

The Personal Learning Environment and the Institution of Education: Reflections on Technological Personalisation in ITEC Schools

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Abstract

Learning and Education are not the same, although they are often confused. Whilst technology has augmented and transformed the means by which individuals can do the work of learning, the institution of education has developed in different ways, harnessing technology to increase their dominance and power in the lives of more and more people. This appears contradictory: how can a technology which makes the means of learning more available contribute to the rise educational institutions who, despite rising costs borne by students, take a stranglehold over the business of education, and the lives of learners the world over?

To understand this, I draw on two sources: the economic critique of Higher Education by Thorstein Veblen – a critique whose pertinence to the current situation is remarkable; and recent work of John Searle on social ontology. Both Veblen and Searle place emphasis on the word ‘status’. For Veblen, Education is a “status game” played by the aspirant members of the ‘leisure class’ in their effort to imbue their lives with meaning through becoming admitted to the ‘priesthood’ of knowledgeable people. Searle, in contrast, discusses “status” in the context of an explanation for how institutions like Universities, schools and nation states, together with artefacts like money and degree certificates establish their reality in a social context.

E-learning projects – even PLE projects – are full of ‘status declarations’: from the status declaration concerning the project itself, or the status of the institutions responsible for the project (e.g. the European Commission or Universities) to declarations about the purpose of tools and the roles of users. In the ITEC project, school teachers were encouraged to deploy personal collections of widgets (small applications which can be instantiated in the variety of settings) in their teaching, as part of the delivery of ‘learning scenarios’. Despite the technology being designed with the flexibility of the PLE at its heart, few teachers adopted it. Drawing on Searle’s work, the status declarations which relate to networks of rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments of stakeholders are examined.

Many advocates of the PLE assumed that the purpose of education is learning, and that technology can serve that purpose as well as institutions (if not better). But what would a PLE look like if its focus was on increasing status, not learning? Can technological forms of personal learning, or even learning through MOOCs, ever be functionally equivalent to institutional education? And what are we to do with those powerful educational institutions for whom initiatives like the PLE might ultimately only serve to drive more people into their clutches?

Introduction: Learning and Education

There is a simple distinction which divides the concept of 'Learning' from that of 'Education'. Whilst 'education' manifests itself in institutions, textbooks, classrooms, curricula and teachers – all of which we can point at – learning itself is something that goes on in peoples' heads: there is, ostensibly, nothing to be pointed at beyond accounts of subjectivity. In characterising the broader distinction between different aspects of reality, Searle has highlighted the difference between the "ontologically objective", the "ontologically subjective", the "epistemically objective" and the "epistemically subjective" (Searle, 2010, p18). Schools, classrooms and curricula are "ontologically subjective" – they are real things that we can point at, but whose reality is constituted through social institutions. Learning, by contrast is "epistemically subjective" – its reality can only be known by the person experiencing it – rather like an itch. Conversely, with regard to "ontological objectivity", we might say that "the earth is spherical", or alternatively we might say that "Beethoven died in 1827" as an example of epistemic objectivity, since the statement about Beethoven is an objective statement of knowledge. But it is the distinction between ontological subjectivity and epistemic subjectivity which forms the basis of the argument in this paper.

The discourse around phenomena which is epistemic subjective is grounded in philosophical metaphysics. Modern "learning theory" can be traced back to German idealism, particularly in what is popularly termed the 'Copernican' epistemological revolution of Immanuel Kant which situated the world around the individual's cognitive processes. With regard to Searle's position, Kant's idealism is problematic: institutions of education – schools, Universities, colleges, seem to affect us all irrespective of our perception of them. However, there is a disconnect between the common-sense notion of the reality of institutions and their causal powers and our learning theories which fundamentally owe their origins to Kantian epistemology. It is this disconnect which, in the process of designing, implementing and evaluating the Personal Learning Environment (PLE), has revealed itself, and which this paper orients itself towards a realist interpretation: in short, the metaphysics of learning do not appear to have taken us anywhere. In its place is proposed a social ontology of commitments, rights, obligations and responsibilities.

