerging e-learning ventures. The rise of e-learning in universities reflects significant changes that are occurring more widely. These include: new relationships between education and the economy; new forms of knowledge relationships; increased pressure for universities to be more responsive to the needs of industry; better preparation of students for immediate contribution to the workforce; and pressure for greater efficiencies.

A further consequence of technological change is that it provides the possibility for new centres and forms of knowledge production and distribution. The impact on universities of this is significant. As they become part of a wider learning market that includes the research and development departments of large organizations, think tanks and consultancies they appear to be losing their privileged status as primary producers of knowledge.

Plant (1995) argues that universities are less able to control access to knowledge when it increasingly takes the form of information circulating through networks which evade the regulation of educational institutions and when the definition of knowledge as a product of ‘educated’ minds is challenged. If we are mindful that curriculum is closely related to social policy then this clearly influences the central curriculum question: What does it mean to educate learners in this changing environment?

As a new form of learning, e-learning causes us to reconsider many aspects of our academic practice. It is both accompanied by and contributes to a changed university environment. New technologies may open up spaces for re-conceptualisation of our policies and practices. However, the new technologies that have made e-learning possible are accompanied by both potential opportunities and threats. E-learning has
already altered some of our practices as individuals and institutions, and it has the capacity to alter academic life significantly for teachers and learners. I will consider some of these practices briefly, bearing in mind that the detail and extent of these will vary from one institution to another and will vary within any one institution.

E-learning can be thought of as one manifestation of the notion of flexible learning. Within the term e-learning we can conceive a range of online or Web-based teaching and learning practices including computer-mediated communication as the basis of teaching and learning, electronic delivery of independent learning resources, learning in simulated electronic environments, learning using technological tools and software, and electronic enrolment and course administration.

Put simply, our questions about ownership may be driven by a protectionist concern that the traditional owners of curriculum--individuals and teams of academics and universities--are losing ownership to other organizations as university and industry develop collaborative programs and new providers enter the education market. Or, more positively, we may take this as an opportunity for expanding curriculum ‘ownership’ in the new environment that has been created by electronic technologies, considering possibilities for greater learner involvement and control, looking at how e-learning may allow for more democratic curriculum practices.

In the new world of higher education we have seen the emergence of alternate education providers. The virtual universities have received the greater share of public attention. The University of Phoenix, while having been established some twenty years ago to provide professional education, achieved prominence with its online course provision. Similarly, it was to a large extent the e-learning environment that drew public attention to the growth of corporate universities such as the McDonald’s ‘Hamburger’ University and Motorola University. These customised course providers certainly position curriculum
ownership in particular ways—the workplace becomes the curriculum and the notion of curriculum becomes more limited and focused on a restricted set of content and skills.

The promise and reality of e-learning

Among the potentials attributed to e-learning over the past decade have been:

- increased access to education;
- democratization of teaching and learning process by giving greater control of learning to students; and
- freedom of learner choice over the place, time and pace at which learning occurs.

Supporters of the new technologies have made many claims for the e-environment. Among these are, that it will:

- remove or bypass controls over what is taught—with the structure of interest being shaped by what students want to learn;
- alter the things we think with; different discourses will emerge that reflect the capacities of the technologies and the ways we use them; and
- alter the nature of community.

The traditional community of the university is structured around notions of lectures, tutorials, and labs controlled by teachers who select groupings, the type of interactions that will occur, who interacts, and with whom. New learning technologies suggest new groupings, communication patterns, interactions and power structures.

Commentators such as Landow (1992) suggest that ideas of community discourse and power are altered by the new relationships between production and delivery. They argue that these technologies will bring about change in the pattern of control and power in designing, delivering and evaluating teaching and learning. The web has been described as a medium that values multiple intelligences (Brown, 2000). As such it should allow teachers to create a learning environment that supports all learners in engaging in a way that best meets their learning needs. The Web can be seen as a two-way medium in which the ‘push and pull’ of receiver and sender of information opens up new opportunities.
Returning to the premise that notions of teaching and curriculum contain the idea of order, structure and sequence in ways such that information becomes part of an intention for learning--it can be argued that technology has the capacity to radically change this situation as information can be available to participants without screening or ordering. Electronically-mediated learning has the potential to make redundant the idea of a self-contained classroom in which teachers to a large extent control and structure information and communication.

Is e-learning as currently practised delivering these promises? Have we seen changes in the dimensions of curriculum with rights to possession or investment shifting from one group to another?

New technologies and practice

In addressing these questions, I’d like to further explore the extent to which e-learning has changed academic tasks and roles; teacher control; learner control; and boundaries.

We are already seeing the separation of some academic tasks and roles in higher education (Cunningham et al., 2000). Distinctions in the staff work underpinning both distance education and on-campus delivery have blurred and are harder to sustain. We have seen an increase in the number of positions of educational developer, instructional designer, and online developer in Australian universities. The production of e-subjects and courses involves not only the academic as expert in content and sometimes pedagogy, it includes educational designers and developers, programmers, technicians, graphic designers and others. Decisions about how subjects will be structured and organised become the domain of a larger number of people. Resourcing needs and implications expand and those responsible for decision-making in relation to these questions include systems managers and information technology managers, in addition to the academic manager.
Several of the US for-profit universities have already separated out the development of curriculum (often in consultation with industry), from the teaching of that curriculum, employing two different groups to perform each task. For example, the University of Phoenix uses a centrally developed curriculum across a wide network of e-classrooms while Jones University uses the ‘best of the best’ notion, arguing that experts at the cutting edge of new knowledge are not necessarily the best at teaching students.

