

Notschool.net Uncovered: Not All It Seems

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ABSTRACT: *This paper comments on the recent Notschool.net initiative and offers a critical perspective on the rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) in New Zealand schools. It attempts to uncover some of the ideological assumptions behind the drive to reform schools through new computer technology and points out the danger of treating ICT as a neutral tool independent of powerful social, economic and political forces. The paper dares to think different by endeavouring to strip away the orthodoxy of optimism surrounding the use of ICT in education.*

This article responds to the rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) in education in the context of the recent 'Notschool.net' initiative. Put simply, Notschool.net is an innovative project aimed at re-engaging disruptive teenagers in formal learning using a combination of online buddies, distributed mentors and new networking technology (Ultralab, 2001). In his press release, the Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard (2004) reports Notschool.net was originally developed by "a leading learning and research centre based in the UK" - that is, Ultralab. This paper offers some insight and background information on Ultralab in order to analyse and better understand the ideological assumptions of the Notschool.net initiative.

MORE ON ULTRALAB

Ultralab is a Learning Technology Research Centre at Anglia Polytechnic University. In the United Kingdom's (UK) equivalent Performance-based Research Funding (PBRF) exercise, Anglia Polytechnic University appears in the bottom 20% of institutions in the Education category. The Director of Ultralab, Professor Stephen Heppell, has a chair in Information Technology in the Learning Environment partly supported by Apple Computer. He is known officially in the field as an 'Apple Master'. This information comes directly from Heppell's (2004) personal website hosted within Ultralab. A quote taken from this website states that he is:

The man who is singlehandedly doing more than any other to enlighten government thinking on the use of computers in schools ... and who sits on more government committees, task forces and think tanks concerned with technology than almost anyone else. (Times Educational Supplement, 1999; cited in Heppell, 2004)

In some circles, Heppell is known as the Richard Branson of the teaching profession. Although this comparison is a little unkind, the following quote taken from a keynote address to Commonwealth Education Ministers reveals the extent to which Heppell (2000) links the use of ICT in schools to a new economic imperative:

Firstly the world race to inject ICT into learning is now an economic race as the link between the ability to harness ICT creatively, adding value to any situation, and the future national income is finally clear to all.

Of course, this last statement is highly contentious. It treats international capitalism as unproblematic and ignores the growing anti-globalisation movement, which brings to the public consciousness important concerns about the relationship between new technology and society. In this keynote address, Heppell (2000) conveniently ignores the fact that despite new technological developments the wealth gap between the richest 20% of humanity and the poorest 20% has doubled in the last 50 years (Pilger, 2002). Thus, the benefits of the new digital economy are not clear-cut and they are likely to privilege a handful of overdeveloped nations.

The lesson is that teachers need to start thinking about the way in which ICT is a political and ideological vehicle for shaping a wider social, economic and educational agenda. After all, Heppell (2001) writes elsewhere:

Will our technologically induced learning futures show that we made a good use or bad of the opportunities presented? Future economic prosperity will tell us tomorrow. (p.xvi)

Is this a good measure of success? There is no consideration here of the deep-seated social, cultural and environmental problems confronting the world. The link that Heppell makes between learning and economic prosperity is typical of the neo-liberal language that has taken root in government policy over the past decade. In New Zealand, for example, when the first national *ICT Strategy for Schools* was published one of the four objectives was to:

Increase opportunities for schools, businesses, and government to work together in developing an information technology-literate workforce that will help New Zealand to maintain its competitive advantage. (Ministry of Education, 1998, p.10)

In the backdrop of this economic agenda, there is no doubt that Heppell is highly regarded in government circles. He was a key member of the infamous Stevenson Report, which made the recommendation to the UK government that:

They must make the act of faith and encourage the education sector to start using technology rather than talking about it. (Stevenson, 1997, p.6)

This report laid the foundation for government policy in the area of ICT as *New Labour* endeavoured to create a knowledge economy that was in the words of Tony Blair (1998), *Open for Learning, Open for Business*. As reported on Heppell's (2004) website:

In the recent past Stephen was a member of Chris Smith's parliamentary Information Superhighway Policy Forum and later of Dennis Stevenson's committee producing the influential 'Information and Communication Technology in UK Schools' report that defined Labour's ICT schools policy and Oftel's general service provision committee.