Recognition of the difficulties with the concept of 'Learning' was a precursor to the establishment of the PLE in the first place. Whilst institutions of education have always constituted an "environment" for learning, the criticism, inspired by Illich (1971) and others, concerned the 'fit' between the learning needs of individuals and the particular kinds of environmental support provided by institutions (Johnson and Liber, 2008; Attwell, 2007). The implication behind the PLE, as an intervention in learning technology, was that a learning environment constituted by personal technology - a learning environment where the locus of control rests with the learner rather than with the institution - provides an alternative environment for learning to that provided by institutions. However, if this was the case, then as the costs of institutional education rise, we might expect an increasingly large number of learners to flee to the technologies of the PLE as a viable alternative. This does not appear to have happened.

In the early years of the PLE discourse, with the rapid rise of social software, the PLE became a rallying cry for the inversion of the institution (Wilson et al, 2007), arguing for "putting the learner in control of their learning", accessing and coordinating services provided by the institution. This became a popular theme that affected not only university education, but schools, becoming aligned

with ideas of self-efficacy, together with an argument that technology was moving too fast for institutional curricula to keep up, necessitated rethinking of institutional services and ushering-in ideas ranging from 'Bring your own Device', mobile-learning, service integration, widgetised learning and other concepts. Among the significant interventions in the school sector, the ITEC project funded by the European Union, has been a major attempt to establish this way of thinking.

However, in this attempt to reposition learning, learning itself became characterised in an increasingly concrete way: models of learning (each of which is commensurable with the other), ranging from Laurillard's conversation model (Laurillard, 1999), the model of the learner as a viable system which this author contributed to (Johnson and Liber, 2008) and connectivist learning which underpinned MOOCs (Siemens and Downes, 2009) all served to reify learning as a process. With this reified process, technologies were identified as being *functionally equivalent* to more traditional practices in face-to-face education: conversation online was functionally equivalent to face-to-face interaction; access to online services was functionally equivalent to accessing the library, student services, etc. Indeed, in the technical specification of the PLE, the aim was to identify those services which could supplant the services of the institution (see Wilson et al, 2007)

In practice, the PLE has not realised the predictions of its theory. Consequently this paper asks, What might be wrong with the theory? In addressing this, I explore the nature of the reality of institutions, certificates, and contrast it to the reality of software, widgets and MOOCs drawing on the experiences of the ITEC project and the social ontology of Searle. I then discuss how a refined picture of the realities of education can help us to explain some of the phenomena we see around us: not only the increasing power of traditional institutions, but new practices online where individuals do appear to be increasing their social status.

Constructivism and the Realities of Software and Institutions

The PLE adopted an approach to learning which was constructivist. This relation with constructivism played a fundamental role in its characterisation of what was meant by the word 'personal'. Whilst constructivism itself was not new in e-learning (many VLEs were conceived as constructivist interventions) the view of the PLE was that if learners could be given the facility to coordinate the technologies of their life with the technologies of their learning, then a meta-level of personal construction mediated by their own personal technologies and practices could be more powerful than the surface level constructivism which relied on technologies provided by institutions. The vision of the PLE was a version of constructivism where nobody said "these are the tools you should use for your learning", but rather, "whatever tools you wish to use for your learning, here's how you can connect and coordinate your actions". The PLE's constructivism was fundamentally tool-oriented, as opposed to utterance-oriented constructivism that lay behind conversational approaches to learning.

In understanding the implications of tool-oriented constructivism, it is necessary to inquiry into the nature of tools as objects whose utilization becomes part of the individual's construction of the world. One way of doing this was to characterise the coordinations of individuals with tools as a way in which individuals maintain their viability: such arguments about technology were put forward by McLuhan and others, and Johnson and Liber characterised the engagement with tools as a cybernetic mechanism of an individual. However, objects are not just 'constructs derived from use'; they are real things in the environment independently of anything that they might mean to

individuals: in Searle's language, they are "ontologically subjective". The objects of software which were advocated with the PLE may not be fundamentally dissimilar from physical objects like banknotes, cups, or pencils. The deep question is, How do these objects become meaningful and recognised as significant in our social contexts? The question concerning the PLE is, Is there a distinction between the status of reality of personal technologies for learning and institutional technologies for learning?