Examples from some of the US for-profit providers illustrate shifts in control of aspects of the curriculum from established teachers to new players. These institutions frame quality in terms of centrally-developed and mandated curricula and teaching scripts that allow teachers limited interpretation in order to ensure consistency of product. It is unlikely that all of these role changes are simply the result of the online environment, rather they stem from a different notion—the emergence of the for-profit and corporate university that just happens to be online.

The Internet makes it possible to transform a subject or course into an object for widespread distribution or sale, opening up new markets for courses. The licensing of university courses to commercial providers may be accompanied by altering the educational product to meet the needs of different groups of learners.

Technology has the capacity to alter the hegemonic relationship of teacher and student. New technologies allow individuals to cross and transform loosely demarcated boundaries by providing access to a myriad of cultural content (O’Connor, 1997). This may lead to the contestation of boundaries between teachers and students through tensions between accepted academic content produced by those in powerful positions and new forms of content from other sources. Technology may allow each individual to personalise the sequence, pace and content of what they learn. Determining what is and what is not legitimate will become a more uncertain process. Social relations and organization may change and this will impact on curriculum and concepts of education.
Learning and teaching in an e-environment presents challenges to the curriculum in relation to knowledge, pedagogy, assessment and organization. It is useful to review the ways in which the potentially free and rich e-environment is currently being used in Australian higher education.

It is not surprising that review of e-learning in Australian universities offers a wide range of approaches and strategies. However e-learning design can be broadly conceptualised as encouraging independent, interactive, or collaborative learning. In Australian higher education we see examples of e-learning design that provide opportunities or require learners to engage in particular types of tasks depending on the dominant view of learning that underpins the design of the environment or the activities. We have examples of e-courses and subjects that range from little more than the insertion of conventional course content and pedagogy into an electronic environment to subjects, programs or components that have been specifically designed to take account of the features of the e-environment such as access to resources, distributed interaction or collaboration, asynchronous communication for distributed learners, access to software and tools. However in almost all cases what we see are situations where organization, structure and pedagogy are pre-determined either centrally (by development teams or e-administration/production unit) or by the teachers involved. It seems that there are few cases where the learner is truly engaged in owning the curriculum or aspects of it. Despite the promises of flexibility and learner control of the e-environment and its resources control is clearly bounded.

At present, the design of proprietary e-learning course management systems is underpinned by notions of structure, sequence, organization and pedagogy that generally replicate conventional face-to-face teaching models. They also dictate particular ways of organising, structuring and supporting particular pedagogies. Materials and courses are packaged according to standardised templates. There is a proliferation of packages that
are clearly structured week-by-week around regular semesters or trimesters with predetermined commencement and conclusion dates. Teaching materials and sites are activated at the commencement of teaching sessions and taken down at the end of semester, when learners are expected to have completed their learning.

Most attempts at online teaching seek to reproduce what we do in on-campus teaching, lectures are videotaped and streamed, Power-point presentations are recorded sometimes with voice commentary, we attempt to run virtual tutorials and discussion groups using synchronous chat or bulletin boards. The notion of a virtual university seeks to provide an experience that is analogous to an on-campus experience rather than exploring the different potentials of the medium.

A common approach to online teaching comprises the electronic presentation of course materials and resources selected by the academic to be used independently by the learner who may or may have choice about the sequence of activities and content. Alternatively, e-learning guided by principles of social constructivism includes interaction among learners, usually directed by the teacher who structures activities and promotes interaction with scaffolds and frameworks, drawing on pre-determined topics at specified dates and points in the subject. The access to additional resources on the web may be assisted by links inserted by the teacher to relevant sites and resources. Again, these are determined by the teacher within the limits of what can be supported. In these models, the teacher remains in control as author.

The growth of e-learning has, however, led to the rise of ‘unbundling’, separating out the rights to development, content, delivery, and assessment. This role distinction has particular implications for curriculum, casting curriculum authorship in a new light. For example, the modularising of courses for e-delivery changes the structure and inserts new players into the curriculum arena. The emergence of e-education has been accompanied by increased involvement of multinational text book conglomerates who provide curriculum designed for the e-environment. The use of capsules of prepared content that can be inserted into an e-learning space brings about new views of curriculum ownership
and decision-making. The increasing involvement of commercial online education providers and deliverers inserts new players into the curriculum map.

Our current approaches to e-learning and teaching create an environment that privileges certain teaching-learning approaches over others. Proprietary course-management systems are designed around particular pedagogical approaches which are frequently less flexible than existing face- to-face approaches. Commercial e-learning packages direct pedagogy, assessment and evaluation. Availability and allocation of university resources determine who develops particular types of e-learning activities and in what ways.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the questions of who should legitimately own the curriculum and the consequences if ownership is appropriated by those outside the higher education domain are serious indeed. While e-learning has the capacity to open up curriculum ownership in positive ways, is this occurring? We need to consider seriously the possible outcomes and the direction in which we wish things to proceed. Despite calls for fundamental re-thinking of pedagogies for the e-environment, to date our attempts to invent new pedagogies have been limited both by conventional attitudes to teaching and learning, and by the wider socio-economic context.

References
Accessed February 12, 2001


