The personal learning environment and the institution of education: reflections on technological personalisation in iTEC schools

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Abstract: This paper explores the distinction between ‘education’ and ‘learning’ with regard to the personal learning environment (PLE), drawing on evidence from the large-scale European iTEC project. The paper argues that Searle’s concept of ‘status functions’ – declarations by powerful agencies about the nature, legitimacy and function of institutions, tools, practices and positions – can help bring clarity to the distinction between the PLE and institutional learning. In analysing the iTEC project, low adoption rates of tools are reported. It is argued that these result from conflicts between status functions for individual stakeholders who are already committed to a wide variety of practices and tools which PLE tools could potentially disrupt. The difference between the status functions of tools and social status within the educational institution is explored drawing on Veblen’s analysis of education. In conclusion, it is argued that the PLE was mistaken in focusing on learning, and would be better focused on mechanisms of social status. The work highlights the challenge for the PLE to study and explore new ways in which learners can empower themselves.

Keywords: personal learning environment; PLE; status function; iTEC project, John Searle; social ontology.


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1 Introduction: learning and education

‘Education’ is not the same as ‘learning’. The terms however are frequently confused. Whilst education manifests itself in the paraphernalia of the education system, including institutions, textbooks, classrooms, curricula, examinations and teachers – all of which can be pointed at, learning is something that goes on in peoples’ heads: there is nothing to be pointed at beyond accounts of subjectivity. In characterising the broader distinction between different aspects of reality, Searle (2010, p18) has highlighted the difference between the ‘ontologically objective’, the ‘ontologically subjective’, the ‘epistemically objective’ and the ‘epistemically subjective’. Schools, classrooms and curricula are ‘ontologically subjective’ – they are real things that can be pointed at, but whose reality is constituted through social behaviour. Learning, by contrast is ‘epistemically subjective’ – its reality can only be known by the person experiencing it – rather like a headache or an itch. This distinction is useful when considering the concept of the ‘personal learning environment’ (PLE) and its relation to education (Johnson and Liber, 2008; Johnson and Sherlock, 2009). The PLE concerns itself with learning that an individual engages in through interacting with personal technology, but in distinguishing personal technology from institutional technology it highlights the relation between epistemic subjectivity (learning) and different forms of ontological subjectivity (technologies, institutions and practices).

The discourse surrounding learning is grounded in metaphysical speculation. Modern ‘learning theory’ can be traced back to German Idealism and particularly to Kant’s ‘Copernican’ epistemological revolution that emphasised the mind’s active role in the constitution of knowledge about reality. The German tradition is, however, problematic: much in education and society has universal effect beyond the individual’s construction. Following Bhaskar (1979), social structures like families, schools, universities and colleges pre-exist individuals and constitute a shared environment which may be reproduced and transformed by the individual’s actions, but which also conditions and constrains agency. In the process of designing, implementing and evaluating the PLE, the disconnect between the shared environment of institutions, metaphysical learning theory and individual technological practices has become apparent.

Criticism of institutions as ‘environments for learning’, inspired by Illich (1971), concerned the ‘fit’ between the learning needs of individuals and the particular kinds of environmental support provided by institutions (Attwell, 2007; Wilson et al., 2009). The PLE is an intervention in learning technology which places the design and coordination of the learning environment in the hands of the individual rather than any outside agency. Empowered by technology, the PLE is an initiative to shift the locus of control of technology away from the institution to the learner. In the early years of the PLE discourse, with the rapid rise of social software, the PLE became a rallying cry for the ‘inversion’ of the institution (Wilson et al., 2009), arguing that the institution’s functions could be aggregated and controlled by learners and mixed with other services outside the institutions (for example, social software). The empowerment of learners to take control over their learning environment became a popular theme in the e-learning discourse that affected all levels of education, becoming aligned with ideas of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), together with arguments against rigid curricula in favour of individually-driven inquiry. Institutional technologies, it was argued, were cumbersome and difficult to maintain whilst personal technologies were agile, and frequently more powerful than institutional equivalents. The PLE became a springboard for a range of radical ideas to
transform the institutional infrastructure of education, from ‘bring your own device’, mobile-learning, service integration and the distribution of tools through apps and widgets. The iTEC project funded by the European Union has been a major attempt to establish these approaches in schools.