Searle's Theory of Status Functions and the Objects of Education

Searle's basic idea is that objects like banknotes, computer software, textbooks and curricula acquire their significance through a social process of what he calls 'status functions'. A status function is a particular kind of speech act whereby an individual or a group of individuals make a declaration: "We (or I) make it the case by Declaration that the Y status function exists". Such a declaration is supported by other declarations of others in the society, not least the declaration that the person making the first declaration has the power to do so. So, for example, the object of the Virtual Learning Environment was a status declaration by a group of influential learning technologists who made the statement that "A status function exists such that the VLE is an important part of university education". The impact of this status function was supported by other status functions which related to the organisations making it. In the UK, for example, the influential Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) played a significant role (and the reason why only in the UK is there talk of a "Virtual Learning Environment", JISC's terminology, as opposed to "learning management system" – as it is described everywhere else!). What emerges in the network of status function declarations between different stakeholders are networks of rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments. It is through the network of these that the "ontologically subjective" entities, not just of the education system, but of society in general, establish their reality and their causal powers on everybody in that society.

Computer software itself is an aggregation of a variety of status functions. Within any computer software, there are encoded responsibilities, roles, obligations and commitments – of both users and developers - which once a person starts to engage with the software, they are obliged to comply with. This aggregated nature of software produces problems: with the VLE, there are implicit roles and responsibilities (the role of teacher, the role of learner) which are encoded in the software, and which have to be tacitly accepted if the status function regarding the software as a whole is accepted. The fact that the encoded roles and responsibilities within the software relating to those people for whom the software is intended often do not reflect their actual practice can lead to processes of alienation and disengagement. Technologists hope that through the intervention of software, the agency of the users will change. Yet it rarely does of its own accord. What is required in order for it to change (even for take-up of the VLE) are increasingly powerful status function declarations by powerful people in the institution which eventually mandate the use of the software.

The combination of different status functions relating to power relations within the institution, the status of software objects and the rights and obligations of individuals provides a backdrop to inspect the impact of the PLE. The PLE was a declared status function relating not to a particular object (because the objective was not to 'build' a PLE!) but instead relating to a set of practices. In effect, these practices were deemed to support notions of 'personalised learning' and self-efficacy whilst challenging the status of institutional approaches to education and the curriculum. Behind the

rationale for these new 'practice-oriented' status functions were concretised ideas about learning. Learning, it was argued, was engendered through conversation and connection, and that these connections could be facilitated in ways where individuals could coordinate engagement with institutional structures in more flexible ways than those which were determined by traditional courses. As evidence for this, the uses of social software such as YouTube by artists and musicians, where individuals found new ways of making their way through the world independently of traditional brokers (like agents) was cited as an example of what might be possible within the educational universe. If individual practices could change so that individuals used personal technologies in effective ways which manifested in practices which were 'functionally equivalent' to institutional processes, then a challenge to institutional practices could be defended.

The status function of the PLE was a challenge to existing institutional status functions. By declaring the status of the 'learning process' and the associated "functional equivalence" off online engagement to face-to-face engagement, the PLE also sought to critique the status functions that others within the institutional environment had determined with regard to institutional learning technology – in particular, a challenge was mounted against the status of the VLE. Associated with the challenge to the status of technologies, was a challenge to the status of the individuals who upheld the status of those objects. The PLE was 'personal' in terms of a power conflict, not just in terms of its aspirations for learning!

Power, Status functions and the PLE concept in institutional learning

Whilst the PLE is described as something of a challenge to the institution, most experiments in engaging with PLE concepts have occurred within the context of institutional learning. Typically this has involved uses of technologies beyond those sanctioned directly by the institution. This creates a complex set of power relations which can also be described in terms of status functions. Searle describes power relations within his social ontology in terms of what he calls "deontic powers". He explains:

"The power of the local party bosses and the village council as well as the power of such grander figures as presidents, prime ministers, the US Congress and the Supreme court are all derived from the possession by these entities of recognized status functions. And these status functions assign deontic powers." (p 164)

The role of status functions in assigning deontic powers to these bodies and individuals has a simple but profound logical consequence: "All political power, though exercised from above, comes from below." Even dictators typically are unsure of the status functions that gave them power, needing to maintain these functions through "massive systems of rewards and punishments by terror." In more democratic situations, those in power have that power given to them by those subjected to it.

Within status declarations about tools within an educational institution are implicit status functions relating to power structures. Compliance with institutional tooling entails status functions relating to head-teachers, vice-chancellors, heads of teaching and learning, examining boards, etc. As institutions become increasingly technological, and each institutional technology carries its own status functions and declarations of rights and responsibilities, so the network of status functions can become confusing and difficult for both learners and staff.

Politicians, heads of institutions and others in power can look at existing practices and say “This is no longer valid; these new functions/roles/responsibilities/tools are the ones you should now comply with.” Political interference in educational systems of this sort is common as educational intervention has become a popular means by which political parties can stamp their mark on a society. However, such attempts naturally lead to reactions.