Clearly, Stephen Heppell has been highly influential in shaping a number of ICT-related policy initiatives as evidenced by his continuing work on numerous industry and government committees. Many of these are summarised on his personal website:

Stephen sits on David Blunkett's DfEE Standards Task Force (chairing the Standing Working Group on ICT), Chris Smith's DCMS Creative Industries Task Force, the DCMS Internet Policy Committee, the DTI's Foresight 2020 Education Task Force, advises the 'Learn' zone team in the Millennium Dome, is a board member of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology and of Mental Health Media and continues to be influential in government ICT policy making. He chairs the multimedia jury for the Royal Television Society and sits on both the BAFTA Interactive Entertainments Committee and the Department of Culture Media and Sport's working committee in Internet policy futures for the Cinema, Music, Radio and TV industries. (Heppell, 2004)

Of particular interest is the relationship that Heppell has established between Ultralab and Oracle Corporation especially in the development of 'Think.com'. Once again, more information about this relationship is contained on his personal website:

Most recently a long term collaboration with Oracle in the US has produced the innovative Oracle Millennium Project (think.com) - a set of learning community tools for up to 100 million children. The tools are currently at the heart of projects run with the Arts Council, the Design Council, Young Engineers and a string of LEAs and US projects, as well as providing the infrastructure for Notschool and Talking Heads. (Heppell, 2004)

The significance of Think.com is that Oracle subsequently made this Internet environment and online learning system freely available to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, which helped them to establish new professional communities such as 'Leadspace', 'Talk2learn', and so forth. Oracle Corporation is quite open about their motives for making Think.com freely available to students and the teaching profession. Amongst other things they report:

By investing in the technology education of today's students, we are investing in our future as a technology leader. If our society doesn't produce citizens capable of exploiting technology to solve great business and global challenges, the technology market will not continue to prosper. The long-term future of our business is reliant upon the next generation of learners and leaders. (Oracle, 2004)

Not surprisingly, there is no reference by Oracle to the way in which new technologies have contributed to many of the global challenges confronting the world. Yet again, ICT is seen as neutral and the solution to our problems when patterns of unsustainable technology consumption are central to the problems we face. This type of statement naturalises technological change, implying inevitability, and promotes a deterministic view that wrongly assumes "as technology changes so society follows" (Selwyn & Gorard, 2002, p.4).

On the personal front, given Oracle's relationship with Ultralab, it is interesting to note that Heppell shares Larry Ellison's passion for sailing. His website states:

Stephen is passionate about sailboat racing. He races his own boat and was coach to the UK's International Mirror Class World Championship squad in 1997 (in Canada - they won) and 1999 (in South Africa - they lost!). He sits on the Royal Yachting Association's Race Training Committee responsible for the pathway between Junior/Youth sailing and the Olympic squad. (Heppell, 2004)

ULTRALAB DOWNUNDER

Shifting attention to Ultralab South, this recent New Zealand initiative is an offshoot of the original Learning Technology Centre at Anglia Polytechnic University. The Southern Hemisphere centre was set up with the assistance of the Canterbury Development Corporation and is co-directed by Nick Billows and Dr Vince Ham who have strong links to the Christchurch College of Education. Interestingly, Ultralab South also employs Carol Moffat, previous ICT Unit Manager for the Ministry of Education. Moffat was responsible for ICT when *Digital Horizons* (Ministry of Education, 2002), the revised ICT Strategy for Schools, was developed. The stated mission of Ultralab South (2004) promoted on their website is:

To research, apply and disseminate the benefits of new technologies, seeking to develop an empowering, creative and delightful learning environment that knows no boundaries.

Notably, there is no reference in this mission statement to potential negative or unanticipated effects. By and large, the benefits of ICT are taken-for-granted and new computer technology is framed as a neutral transforming tool independent of powerful social, economic and political forces.