In order for the PLE to reposition learning in this way, learning itself was presented in an increasingly concrete way: models of learning, ranging from Laurillard’s (1999) ‘conversation model’, the model of the learner as a viable system (Johnson and Liber, 2008) and connectivist learning which underpinned MOOCs (Siemens and Downes, 2009) all served to reify learning as a process. Alongside the reification of learning, technologies were identified as being functionally-equivalent to more traditional practices in face-to-face education. Real conversations could be substituted with online conversations; access to online services was deemed to be functionally equivalent to accessing the library, student services, etc. In the technical specification of the PLE, the aim was to identify those services which could supplant the services of the institution (see Wilson et al., 2009).

In practice, the PLE has not realised the predictions of its theory. Consequently, this paper asks, what might be wrong with the theory? In addressing this, I argue that the emphasis on learning is misplaced and that, following Veblen (1899), we should consider education as an opportunity to enhance social status. In exploring the reality of institutions and in contrasting it with the reality of software through the experiences of the iTEC project, I argue that the social ontology of Searle provides a way of re-examining what happens in education. This is then used to explain the increasing power of traditional institutions (not predicted by the PLE), but also new practices online where individuals do appear to be successful in increasing their social status away from institutions.

2 Tool-oriented constructivism

The PLE’s underlying educational philosophy is constructivist, and whilst this in itself is not unusual in e-learning (many VLEs were conceived as constructivist interventions), most articulations of constructivism had been orientated around conversation (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991) whereas the PLE is more concerned with practice, and particularly practice with tools. The PLE principle is for learners to be given the facility to construct their own learning environments through coordinating the technologies of their life with the technologies of their learning. Whilst constructivism has been traditionally deployed to argue for the design of environments for conversation, the vision of the PLE is a version of constructivism where nobody says “these are the tools you should use for your learning”, but rather, “whatever tools you wish to use for your learning, here’s how you can connect and coordinate your actions”.

In understanding the implications of tool-oriented constructivism, it is necessary to inquire into the nature of tools as objects whose utilisation becomes part of the individual’s construction of the world. One way of doing this is to characterise the coordinations of individuals with tools as a way in which individuals maintain their viability: such arguments about technology were put forward by McLuhan (1964), whilst Johnson and Liber (2008) characterised the engagement with tools as a cybernetic mechanism of an individual. However, objects are not just ‘constructs derived from use’;
they are real things in a shared environment – in Searle’s language, they are ‘ontologically subjective’. The objects of software which were advocated by the PLE may not be fundamentally dissimilar from physical objects like banknotes, cups, or pencils. How do these objects become meaningful and recognised as significant in social contexts? The question concerning the PLE is, Is there a distinction between the status of reality of personal technologies for learning and institutional technologies for learning? Searle’s social ontology provides a way of addressing this.

3 Searle’s theory of status functions and the objects of education

John Searle’s career as a philosopher has revolved around the role of language in its relation to the world. His early work synthesised ideas from the philosophy of language including the later work of Wittgenstein, and the Speech Act theory of Austin (1962). Criticism of this approach stemmed from what some commentators felt was an ‘ontological reduction’: that Searle committed what Bhaskar (1975) terms a ‘linguistic fallacy’, in reducing reality to language. Searle’s recent work on what he calls ‘social ontology’ appears to address some, although not all, of these concerns. Whilst Searle’s social ontology remains language-oriented, it is less clear whether Searle argues for a position where language determines social reality, or for a position where language constrains social reality. I argue that in focusing on the role of language as constraint, Searle’s theory is illuminating of the role language plays in shaping the conditions for the emergence of technologies and practices, without making any strong claims about the relationship between language and reality.