The situation for teachers is ultimately one of conflicting status functions which somehow they have to negotiate. The rights and commitments they must manage must balance their obligations to their institutions with the obligations to their students. The status functions determined by the institution as they are embodied within institutional technology must be balanced by what the teacher might feel as opportunities for learners to learn new skills with technology that exists outside the institution. In managing this balance, teachers exercise their own deontic powers in relation both to their students, taking responsibility for their experiments with regard to how they might be viewed by their institutions. However, a teacher that declares that Twitter or Facebook will be the technology for a course is not promoting the principles of the PLE (although this is sometimes confused with the PLE rhetoric); they are simply declaring a different status function with regard to technology. On the other hand, a teacher who allows students to choose whatever technology they wish providing they meet some particular requirement of assessment might be closer to the spirit of the PLE. In such a case, the declared status function relates to the process of assessment rather than the use of a particular technology. In the variety of practices which have been described as being allied to the PLE, there are a large variety of distinctions that can be made with regard to the precise nature of the status functions that are declared.

In each case of teachers negotiating this balance of technology, institutional policy, assessment regimes and learner needs, teachers need to consider:

- How not to put their jobs at risk;
- How to ensure that they can manage the complexities of assessment which ensue from whichever approach they take;
- How to balance the interests of learners with practical concerns about technology use;
- How to avoid making technological demands on their learners which their learners are not comfortable with (in other words, how to avoid doing precisely what is criticised in institutional IT provision!)

There are deep mechanisms whereby the education system manages to hold things together. Not least this is because teachers want to continue to get paid, and students demand that they achieve qualifications. In reality, good teachers will work through things and make the best of it. The ITEC project presents some useful examples of where this was the case.

The Reality of Software in the ITEC Project

ITEC is a large-scale European project which aims to transform the technological practices of teachers in schools across Europe. It was formulated against the background of technological transformations which were among the driving forces behind the PLE agenda: the rise of social software, increasing personalisation of tools and the need for flexibility in the curriculum as well as addressing deeper societal concerns including the global movement of populations, social mobility and inclusion.

ITEC has sought to establish a community of practice among teachers and learners in schools focused around specific pedagogical activities which in turn implicate engagement with technologies. To achieve its ambitions, the project set to put in place an infrastructure whereby pedagogical and technical innovation is community-led and community-sustained. This is central to the iTEC philosophy: it is the means by which individual instances of classroom practice are connected and contribute to a broader effort in experimenting with new pedagogies and technologies. By doing this, the conditions for sustained innovation through engaging in new practice is envisaged as not only a means to better practice on the ground, but also a means whereby teachers continue their involvement in a Europe-wide community of teachers the membership of which is something of perceived value to them. ITEC aims to be, in effect, a PLE for teachers to develop pedagogic practice.

The deployment of tools to meet the pedagogical requirements has demanded flexible ways in which toolsets can be organised and distributed. Evolving the PLE's concept of service interoperability and personalisation of toolsets, ITEC has used 'widgets' (small web-based applications) as a key component in the technical architecture of the project. These tools can be instantiated across a wide range of electronic learning contexts, including a number of popular Virtual Learning Environments. Whilst particular widgets were designed with requisite affordances for the educational requirements, the instantiation and curation of widgets could be left to the teacher through the use of a 'widget store', a technology developed from the Apache Wookie Widget Server (Griffiths et al., 2012; Wilson et al, 2008). The Widget Store also provides additional social network features, thus not only serving the instrumental purpose of delivering tools, but also providing a means whereby the teacher community may share and comment on widgets which they find meaningful and useful within their practice.

However, across the 4 years of the project, the widget store has only met with a modicum of success. In general, teachers have chosen to use institutionally-provided tools such as electronic whiteboards or other tools provided on the web (for example, Socrative) rather than coordinate their own tooling through the widget store. From the perspective of the present paper, the realities both of the project's innovation in designing the widget store, and in the actual practices teachers can be analysed in terms of commitments, responsibilities, obligations and the status functions which relate to them.