An analysis of the Ultralab South website reveals little or no acknowledgment of the growing debate in the literature over the growth of ICT in schools. This debate is centred around the work of Cuban (2001), Oppenheimer (2003), and so on, who argue that the hidden curriculum for computers in schools is about training a sufficient number of hi-tech workers for future low-tech electronic factories. From this perspective, ICT is the digital lubricant for globalisation and a new kind of fast capitalism leaving a great deal of social debris in its wake.

Although there is no empirical support in the academic literature for the concept of 'delightful learning', this term is a defining metaphor and personal signature for the work at Ultralab South, as evidenced by the individual definitions offered by the so-called 'Ultronauts'. For example, Billows (2004) offers the following definition:

A moment of gobsmacking realisation that something wonderful is possible, has happened or might occur, Delight is timeless and utterly personal, not transferable to nor understandable by others. It is your own - often misunderstood and sometimes unexplainable but when it is shared it is transformative - essence of life!

While the need for transformation is encapsulated in this definition, it has a very individual flavour and there is no sense in which ICT might be used to promote (and even prevent) the real goals of education - that is, achieving greater equality, fairness and social justice. In other words, the concept of delightful learning appears to bypass deeper questions associated with reconceptualising education for critical citizenry - such as: What is education? What is education for? Whose education for what?

Returning to the strong economic agenda underpinning the use of ICT in education, it is noteworthy that Dr Vince Ham was selected as one of the four New Zealand participants at the January 2004 Summit on Education Reform in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Region (The Summit was made possible through support from the Hewlett Foundation and the Sun Wah Education Foundation through grants to Michigan State University). This is further evidence of Ultralab's esteem in government circles. Moreover, it shows the way in which APEC and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are shaping the use of ICT in education for their own neo-liberal ends. After all, the importance of ICT in the global economy was a key Summit topic.

The Summit's website reports that APEC leaders agree that the ability to use ICT is one of three key skills required to participate in the 21st century

economy (Summit on Education Reform, 2004). The Summit report, which was intended to inform the 3rd APEC education ministerial meeting in Chile, goes on to state that:

Students must achieve the ability to use 21st century tools (ICT) so that they can:

- *use appropriate technology to motivate learning and facilitate communication, and*
- *demonstrate computer literacy skills in real world situations.*

(Summit on Education Reform in the APEC Region, 2004)

Although the so-called digital divide was a topic of discussion, the current state of the 'real world' is presented as unproblematic from a global economic perspective. There is certainly no recognition in the above statement of the need for students to learn more about the potential negative and unanticipated effects of ICT on society. Instead, as the following quote illustrates, economic globalisation, fuelled by the growth of ICT (which APEC fails to acknowledge is equally a byproduct of globalisation), requires a homogeneous policy response:

Facing an increasingly global economy propelled by new technologies ... APEC's members have made significant education reforms to prepare citizens for a rapidly changing world. These economies have developed different policies, employed different strategies, and executed different practices in their reforms. However ... an increasingly global economy dictates that education concerns are inevitably similar.

(Summit on Education Reform in the APEC Region, 2004)

Suffice to say, there is a great deal of policy borrowing in New Zealand's approach to ICT in schools, as evidenced by the Government's recent allocation of \$2.5 million for Notschool.net. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish many local initiatives such as lead schools, laptops for teachers, and e-learning strategic frameworks from those in the United Kingdom and United States as they are part of a global policy phenomenon.

The lack of critique of New Zealand's educational policy is hardly surprising given the nature of ICT teacher professional development. Since its inception, Ultralab South has been contracted by the Ministry of Education to coordinate the ICTPD Clusters - that is, a decentralised model of school-based professional development where schools similar in purpose or geographical location collaborate under the leadership of a lead school. The ICTPD Clusters are provided approximately \$350,000 each, over a three year period, to spend on ICT-related teacher education. Thus far, almost 50% of New Zealand schools have participated in one of these clusters. Notably, Ultralab South also has the research contract that evaluates the ICTPD Clusters although the relationship between these two projects is unclear.