Searle’s basic idea is that objects like banknotes, computer software, textbooks and curricula acquire their significance through a social process. A status function is a particular kind of speech act whereby an individual or a group of individuals make a declaration: “We (or I) make it the case by declaration that (state-of-affairs) X counts as (meaning) Y in (social context) C”. Such a declaration is supported by other declarations in the society, not least the declaration that the person making the first declaration has the authority to do so. More fundamentally, in order for the status function to carry any weight, there must be a ‘collective intentionality’ within the social context which acquiesces with it. So, for example, the object of the virtual learning environment was a status declaration by a group of influential learning technologists who made the statement “This software counts as a ‘virtual learning environment’ within the university”. The impact of this status function was supported by other status functions which related to the organisations making it. In the UK, for example, the influential Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) played a significant role (and the reason why only in the UK is there talk of a ‘virtual learning environment’, JISC’s terminology, as opposed to ‘learning management system’ – as it is described everywhere else). What emerges in the network of status function declarations between different stakeholders are networks of rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments. It is through the network of these that the ‘ontologically subjective’ entities, not just of the education system, but of society in general, establish their reality and their causal powers on everybody in that society.

Computer software itself is an aggregation of a variety of status functions. Within any computer software, there are encoded responsibilities, roles, obligations and commitments – of both users and developers – where once a person starts to engage with
the software, they are obliged to comply with. This aggregated nature of software produces problems: with the VLE, there are implicit roles and responsibilities (the role of teacher, the role of learner) which are encoded in the software, and which have to be tacitly accepted if the status function regarding the software as a whole is accepted. The fact that the encoded roles and responsibilities within the software relating to those people for whom the software is intended often do not reflect their actual practice can lead to processes of alienation and disengagement. Technologists hope that through the intervention of software, the agency of the users will change. Yet, it rarely does of its own accord. What is required in order for it to change (even for take-up of the VLE) are increasingly powerful status function declarations by powerful people in the institution which eventually mandate the use of the software.

The combination of different status functions relating to power relations within the institution, the status of software objects and the rights and obligations of individuals provides a backdrop to inspect the impact of the PLE. The PLE was a declared status function relating not to a particular object (because the objective was not to ‘build’ a PLE) but instead relating to a set of practices. In effect, these practices were deemed to support notions of ‘personalised learning’ and self-efficacy whilst challenging the status of institutional approaches to education and the curriculum. Behind the rationale for these new ‘practice-oriented’ status functions were concretised ideas about learning. Learning, it was argued, was engendered through conversation and connection, and that these connections could be facilitated in ways where individuals could coordinate engagement with institutional structures in more flexible ways than those which were determined by traditional courses. As evidence for this, the uses of social software such as YouTube by artists and musicians, where individuals found new ways of making their way through the world independently of traditional brokers (like agents) was cited as an example of what might be possible within the educational universe. If individual practices could change so that individuals used personal technologies in effective ways which were ‘functionally equivalent’ to institutional processes, then a challenge to institutional practices could be defended.

4 Power, status functions and the PLE concept in institutional learning

Whilst the PLE is described as a challenge to the institution, most experiments with the PLE have occurred within the context of institutional learning. Typically, this has involved uses of technologies beyond those managed directly by the institution (for example, social software). Stepping outside the institutional domain creates a complex set of power relations which can also be described in terms of status functions, rights, responsibilities and obligations. Within Searle’s social ontology, the capacity to make status function declarations rests on those with sufficient ‘deontic power’ to do so. He explains:

“The power of the local party bosses and the village council as well as the power of such grander figures as presidents, prime ministers, the US Congress and the Supreme court are all derived from the possession by these entities of recognized status functions. And these status functions assign deontic powers.”

(p.164)
There are status functions which assign deontic powers to individuals and organisations with corresponding collective intentionality that supports these powers. This has a simple but profound logical consequence: Searle argues that “All political power, though exercised from above, comes from below”. He points out the even dictators typically are unsure of the status functions that gave them power, needing to maintain these functions through “massive systems of rewards and punishments by terror”.

Within educational institutions there are implicit status functions relating to power structures which become encoded into tools. Compliance with institutional tools entails status functions relating to head-teachers, vice-chancellors, heads of teaching and learning, examining boards, and so on. As institutions become increasingly technological, and each institutional technology carries its own status functions and declarations of rights and responsibilities, so the network of status functions can become confusing and difficult for both learners and staff.