Any project is itself a status function which says (broadly) "this is a project which is of relevance to you". The deontic power of this statement rests on the body organising the project (in this case, the EU Commission), the amount of funding, the opportunities for engagement and the status of the ideas underpinning the project. Basing itself around ideas related to the PLE, the status declaration of the ITEC project had some weight with substantial funding, a broad range of stakeholders and a recognised need that technology in schools is an important thing. However, like all status functions – and particularly those relating to technological practices – there can emerge conflicts in local situations as teachers have to balance their commitments to their learners and their obligations to their managers, whilst at the same time seeking opportunities to raise their own status. Whatever status declarations ITEC could make about specific technologies, 'engagement' meant that fundamentally teachers had to endorse the status functions about the technologies with their learners. In doing so, they would not want to appear to be admiring the "emperor's new clothes". In doing this, many teachers ultimately decided that the emperor (at least the "emperor" of the widget

store) was in fact naked and had to manoeuvre between their status relations with their learners and the status relations with the project.

There were some curious side-effects of this. Not least was the fact that despite the actual evidence of web activity on the widget store was low, teachers would often say that they had used the technology more than the statistics indicated, with many saying that the widget store was a 'good idea'. Moreover, teachers found that they could negotiate between the different status functions of the project, trading off one for the other. ITEC made two fundamental status declarations: on the one hand, there was a declaration about the use of technology; on the other, there was a declaration about engagement with "pedagogical scenarios". The latter function provided flexibility in the acknowledgement of the former. Thus, the status of "being engaged in the ITEC project" could be achieved through engaging with the pedagogical scenarios, irrespective of the specific technological solution deployed.

But given this rather complex web of status functions, and the apparent failure of the attempt to get teachers to use ITEC widgets, it is also worth considering the winners and losers in the whole enterprise. In particular, we might ask, to what extent did teachers or learners increase their social status? To what extent were they able to define new rights and responsibilities? The answer here is, for learners – hardly at all; for teachers, not a lot. What about the core project team? These, in the final analysis, were the people who clearly did gain new networks of responsibility and obligations: they determined the nature of the technology provision, they determined the organisation of the project, they identified the goals and challenges. Despite its intentions, ITEC appears fundamentally top-down, with an "elite" management which could only gain status from the project (even despite its failures), and teachers who were provided with few opportunities for increasing their own status. Given that the project team had few ambitions for despotism, how could this come about?

The root cause for this lies in the fact that ITEC's status function concerned not a particular technology or a particular pedagogy, but an idea about learning. The concepts of online connection, conversation and cognitive development – whether in teachers or learners – lay behind not only its technological developments, but many of its pedagogical developments. Yet over-focus on ideals led focus away from the concrete realities of institutional life – not just in schools, but within the universities participating in the project, and within the governmental institutions that commissioned it in the first place. There are some fundamental questions which emerge from the ITEC experience:

1. What if ITEC had been more aware of the network of status functions which it was going to become a part right from the beginning?
2. What if the concrete requirement for status enhancement of both learners and teachers had been in-built from the start?
3. What if the requirement to balance the deontic power of the project board with the deontic power between individual teachers and learners had been recognised?
4. What kind of preliminary research would have been necessary to establish the realities of institutional relations?
5. What kind of interventions might have resulted in the light of a realistic grounding of the nature of the schools who were subject to the intervention?

The Personal Status of Learners: The role of Institutions and the Role of Technology

Situations such as those in ITEC are examples of institutionally-oriented approaches to personal learning with technology. However, the PLE articulated a vision of technologically-empowered learning which could theoretically bypass institutions altogether, or at least stitch episodes of learning from different institutions together in individual ways. Despite a few isolated examples of where individuals found ways of carving out careers through engaging with online platforms, for the vast majority of learners, the bypassing the institution has seemed unrealistic. Learners often testify to fear and lack of confidence with online practices like blogging or posting videos on YouTube. Even when learners can be persuaded to engage with tools like Twitter, engagement does not always become habit, and habit does not always entail increased self-confidence or personal learning. In particular, online discussion forums – whilst promoted as being communities of support for all where issues can be discussed – tend to attract the few with the disposition to express themselves online, whilst everyone else either ‘lurks’ or fails to engage at all.

The exhortation to engage online through forums and other means has grounded itself in ideas about learning. It is through these ideas about learning that particular status functions are declared with regard to particular tools and practices. However, the rationale for these status functions is seen to be inconsistent with the experience of complying with them: it is not only that there are sometimes perceived to be no ‘learning experiences’ gained through engaging with the technology. It is more than confidence is often not increased or that fears about online engagement are not addressed. In effect, it is the fact that individuals exhorted to engage in personal technologies for learning too often fail to acquire new deontic powers themselves in order to declare new status functions.