In addition, Ultralab South manages the e-learning fellowships for teachers along with having a key role in a number of ICT-related projects including 'Talk2learn' and the highly publicised pro-constructivist 'Navcon Conference' [<http://www.navcon.org.nz/>]. It is no surprise that Stephen Heppell will again present a paper at this year's conference although he is not a keynote speaker on this occasion. Ultralab South is represented also on the School Management Systems (SMS) Working Party for the setting and administration of standards and guidelines for school learning systems and pupil management software.

And, of course, just recently Derek Wenmoth has joined Ultralab South as Manager of e-Learning and Coordinator for the Training for Teachers in Tertiary Education Project. Prior to his appointment in Ultralab, Wenmoth was employed by the Correspondence School and had a role also in the Ministry of Education as a senior adviser in e-learning, helping formulate the draft e-Learning Framework for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2004). This framework attempts to cover all sectors of education from early years to tertiary and is notable for the way in which it uses selective quotes from tertiary educators to help unequivocally sell the e-learning message. There is a basic assumption that e-learning is good and that people just need to be convinced of the positive benefits rather than engaged in rigorous debate over the value of the technology - for better and worse.

NOT ALL DELIGHTFUL

The key point is that not all of these ICT initiatives are delightful. While Notschool.net has tremendous potential, this type of deschooling innovation supports the goal of increased deregulation and differentiation in keeping with free market policies of neo-liberalism - one of the paradoxes of decentralization. Such initiatives often embody a set of values quite different from education as a public good in which the government is responsible for the provision of a strong education system. The real test is whether Notschool.net helps to challenge the entrenched and oppressive nature of schooling in the tradition of Illich (1971), as opposed to simply rehabilitating future workers for the needs of the global economy. The latter is implicit in the economic agenda that stands out in the UK report on Notschool.net, which as an aside appears to be an 'in house' publication. The report states:

It is already quite evident that Notschool.net can make a substantial and successful impact on the lives of a very large number of young people currently lost to the system and to the economy. (Ultralab, 2001)

There is no sense in which Notschool.net might help disaffected youth to challenge the system and the inherently socially unjust economy that has led to their predicament. Hence, the following 'melting pot' statement on the Notschool.net website is entirely consistent with the concept of a global citizen encapsulated in the language of economic 'reform'. It reflects many of the neo-liberal ideological assumptions of APEC and the OECD that are at the leading

edge of the ICT-related school reform movement - albeit couched in educational terms and disguised in the democratising potential of the Internet:

Our aim here is not only to establish Notschool New Zealand based on the achievements of the team in the UK, but to also grow and develop this project to cater for all youngsters here in the multi-cultural and multi-social melting pot of New Zealand and Pacifica.
(Ultralab, 2004)

CONCLUSION

The above discussion is not an attack on the personal integrity of those employed by Ultralab South. They are dedicated people who are clearly passionate about their work. Rather this paper attempts to expose the level of false consciousness within the teaching profession, which as an Apple Distinguished Educator the author has personally struggled to uncover in better understanding the powerful forces driving the ICT-related school reform movement. In other words, this paper dares to 'think different' in an attempt to untangle the web of Notschool.net from the wider socio-political context.

To date, the "libertarianism of the wired" (Warnick, 2001) has been highly successful at persuading teachers that the use of ICT in schools makes good sense. A core group of teachers and teacher educators has been recruited, often unwittingly, as the champions of the movement since they are likely to have far more success persuading their colleagues of the imperative for change than those promoting the non-educational agenda. Thus, the concept of hegemony, in which dominant groups seek to establish the common sense, define what counts as legitimate areas of agreement and disagreement, and shape the political agendas made public and discussed as possible (Apple, 2003), is central to stripping away the orthodoxy of optimism surrounding the use of ICT in education. Put another way, the new ways of learning with and through ICT conceal many of the desired non-educational outcomes behind the current school reform movement. Although a little binary, the result is that many teachers have ended up collaborating with the enemy.

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