The situation for teachers is characterised by conflicting status functions which have to be negotiated: essentially, obligations to the institution must be balanced with the obligations to students. In managing this balance, teachers exercise their own deontic powers in relation both to their students, their professional roles and taking responsibility for their experiments. A teacher who declares that Twitter or Facebook will be the technology for a course is not necessarily embracing the principles of the PLE (although this is sometimes confused with the PLE) but they are declaring an alternative status function with regard to technology. On the other hand, a teacher who allows students to choose whatever technology they wish providing they meet some particular requirement of assessment is closer to the spirit of the PLE, but may be at risk of conflict with institutional assessment policies. In such a case, the declared status function relates to the process of assessment rather than the use of a particular technology.

In each case, teachers negotiate the balance of their commitments to institutional policy, assessment regimes and learner needs. They have to consider:

- how not to put their jobs at risk
- how to ensure that they can manage the complexities of assessment which ensue from whichever approach they take
- how to balance the interests of learners with practical concerns about technology use
- how to avoid making technological demands on their learners which their learners are not comfortable with (in other words, how to avoid replacing institutionally-owned technology with teacher-owned technology).

The reality of practice which often shows the lack of engagement with new technologies occurs because teachers want to continue to get paid, and students demand that they achieve qualifications. Some teachers will be motivated, for various reasons, to find innovative ways through the maze of new technologies and pedagogies. For others, the risks will be too great. The iTEC project presents some clear examples of where these balances had to be struck.
5 The reality of software in the iTEC project

iTEC is a large-scale European project which aimed to transform the technological practices of teachers in schools across Europe. It was formulated against the background of technological transformations which were among the driving forces behind the PLE agenda: the rise of social software, increasing personalisation of tools and the need for flexibility in the curriculum as well as addressing deeper societal concerns including the global movement of populations, social mobility and inclusion.

iTEC has sought to establish a community of practice among teachers and learners in schools focused around specific pedagogical activities which in turn implicate engagement with technologies. To achieve its ambitions, the project set to put in place an infrastructure whereby pedagogical and technical innovation is community-led and community-sustained. This is central to the iTEC philosophy: it is the means by which individual instances of classroom practice are connected and contribute to a broader effort in experimenting with new pedagogies and technologies. By doing this, the conditions for sustained innovation through innovative practice are envisaged as not only a means to better practice on the ground, but also a means whereby teachers continue their involvement in a Europe-wide community of teachers. In effect, iTEC sought to provide the conditions where teachers could set up personal environments for their own learning and professional development.

The deployment of tools to meet the pedagogical requirements has demanded flexible ways in which toolsets can be organised and distributed. Evolving the PLE’s concept of service interoperability and personalisation of toolsets, iTEC has used ‘widgets’ (small web-based applications) as a key component in the technical architecture of the project. These tools can be instantiated across a wide range of electronic learning contexts, including a number of popular virtual learning environments. Whilst particular widgets were designed with requisite affordances for the educational requirements, the instantiation and curation of widgets could be left to the teacher through the use of a ‘widget store’, a technology developed from the Apache Wookie Widget Server (Griffiths et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2009). The Widget Store also provides additional social network features, thus not only serving the instrumental purpose of delivering tools, but also providing a means whereby the teacher community may share and comment on widgets which they find meaningful and useful within their practice.

Across the four years of the project, however, the widget store has only met with a modicum of success. In general, teachers have chosen to use institutionally-provided tools such as electronic whiteboards or other tools provided on the web rather than coordinate their own tooling through the widget store. From the perspective of the present paper, both the project’s innovation in designing the widget store, and the actual practices teachers can be analysed in terms of commitments, responsibilities, obligations and the status functions which relate to them.

Any project is itself a status function which says (broadly) “this set of activities is legitimated as a project which is of relevance to you”. The deontic power of this statement rests on the authority of the body organising the project (in this case, the EU Commission), the project funding, the opportunities for engagement and the status of the ideas underpinning the project. Basing itself partly around ideas related to the PLE, the
status declaration of the iTEC project had some weight with substantial funding, a broad range of stakeholders and a recognised need that technology in schools is important. However, like all status functions – and particularly those relating to technological practices – there can emerge conflicts in local situations as teachers have to balance their commitments to their learners and their obligations to their managers, whilst at the same time seeking opportunities to develop their careers. Whatever status declarations iTEC could make about specific technologies, ‘engagement’ meant that fundamentally teachers had to endorse the status functions about the technologies with their learners.