In this process of the acquisition of deontic powers that some key distinctions can be made between what happens within institutions and what often happens online. Institutions – particularly universities – establish themselves on the basis of a rich set of status functions which relate them to society. For the most prestigious institutions, these status functions are almost universally upheld in a rich network of political, historical and societal status functions. Association with such an institution immediately connects an individual to this network of social declarations and grants them privileged social status. University education at all levels upholds its status functions through various processes of exclusion and selection. However, more than this, within an institution – even an institution which is not in the upper echelons of the University system – opportunities are provided for individuals to establish new commitments and obligations: it might be writing for the student newspaper, or managing the sports club, or taking a political role in the students union. In each case, such opportunities also accord to an individual learner the opportunity to gain new deontic powers within a limited context: students can find themselves in a position to take the initiative with new projects and so on – all things which they can declare on their CVs when they graduate and look to impress employers. Student confidence follows increases in deontic power.

Whilst Universities portray themselves as “institutions of learning”, analysis of the opportunities it affords for increasing deontic powers, giving access to new rights, obligations and commitments may provide a richer and more realistic picture of the causal power of engagement with such institutions. Having said this, we can turn to the PLE and ask to what extent ‘learning’ might be a mistaken focus for looking at the engagement with personal technology. In the celebrated instances of individuals

making careers through engaging with personal tools, it is possible to determine processes of increasing social status through acquiring new rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments through online action. For example, the YouTube video artist acquires an audience who harbour expectations about the kind of thing that the artist might produce next. The artist acquires new responsibilities to satisfy and maintain their audience. In open-source software development environments like GitHub, a software developer might through developing software, acquire a body of users whose expectations create the need for the developer to honour obligations and commitments in terms of fixing bugs, developing new functionality and new initiatives. In each case, what we see may be better described as networks of commitments and obligations rather than processes of learning which remain essentially unobservable.

Veblen's Critique of Education as Archaic and Status-serving

The account given so far of the role and efficacy of institutional learning in providing opportunities for status enhancement goes some way to explain why it is that the PLE has not challenged the institution in ways that theorists thought that it might (including the present author). Despite rising costs of institutional education, there seems to be no decline in the demand for institutional learning, and there is certainly no abandonment of institutional learning in favour of technological engagement. How can we explain this? What is required is a more general theory of education as a status-oriented activity, where the nature of the relationship between status enhancement and economic activity is made explicit. Such a position was put forwards over 100 years ago by the American economist Thorstien Veblen. Veblen wrote twice about education – first in the last chapter of his “Theory of the Leisure Class” (1899) and later in “Higher Learning in America”. Here I will concentrate on the arguments put forwards in the former text, since they relate directly to a more general economic theory.

Veblen sees "education" as having not shaken-off archaic sacramental roots, presenting itself to the "leisure classes" (Veblen's name for the Bourgeoisie) as a means of becoming 'priests' or shamans. Veblen argues that:

"The recondite element in learning is still, as it has been in all ages, a very attractive and effective element for the purpose of impressing, or even imposing upon, the unlearned; and the standing of the savant in the mind of the altogether unlettered is in great measure rated in terms of intimacy with the occult forces"

In the relationships between those who consider themselves 'lettered' and those who don't, there is perhaps still an element of 'impressing' and 'imposing upon' that goes on. Veblen characterises the behaviour as:

"The priestly servitor of the inscrutable powers that move in the external world [...] stand in the position of a mediator between these powers and the common run of unrestricted humanity; for he was possessed of a knowledge of the supernatural etiquette which would admit him into the presence."

Veblen's point is not so much to drive home a point about education. It is to drive home a point about economics. His theory of the 'leisure class' provides the foundation for his critique of American capitalism. He argues that the acquisition of priestly status among the leisure classes had

become not only desirable, but mandated by 20th century society. In mandating this pretence, the engines of the education industry could be fired on the social aspirations of students. With this, so the engines of social difference and inequality drive value conflicts and networks of wants and desires which ultimately serve to keep the rich getting richer. Veblen points to evidence for his association with priestliness and learning in the obsession with rituals in the University:

"the learned class in all primitive communities are great sticklers for form, precedent, graduations of rank, ritual, ceremonial vestments, and learned paraphernalia generally."

