

# The e-learning cabaret: do's and don'ts in e-learning design

Paper contribution Online Educa Berlin 2006

Wim Westera, Open University of the Netherlands

For a start, online education has very good prospects. The idea of networked learning offers many advantages over traditional ways of learning. Today we are already witnessing a radical change in education, which involves all primary components of the educational system. Even though today its history takes up more than a decade, online education is still in its infancy. Its status strongly resembles the situation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's automobile industry which produced cars that were no more than motorised coaches.

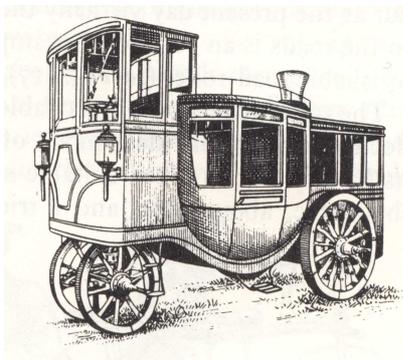


Figure 1 Randolph's steam-powered carriage, 1872.

Likewise, e-learning developers also seem to prefer maintaining existing methods and habits for a great deal, while merely adding new technologies. Indeed, most online education efforts concern electronic replicas of existing media, i.e. the transfer of learning content from books into web-”pages”.



Figure 2 Implementing old patterns in new technologies.

This cautious approach of introducing new technologies while maintaining old patterns is alright for the time being. But in order to anticipate the future of online education critical reflection is needed rather than conceit and big-headedness. This is difficult as such. Naturally, all visitors of Online-Educa share an unconcerned optimism and belief in the significance of topics like communities of practice, technology standards, re-usable learning objects, portfolios and so on. We recognise the importance to further these new educational technologies. Mapped onto Rogers' diffusion theory of innovation (Rogers, 1962), we are probably the leading 2.5 % of the population: brave people, impassioned forerunners pulling

the change. But we also need to convince others, the other 97.5%: the group of careful early adopters, the deliberate early majority, not to speak of the sceptical late majority and the suspicious laggards. So we have a mission. Our energy is unparalleled, as are our involvement and our persuasiveness. However, our fanaticism may have serious drawbacks. Outsiders might equate our conference with a religious sect loaded with ideological bias rather than a meeting of sensible academics that put things into perspective: indeed, we “believe” in our case and we are always prepared to give a glowing speech, highlighting the benefits and downplaying the problems. Such unconditional positivism may hamper critical reflection and amplify the disregard of failures, even when we proclaim that critical thinking and learning from mistakes are key concepts in contemporary learning philosophies. This conference contribution calls for the critical introspection of the e-learning community, a productive self-mockery to identify weak spots, to boost creative and inventive solutions and to further new paradigms of learning. It light-heartedly treats a series of peculiarities and weak spots that seem to have become stable parts of our habits and efforts. First, various claims of online education are evaluated. These claims are often promotional rather than rational. For instance, the commended flexibilities for learners are probably exaggerated and demand a high price (Paulsen, 2004). Secondly, weaknesses in the vocabulary will be uncovered. Indeed, many concepts in educational technology are fuzzy, ill-defined, ambiguous, attached with different meanings and as such often confusing rather than clarifying (Westera, 2001). Also, it will be demonstrated that the focus of our attention is highly biased while relevant topical issues are lacking. In conclusion, this contribution will denounce our conceit about current educational research and criticise the naive instrumental view of technology-based education that is held by many (Westera, 2005).

The e-learning cabaret is a critical reflection on online education. It holds a mirror up to our faces and treats the paradoxes, inconsistencies and blunders of our well intended e-learning efforts in order to improve and boost the achievements of online education.

Paulsen, M. F. (2004) Seven important trends in online education, *Book of abstracts Online Educa Berlin 2004*, 166-168.

Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovations*. The Free Press. New York.

Westera, W. (2005). Beyond functionality and technocracy: creating human involvement with educational technology. *Educational Technology & Society*, 8 (1), 28-37.

Westera, W. (2001) Competences in Education: a confusion of tongues. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 33 (1), 75-88.