Web statistics from hits on the iTEC’s widget store tools show that usage of the tools was low. However, when interviewed, teachers reported that they had used the technology more than the statistics indicated. Many teachers also said that the widget store was a ‘good idea’ despite evidence suggesting low engagement with it. This can be explained by the fact that iTEC made two fundamental status declarations: on the one hand, there was a declaration about the use of technology; on the other, there was a declaration about engagement with ‘pedagogical scenarios’. The status functions concerning ‘pedagogical scenarios’ could be flexibly acknowledged in a number of different ways. Consequently, the status of ‘being engaged in the iTEC project’ could be achieved through engaging with the pedagogical scenarios, irrespective of the specific technological solution deployed. Lack of engagement with the widget store did not mean a lack of engagement with the project.

Given this complex web of status functions, and the apparent failure in getting teachers to use iTEC widgets, we might ask what teachers or learners got out of the project. On reflection, the people who clearly gained from the deployment of iTEC tools were the project team themselves: they gained new networks of responsibility and obligations; they determined the nature of the technology provision; they determined the organisation of the project; they identified the goals and challenges. Teachers negotiated the status functions of the project with their existing responsibilities and beyond acquiring the status of ‘project participant’ and engaging in some group design activities, their channels of communication for influencing the project were very narrow. Despite its intentions, iTEC was fundamentally top-down, with an ‘elite’ management and teachers who were provided with few opportunities for increasing their own social standing. The hierarchy was not intentional, and given that it emerged, it is important to ask why it happened.

Like the PLE itself, iTEC’s status functions were fundamentally grounded not in technologies, but in an idea about learning. The concepts of online connection, conversation and cognitive development – whether in teachers or learners – lay behind not only its technological development, but many of its pedagogical developments. An abstract conception of learning led the focus away from the concrete realities of institutional life – not just in schools, but within the universities participating in the project, and within the governmental institutions that commissioned it. With ‘learning’ the focus, there was no way to inspect power relations, rights, responsibilities or commitments. Nor was there any way to explore the tangible material benefits for each of the stakeholders or any way of studying how participants could be empowered to declare their own status functions with regard to the project.
6 The personal status of learners: the role of institutions and the role of technology

iTEC provides an example of an institutionally-oriented approach to personal learning with technology. The PLE articulated a vision of technologically-empowered learning which could theoretically bypass institutions altogether, or at least stitch episodes of learning from different institutions together in individual ways. Despite a few isolated examples where individuals have found ways of carving-out careers through engaging with online platforms, for the vast majority of learners the bypassing of the institution has seemed unrealistic. Learners often testify to fear and lack of confidence with online practices like blogging or posting videos on YouTube. Even when learners can be persuaded to engage with tools like Twitter, engagement does not always become habit, and habit does not always entail increased self-confidence or personal development. In particular, online discussion forums – whilst promoted as being communities of support for all where issues can be discussed – tend to attract the few with the disposition to express themselves online, whilst everyone else either ‘lurks’ or fails to engage at all (Johnson, 2008).

Institutions – particularly universities – establish themselves on the basis of a rich set of status functions which relate them to society. For the most prestigious institutions, these status functions are almost universally upheld in a network of political, historical and societal status functions. Association with such an institution immediately connects an individual to this network of social declarations and grants them privileged social status. University education at all levels upholds its status functions through various processes of exclusion and selection. Within an institution opportunities are provided for individuals to establish new commitments and obligations: it might be writing for the student newspaper, or managing the sports club, or taking a political role in the students union. In each case, such opportunities also accord to an individual learner the opportunity to gain new deontic powers within a limited context: students can find themselves in a position to take the initiative with new projects and so on – all things which they can declare on their CVs when they graduate and look to impress employers. Student confidence follows increases in deontic power.

Whilst universities portray themselves as ‘institutions of learning’, analysis of the opportunities they afford for increasing deontic powers, creating possibilities for declaring new rights, obligations and commitments may provide a richer and more realistic picture of the causal power of engagement with institutions. Turning to the PLE, it is possible to ask whether ‘learning’ is a mistaken focus for examining engagement with personal technology. In the celebrated instances of individuals making careers through engaging with social software, it is possible to determine processes of increasing social status through acquiring new rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments through online action. For example, the YouTube video artist acquires an audience who harbours expectations about performances or artefacts that the artist might produce next. The artist acquires new responsibilities to satisfy and maintain their audience. In open-source software development environments like GitHub, a software developer might through developing software, acquire a body of users whose expectations create the need for the developer to honour obligations and commitments in terms of fixing bugs, developing new functionality and new initiatives. In each case, what we see may
better be described as networks of commitments, obligations and duties rather than processes of learning which remain essentially unobservable.