Later he says "Even today there are such things in the usage of the learned community as the cap and gown, matriculation, initiation, and graduation ceremonies, and the conferring of scholastic degrees, dignities, and prerogatives in a way which suggests some sort of a scholarly apostolic succession." Furthermore, he argues that:

"These usages and the conceptions on which they rest belong to a stage in cultural development no later than that of the angekok [shaman] and the rain-maker."

To what extent does Veblen's critique measure up to what we see in the education system now? He presents a powerful description of what we might term the 'marketisation' of education:

"it is also no doubt true that such a ritualistic reversion could not have been effected in the college scheme of life until the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the propertied class had gone far enough to afford the requisite pecuniary ground for a movement which should bring the colleges of the country up to the leisure-class requirements in the higher learning. The adoption of the cap and gown is one of the striking atavistic features of modern college life, and at the same time it marks the fact that these colleges have definitively become leisure class establishments, either in actual achievement or in aspiration."

Finally, Veblen turns his focus on the leadership of institutions. Even in America in the 1920s, the pre-echoes of 21st century managerialism were present:

"it may be remarked that there is some tendency latterly to substitute the captain of industry in place of the priest, as the head of seminaries of the higher learning. The substitution is by no means complete or unequivocal. Those heads of institutions are best accepted who combine the sacerdotal office with a high degree of pecuniary efficiency."

He goes on to say that there is a tendency for educational institutions to be run by the 'money men' rather than people of learning:

"There is a similar but less pronounced tendency to intrust the work of instruction in the higher learning to men of some pecuniary qualification."

"Administrative ability and skill in advertising the enterprise count for rather more than they once did, as qualifications for the work of teaching. This applies especially in those sciences that have most to do with the everyday facts of life, and it is particularly true of schools in the economically single-minded communities."

Institutions and Technologies

Veblen's analysis appears powerfully prescient, but what does it mean for the PLE? When Veblen talks about the power of institutions he is referring to what Searle describes as the network of status functions which determine the position of those institutions in an economy. In particular, Veblen's analysis which relates the status functions of the institution with the societal drive towards status acquisition and broader economic processes helps to explain why it is that even despite the rising costs of institutional education, learners are still drawn to it, being prepared to take out larger and larger loans as a consequence. Indeed, Veblen points out that his principal of "conspicuous consumption" by the leisure classes may make more expensive offerings of education more attractive – social status can be achieved through explicit and extravagant wastefulness. This gives rise to what has become termed the 'Veblen good': a good whose demand is proportional to its price. Veblen, in describing this phenomenon, is close to Bataille's economic theory (Bataille, 1991) which related economic behaviour to exuberant wastefulness as an expression of individual sovereignty.

When we come to ask "What is exuberant or wasteful about the PLE?" we see by contrast a picture of economic rationalism. Indeed, this is not just economic rationalism but also a kind of 'learning rationalism'. However, with regard to technological engagement, and particularly those engagements which have been effective in raising social status, there are particular special cases and exceptions. The principal one is the production of art. For Bataille, artistic endeavour was a fundamental expression of exuberance: it is an act of 'giving' or what Bataille termed, following Mauss (1922), a 'potlatch'. What is particularly curious is that the potlatch of artistic engagement produces in turn a network of new responsibilities, obligations and rights – from which new deontic powers emerge for individuals, from where they learn. A similar pattern of potlatch can be seen in the behaviour of individuals who create software in GitHub. Again, this appears, at least initially, to be a wasteful act.

From this perspective, we can see how deep differences and similarities between technological practices and practices within the institution relate to economic forces which will tend to manifest in the increasing dominance of educational institutions in social life irrespective (and maybe because of) their cost. Whilst educational certificates carry particular declarations of status from the institutional bodies, the real value of institutional learning relates to its provision of other opportunities for status enhancement. Online, there are opportunities for status enhancement, but to realise them requires a more direct engagement with fundamental processes of exuberant and wasteful self-expression. Typically, those with the dispositions to do this will themselves be those privileged through upbringing to have the confidence to grab opportunities: online engagement does not represent a solution to the problem of social inequality.

Conclusion: A Personal Status Environment?

Technological interventions in education give us permission to ask deeper questions about education in general: the benefit of intervention, whether PLE, VLE, MOOC or anything else often lies not in successful implementation (which is rare), but in illumination. The PLE discourse asserted technology as a challenge to the institution's hegemony on the basis of theories of learning. The outcomes from the interventions from projects like iTEC suggest that the theories cannot be right. The problem, fundamentally, appears to be the intangible nature of learning itself, and the impossibility of being able to impute concrete processes to things which go on in peoples' heads.

