

Control and Constraint in E-learning: Choosing When to Choose

by John Dron (Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing, 2007, 328 pages)

This book starts with the premise that choice is central to learning; that is, the real goal of education is to teach us to learn and, for adult learners, informal, independent learning is the rule rather than the exception. Like so many things, though, it is a question of balance. The need to allow someone else to control one's learning is a function of how much independence a learner has developed and of that learner's intellectual maturity. Learners should be able to choose when to delegate control of their learning to another—in other words, to be able to choose when to choose. However, given that too many options are as problematic as too few, for a teacher to potentially have to constrain choice may also be problematic. For all learners, an ideal interplay of choice and constraint will optimize their ability to mature to autonomy. Add the notion that environment influences behaviour and the conclusion reached by author John Dron is that social software tools and habits native to Internet culture might have the potential to create an ideal personalized learning environment. Learners both influence and are influenced by this kind of environment, creating a “self-organizing feedback loop derived from the collective intelligence of its inhabitants” (p. 311). Dron's ultimate purpose seems to be to convince his readers that a future electronic educational utopia is both possible and desirable.

Although I was tepid about the author's destination, I found the trip stimulating and enjoyable. As educators, many of us struggle with the electronic transition we are experiencing and are looking for appropriate responses. One problem associated with the Internet is that it encourages people to relate only to those with whom they agree; indeed, the use of social software to create self-organizing learning environments seems to carry this danger within it, although I am all for personalized learning spaces. I am particularly interested in lifelong learning not as acquiescence to the corporatization of higher education but as having the potential to promote strong and

active citizenship, environmental stewardship, involvement in the arts, and responsible entrepreneurship. This book offers a helpful and engaging look at what there is in the current environment and what others are thinking about the possible future of education.

Dron points out the weaknesses of self-organizing learning environments at the same time as he heartily endorses them, without ever dispelling any of the reasonable doubts he has acknowledged. Readers must review the lengthy argument he presents and come to their own conclusions. I enjoyed trying to fill in the gaps. For example, he states, "Truly self-organizing environments will only self-organize to become learning environments if the intention of their users is to learn" (p. 306). As an educator, my focus is on how to stimulate or awaken that intent in learners; the circumstances through which the intention to learn is realized are secondary. This is not a book about motivating learners, even if it hints that the ideal social learning environment is so enjoyable that it is intrinsically motivating. Although it questions the wisdom of crowds, in the end it affirms that well-thought-out artificial intelligence could work with human sociability to generate independent learners. For me, however, any conversation I have ever had with automated telephone helpers casts doubt on this possibility.

Most teachers have already reconceptualized themselves as coaches and "guides by the side." Those who resort to sage-on-the-stage behaviour do so only because they lack the skill, not the will, to do otherwise. Dron would give them an even more-peripheral role in his utopia, leaving the heavy educational lifting to instructional designers and computer programmers. Nonetheless, early in his discussion, he acknowledges that the ideal situation is a teacher who understands both learner and subject—and then immediately rejects this as uncommon (p. 3). I, however, see it as the goal that all good teachers strive for and very often meet, so it's hard for me to understand the rationale for expending resources to develop various types of adaptive software rather than to educate teachers in new and better ways.

Dron contends that more-dependent learners are likely to benefit the most from delegating control of their learning to others (p. 116), but he fails to explain how these learners, who in my experience are the very ones who don't know they should be doing so, come to this realization. The problem, as Dron sees it, is to perfectly meet the learner's need for constraint and control, whereas I would question the value of extreme attempts to adapt to it. For one thing, it is a moving target. What a learner perceives she needs is bound to be shaped not only by what she has already learned but also by the immediate context, which is always being shaped by others' desires and actions. In many cases, the teacher provides positive intervention in that context. And, is Dron referring to the learner's own perceptions of need or the needs imposed by circumstance? What anyone experiences as a need

at a given time often looks foolish in hindsight. In emphasizing the importance of personalized and social learning, the author seems to discount the demands of living in a society that is not built around one's own perceptions of what is needed.

A discussion of resource-based learning is presented mid-book, and an appealing metaphor is used in that discussion to sum up the proper uses of RBL: "Sign posts, in various forms, are always preferable to fence posts, giving guidance to those that need it, but allowing other paths to be taken" (p. 225). I can't argue with that, but while I share some of Dron's disappointment in learning-management systems, his bitterness regarding them seems unwarranted. He continues, "The effort involved in bending an intransigent environment to achieve this can be great, involving a constant struggle with the larger, slower moving parts of the system" (p. 225). However, many educators do not have the requisite skills to develop a learning environment from scratch, and open-source systems such as Moodle offer a good compromise between structure and flexibility.

Dron also states, "To make the process [of RBL] easier, perhaps a flesh-and-blood teacher might offer support and advice where necessary, but even this seems in excess to a learner's needs, given that such guidance exists among the myriad of resources already available on the Internet" (p. 142). Statements such as this make me, as an online teacher, uneasy. A little later, the familiar lists of criteria by which to evaluate online resources are offered. Does Dron assume that all learners already know what the criteria mean, let alone how to apply them? This is much too optimistic in my experience.

In the final section of his book, Dron addresses the important job of designing better e-learning environments and offers eight design principles by which to evaluate social software. To me, the "ability to choose to choose" is more of a human issue than a tools or software issue, but the loci of constraint and control in learning are worth further thought. There are many ideas in his book that I have not touched upon here, and I think Dron's is a valuable voice in the discussion of what education might be in the near future. As he says, without apparent irony, "this is a brave new world that has only begun to be explored" (p. 307), and I am pleased to have the help of his book to advance my own explorations.

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