Open Dialogue: Peer Response

Response to Flavin on disruptive innovation and technology enhanced learning: Affordances for disruption

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Given the experiences of educators and learners through the Covid-19 pandemic, it is certainly timely to explore disruption in higher education. As Flavin rightly states, despite radical changes in technology over the last 20 years, technology has not disrupted higher education in any meaningful way. However, within the last 12 months, Covid-19 has, at least temporarily. In this response I will explore both why the transformative power of technology has not been harnessed to its full potential in higher education and what the transformative potential could be in pedagogical terms. The final section examines the potential of Covid-19 as a catalyst for change in higher education, looking at the identified needs of learners and the potential for technology to respond to these.

However, before embarking on this exploration of learning technologies and their affordances for higher education, it is necessary to address the key premise of Dr Flavin’s article that uses a business lens to examine an educational context. The marketisation of education and the framing of the student-as-customer in higher education is of course an area of engaged critical debate in the field of education and has been for many years. In the UK system as in other systems, since the 1980s, marketisation of universities has intensified steadily (Blackmore, 2009) and many researchers have outlined the range of threats posed by this drive to the purpose and values of an education system (Marginson, 1997; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Nixon et al. (2018) in particular interrogate how positioning the student as customer negatively impacts on the teaching and learning process in higher education, positioning the students as passive recipients of learning from educators delivering learning as though it were a pizza or indeed a swatch watch. The claim that educators on gig economy contracts would have the capacity or incentive to engage in the long-term in the meaningful interactions needed for a quality learning experience would require sustained evidence. This is not to say that the university experience is perfect as it is but rather to note that framing HE only in business terms will not necessarily drive a positive student experience.

Having said all that, the exploration of technology as a disruptor of higher education is certainly a pertinent topic for discussion. Technology has completely failed to disrupt mainstream education in any sustained way despite the ICT revolution of the recent years that has transformed how we interact as humans and how we conduct many of our daily activities. As Flavin notes, technology has for the most part facilitated ways of working in education but not changed them. The transformative potential of technology is evident in the models of technology adoption in learning that are in common use in the field, such as SAMR (PuenteDura, 2013),
TIM (Harmes et al., 2016) and others. In the four stage SAMR model for example, the two later stages are defined as ‘transformation’ while the first two stages are termed ‘enhancement’.

Higher education for the most part has adopted technology to enhance existing processes and practices (access to resources, provision of feedback, ‘delivery’ of lectures, etc). HE has not for the most part tapped the affordances of technology to redefine the learning experience, creating new ways of working, new tasks and activities through which students can engage in a challenging and stimulating environment. The literature on technology enhanced learning is full of examples of transformed teaching learning and assessment but this has not moved into the mainstream of higher education. In the field of Technology Enhanced Assessment in HE for example, key barriers to adoption of technology include lack of institutional and infrastructural support, inadequate professional development opportunities, lack of resources (in terms of time and money) (Brady et al., 2019). The research would suggest that there are several interacting factors that influence sustained adoption of technology, not least educator time and buy-in. The TPACK framework (Mishra and Koehler, 2006) captures the depth and range of knowledge that can allow educators to adapt and even transform their teaching using technology. It is not only knowledge of the technology and of the subject area but an understanding of how to deploy technology in discipline specific pedagogically sound ways that is required to successfully embed and integrate technology in the learning process.

Best practice in professional development in relation to technology adoption in education, and in particular in higher education, requires that professional development is contextualised to the institutional resources, norms, the discipline and addresses the pedagogical beliefs and approach of the educators (Bennett et al., 2017; McNeill et al., 2012).

While technology on its own did not disrupt higher education in any real sense, Covid-19 did, utterly. There have been greater changes to practice at all levels in education over the last nine months than in the previous nine years with educational institutions globally moving online. Covid-19 has brushed away some of the afore-mentioned barriers to technology adoption at scale in higher education through pure necessity. It has also however highlighted what is core to a positive learning experience. The Flavin article seems to suggest that the university experience is composed of content delivery and ancillary services where in fact the university learning experience is characterised by rich interactions with content, educators and other learners. This experience is not necessarily always a pleasant one, as highlighted in the literature on Threshold Concepts (Meyer et al., 2010) but if successful it is a varied and engaging one. The closure of educational institutions during Covid-19 have highlighted the value of collaboration for learning and engagement (Bray et al., 2020; Devitt et al., 2020). The Irish Covid-19 Psychological Survey has demonstrated the negative impact of isolation and loss of contact during Covid-19 on mental health and well-being (Bray et al., 2020). Technological tools such as Zoom, Teams and other collaborative platforms offer the potential to address these educational needs but the affordance of the different tools are not exactly the same and change rapidly with new releases of technology. For example, the number of individuals that can be seen at the same time on a video call, the mechanism for assigning people to break-out rooms, the modes of response available to learners within the environment, all of these technical features afford different possibilities for teaching and learning. The technological pedagogical content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) required to avail of these affordances for learning is highly complex.

Learning is a fundamentally social and interactive activity (Vygotsky, 1986) which is quintessentially human. In the rush to seize
Response to Flavin on disruptive innovation and technology

the opportunity for change presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, we must not forget that while we may be framed as customers and providers, we remain humans acting together in a social context, mediated by technology, yes, but governed by the principles, values and processes that make us human.

References