The PLE (not least through the present author's work) not only attempted this but to design a technological infrastructure and set of practices whereby imputed learning processes could be supported: metaphysics drove technological development!

Technological development however does not need metaphysics to advance its cause. There is plenty of evidence of individuals making careers and advancing themselves through society with online activity. What is required is a theory to explain this which does not rely on metaphysics, but practical and concrete description. Searle's social ontology helps with this task. Networks of rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments can be revealed both by looking at the data-oriented connections between people, and by simply asking people about their relations with one another. Who has to do what? Who says who has to do what? What do people gain? Who has the right to change things? Basic transformations in rights and responsibilities bring with them the paraphernalia that typically are associated with learning: increases in self-efficacy, confidence, skilled-performances, and so on.

Institutions have always done this. However, they have presented what they do not as a 'status game' (which is what Veblen identified was actually going on) but rather as a metaphysical process of learning. We might ask whether for institutions to maintain their economic advantage, a certain degree of obfuscation about what they are really about is necessary. The appeal to the metaphysics of learning works by pretending that mysterious processes are going on in peoples' heads whilst in reality social climbing and grappling for responsibility and power presents the real opportunities of the institution (opportunities which all-too-often are most accessible to those who already come from positions of privilege) and the currency beyond the degree certificate which carries graduates into high-flying employment beyond education.

Something happens to individual confidence, and status within the learning process – and particularly in the face-to-face interactions. It may be validation of personal viewpoints, or the ability to enhance self-expression. By contrast to these more 'traditional' distance education offerings, the MOOC was seen as a way of amplifying learning to students all over the world, and how education could be made accessible to more and more people. Few MOOCs led to high levels of certification among students. Not that any of these offerings provided degree routes. The student profile from studying the MOOC tended to be those who had relatively high social status. Economic status and educational status become tied up in ways where the relationship between education, money and social inequality reveals itself in the cold light of realism.

As far as the aspirations of the PLE go, all is not necessarily lost to the institution. However, if the PLE is framed around the same metaphysical foundations that support institutions in their increasingly expensive offerings, it is unlikely that any institution will fear personalised learning. However, if the PLE operates as an illumination on institutional processes and socio-economic structures, then there may be ways in which the example of successful YouTube artists, software developers and bloggers might be codified and amplified in ways that provide individuals with genuine ways of using technology for social advancement. But this requires a deeper research project. Among the factors that would need to be investigated are:

1. The socioeconomic status of individuals engaging in institutional study or online activity;
2. The costs of study to learners in institutions;
3. The motivations for online activity;

4. The family backgrounds of individuals engaged in online activity;
5. The financial rewards of study to institutions;
6. The financial rewards of online engagement to technology corporations;
7. The financial rewards of online activity to individuals;
8. The net contribution to national economy of institutional performance;
9. The potential benefits of student loans to the government and industry;
10. The extent to which individuals engage in 'potlatch' style behaviours online or within institutions;
11. The power of networks of rights and responsibilities gained through online activity;
12. The causal efficacy of educational interventions in making a difference (or not) to social status;
13. The economics of course provision and the means by which institutions maintain their viability;
14. The utilization of free course offerings through MOOCs and the marketing strategy of institutions;
15. The consequences of the financialisation of knowledge and the consolidation of enterprise operations in universities

Such a list is only a beginning, but it is an indication that the research project of the PLE is a large-scale, transdisciplinary affair. It must bridge the gap between a discourse around educational processes, technological affordance, and economic analysis if it is to have any power. Ivan Illich, whose work provided one of the polemical foundations of the PLE argued that:

“Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools. Neither new attitudes of teachers toward their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software (in classroom or bedroom), nor finally the attempt to expand the pedagogue's responsibility until it engulfs his pupils' lifetimes will deliver universal education.”

In ruling out many of the popular initiatives in educational thought (including the PLE as it was initially presented!) Illich's argument concerned the nature of the relationship between education and society. He goes on to say:

“The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring.”

In order to do this, the task is an understanding of the nature of society, institutions, economy, technology and educational activity. The PLE's apparent failure might yet be the root of its eventual success as a way of situating modern social life with educational processes.

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