

Commentary on:

Technology and Human Issues in Reusing Learning Objects.

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The article by Betty Collis and Allard Strijker, *Technology and human issues in re-using learning objects*, represents a welcome consideration of some of the human, or social, issues that surround the use of online media in education and training, especially, with respect to the re-use of learning objects. The article struck many chords for me, some historical and some contemporary, which I shall discuss here.

Learning objects, in the context of Collis and Strijker's article, are viewed as bits of electronic instructional material that are produced for one educational context and, by virtue of electronic storage, searching and transmission, and potentially can be 're-used' in other educational contexts. There is no particular size to such objects: they can be a picture or a whole course. Indeed, the concept of 'granularity' is used in the field to conceptualise the varying sizes of the 'granules' (bits of instructional material) that can be identified, stored, searched, manipulated and transmitted for instructional purposes. The producing, storing and pumping of instructional material to series of 'end-users' is probably as old as literacy itself, certainly since the invention of printing (see Evans & Nation, 1993). It probably had a marked boost during the period after the UK Open University was established to provide mass higher education at a distance (Harris, 1987). Nation and I considered these approaches to be forms of 'instructional industrialism' (Evans & Nation, 1987; 1989) which, whilst very professionally produced in many ways, had a behaviourist-inspired didacticism and a tendency to homogenise knowledge through the centralist curricula. The advent of online media has elevated the power of instructional industrialism to a new, potentially global and globalising, level (Evans, 2003). The re-use of learning objects may be seen as the currency transactions of this new instructional industrialism, for it is these that are traded between providers to end users—often for real currency.

Collis and Strijker analyse the re-usability of learning objects in the three educational contexts: university, corporate and military. Therefore, their analysis is located within three of the major contexts of adult education in contemporary developed nations. Their descriptions of these contexts are arguably accurate, if somewhat over-generalised. For example, the university context is typified by the

'freedom' for course development of the academic staff and their (and the institution's) commitment to research. Those who have provided a critique of contemporary higher education (for example, Marginson, 1997) might suggest that the corporatisation and the associated managerialism of modern universities has constrained this freedom. Also, the research focus of universities has intensified for some, but for others they are essentially teaching only universities. Likewise, it is arguable that Collis and Strijker's characterisation of military education and training is broadly correct. However, the rise of new weapons, communications and surveillance technologies, the shifts in the nature of (or threats of) warfare and conflict since the Cold War, and the rise in peacekeeping deployments under UN sanction, has contributed to new education and training requirements and provision, although, as Collis and Strijker note, change is slow.

A fundamental argument in Collis and Strijker's article is that the knowledge-acquisition 'learning philosophy' underpinning the systems that use (and re-use) 'learning objects' of varying granularity is one that conflicts with the collaborative and constructivist 'learning philosophy' promulgated fashionably today. In my view, it is a conflict as much about what might be called the 'learning subjects', as it is about the use and re-use of learning objects. If the learning subjects are viewed, as Freire described over thirty years ago (Freire, 1972), as 'empty vessels' to be filled (instructed) with the knowledge they are deemed to require (by 'instructors' or 'instructional designers'), then using and re-using learning objects can be seen as good business. However, if the learning subjects are seen as active agents in the learning process who have their own individual needs and interests over what they learn, and they bring to their learning their existing knowledge, and values with which they make their own meanings of the new learning in which they engage, then the business of using, and especially re-using, learning objects looks very shaky. The notion that knowledge can be fragmented into 'granules' that make any sense educationally on their own is problematic. As Collis and Strijker suggest, at the very least such minute learning objects imply an acquisition of knowledge, rather than a constructivist or dialogic view of instruction/education. It is even more problematic to purport to know what such learning objects mean in different personal, professional, social and/or cultural contexts. As Collis and Strijker state, '(a)n object's meaning...depends on its context of use.' However, one might also add: how can those who control the decisions over what is coded, stored and accessed make decisions on behalf of diverse communities and their individual subjects?

Collis and Strijker explore their argument with an analysis of what they call the 'life cycle' of a learning object. The 'lifecycle' metaphor diverted me at the beginning of

the article, because I wrongly assumed the reference was to the learners' lifecycles and the relationship learning objects would have within such. On reflection, the metaphor, as applied to learning objects, is worth briefly considering critically. It conveys a notion that the 'objects' are actually living entities (almost as if they were subjects in 'themselves'). There is also a notion that they are somehow organic and natural: thus, ecologically, part of the balance of life. The 'cycle' also conveys the idea that they reproduce and mutate in some form of Darwinian evolutionary process. Indeed, Collis and Strijker do use the metaphor in this way with their cybernetic loop from the 'retaining' to 'obtaining' stages. Perhaps a more industrial metaphor would have conveyed Collis and Strijker's argument better. Indeed, of course, they are really not so much 'learning objects' as 'instructing (or instructors' objects', more like tools used by workers (instructors) in an industry that are used and re-used, serviced, repaired until they are obsolete. The use of the verb 'learning' in an adjectival form to describe these 'objects' is part of the deception portrayed by the new online 'instructional industries'. Extending Collis and Strijker's argument, they are actually about popping a bit of knowledge in other people's heads.

As Collis and Strijker also make clear, such transmission of knowledge is fraught with the difficulties of local (mis)interpretation and (mis)understanding. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that the rise of globalisation in late-modernity is necessarily related to the rise of individualisation, and that there are contradictory forces at work between the two. The growth of transnational (it is rarely global in the sense that the poor of the world are excluded) online educational systems can be seen as a feature of contemporary globalisation processes; the notion and deployment of 'learning objects' can be seen as a necessary corollary of the ways in which mass educational markets are 'constructed' with the shift to individualised choices, responsibilities and costs/payments. It is possible to assert that these are features of the new colonisation of 'other' nations' languages and cultures. The colonising potential of the new learning systems and their learning objects needs to be understood critically, not just because of the difficulties of local people understanding the objects, but more for what is harmed or displaced if they do.

Collis and Strijker conclude their article with a range of technical and pedagogical issues that require attention in the mass storage and re-use of learning objects. They recognise that the blending of what might be called the 'repository' and 'dialogic' capacities of computer-based learning management systems is where a more constructive future of online educational media lies. Their article is a welcome critique of the human aspects behind the re-use of learning objects. It stimulated me to make some connections to other work, some of which I have shared here. Clearly,

there is more critical work to be done on this if the 'learning subjects' of the world are to be treated as individual, meaning-making agents within important local cultures.

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