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6. LOGOS AND MYTHOS
The Political Dilemmas of Web 2.0 in an Accreditation-Driven Educational Environment

“Believers in progress are seeking from technology what they once looked for in political ideologies, and before that from religion: salvation from themselves” (Gray, 2004)

INTRODUCTION
For a number of years teachers in higher education have been encouraged to make use of online learning to transform individual and institutional learning and teaching practices (Crook, 1994; HEFCE, 2005; Laurillard, 1993; Squires, Conole, & Jacobs, 2000). This push to adopt e-learning has been reinforced by political reactions to growing student numbers, falling per capita funding and the growing dominance of bureaucratic university cultures which see e-learning as a means of providing cheaper, more flexible and more scalable delivery of both courses and whole programmes of study. Such an imperative is in turn arguably symptomatic of a wider change in higher education marked by a shift in focus from education to accreditation (Jacobs, 2005). The other contextual drivers behind the widespread adoption of e-learning are the social and cultural imperatives driving the ‘information revolution’. Such has been the speed of change that despite computers now being common to most education environments their use is often adopted with scant regard to their impact beyond the immediate context of problem (Nardi & O’Day, 1999). Such is the momentum of these changes that critics often self-identify as reactionaries or luddites (Landauer, 1995; Tenner, 1996) or as working to bridge huge divides (Henning & Van der Westhuizen, 2004).

The latest wave of enthusiasm and investment in e-learning has centred around the educational use of online technologies that support widespread collaboration, and the creation and sharing of ‘user content’ via the so called ‘Web 2.0’ generation of applications (Alexander, 2006). However, the devolution of authoring and control to end users – a defining aspect of Web 2.0 – would appear to be antithetical to the increasingly managerialist cultures of many HE institutions, with the result that the politics and economics of learning technology use in Higher Education are increasingly misaligned. The consequences of this are as yet unclear.

This argument can be situated within a broader discourse concerning the principle (and for many the seeming inevitability) of progress that has underpinned Western
thought since the Enlightenment. A prime tenet of technocratic and secular societies is that advancing knowledge and understanding will lead towards a convergence of interests and an end to conflict and social dissonance (Gray, 2004). However, there is, Gray argues, little evidence to show that progress has led to this kind of reconciliation. Homogenous and harmonious learning technology provision within higher education is unlikely given the conflicts of identity, purpose and control. Indeed, that would only underline Gray’s observations that this kind of hopeful convergence amounts to little more than groundless faith in technology.

Although political aspects of learning technology adoption and use have been considered before (Jones, 2001; Roberts, 2002) this paper takes a different perspective by focusing on issues of alignment and misalignment arising from the use of Web 2.0 technologies (and their underlying philosophies) and some of the ways in which they can affect educational contexts and professional identities. In so doing we present methods to support the exploration of the political nature of different learning technology contexts, individual technical interventions/systems and practitioners’ roles to better support their alignment with their intended cultural and political outcomes.

WEB 2.0

The phrase “Web 2.0” is generally used as a way of differentiating newer collaborative and social web applications from the more static and informational instances that marked the first wave of web development, or “Web 1.0”. Despite debate over what actually constitutes Web 2.0, common factors include devolved user ownership and management of data, extensive syndication (and therefore reuse and repurposing) of content, a major emphasis on participation, collaboration and community building, along with service oriented technical architectures (Wikipedia, 2007). In just a few years whole communities have grown up around Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, Blogger, YouTube, Flickr, Delicious, and many others. More recently Tapscott has identified the properties of Web 2.0 as consisting of openness, peer-peer relationships, sharing and acting globally (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The scale of this phenomenon was reflected in Time magazine awarding their ‘personality of the year’ in 2006 to ‘You’ i.e. the multitudes involved in creating, publishing and communicating online, predominantly in Web 2.0-like ways (Stengel, 2006).

Although this emphasis on individuality and community might be seen as a highly democratic phenomenon, it should be borne in mind that a lot of the most popular applications are controlled by just a few global corporations: Google controls YouTube and Blogger, News International controls MySpace, and Yahoo! Controls both Flickr and Delicious.

Despite the many issues and unknowns surrounding Web 2.0 we are already in a cycle of hype over the educational use of Web 2.0, in particular social and collaborative tools such as wikis, blogs and the use of various forms of syndicated content like podcasting and vodcasting (Alexander, 2006). While voicing enthusiasm for the engaging, self directed, collaborative approaches apparently enabled by