7 Veblen’s critique of education and status

The account given so far of the role and efficacy of institutional learning in providing opportunities for status enhancement goes some way to explain why the PLE has not challenged the institution in ways that theorists thought that it might. Despite rising costs of institutional education, there seems to be no decline in the demand for institutional learning, and there is certainly no abandonment of institutional learning in favour of technological engagement. What is required is a more general theory of education as a status-oriented activity, where the nature of the relationship between status enhancement and economic activity is made explicit. Such a position was put forwards over 100 years ago by the American economist Thorstien Veblen. Veblen (1899) wrote twice about education – first in the last chapter of his ‘Theory of the Leisure Class’ and later in ‘Higher Learning in America’ (1918). Here, I will concentrate on the arguments put forwards in the former text.

Veblen sees ‘education’ as having not shaken-off what he sees as archaic sacramental roots, presenting itself to the ‘leisure classes’ (Veblen’s name for the Bourgeoisie) as a means of becoming ‘priests’ or shamans. Veblen argues that:

“The recondite element in learning is still, as it has been in all ages, a very attractive and effective element for the purpose of impressing, or even imposing upon, the unlearned; and the standing of the savant in the mind of the altogether unlettered is in great measure rated in terms of intimacy with the occult forces.”

In the relationships between those who consider themselves ‘lettered’ and those who don’t, there is perhaps still an element of ‘impressing’ and ‘imposing upon’ that Searle would recognise as the behaviour of those with deontic power to make new status function declarations. Veblen sarcastically notes that:

“It appears to have been from this source that learning, as an institution, arose, and its differentiation from this its parent stock of magic ritual and shamanistic fraud has been slow and tedious, and is scarcely yet complete even in the most advanced of the higher seminaries of learning.”

Veblen’s analysis relates what Searle would recognise as the status functions of the institution (certification, cap and gown, graduation ceremonies) with the societal drive towards status acquisition and broader economic processes. His analysis helps to explain why it is that even despite the rising costs of institutional education, learners are still drawn to it, being prepared to take out larger and larger loans as a consequence. This kind of economic situation has become known as a ‘Veblen Good’: a good whose price relates to its exclusivity and its demand. The status functions of education are also declarations of scarcity.

Veblen’s economic analysis of education highlights the central differences between the online world of the PLE and the world of institutional education. Institutional education implicates a network of status functions which also declare scarcity, not only in admissions policies to ‘elite’ universities, or in degree classifications, but in admittance to academic discourses, conferences and highly-ranked research journals and opportunities.
Moreover, some manifestations of educational technology have further served to emphasise the status/scarcity declarations: MOOCs on major platforms provide marketing opportunities for elite universities. Whilst the PLE seemed to reproduce the functions performed in institutional learning environments through learner-controlled technology, those aspects which were reproduced (access to content, online communication tools or online publishing facilities) possessed deeper status functions which declared the scarcity of resources and activities and membership of communities, and these aspects of scarcity were not reproduced in the PLE. Veblen points out that the deeper networks of behaviour in institutional education are fundamentally irrational; the PLE however, presented a rationalised view of learning through tool coordination and social communication.

There are, however, opportunities for status enhancement online. To realise them requires a more direct engagement with the same irrational and exclusive forces which characterise the university. Creative production online is a way of making personal status function declarations about artistic projects, new open-source software tools, videos of unusual events, journalism, storytelling and so forth. The educational challenge comes in having the initial self-confidence to grab opportunities: online engagement does not represent a solution to the problem of social inequality since self-confidence often stems from privilege.

8 Conclusions: a personal status environment?

Technological interventions in education give us permission to ask deeper questions about education in general: the benefit of intervention, whether PLE, VLE, MOOC or anything else often lies not in successful implementation (which is rare), but in illumination. The PLE discourse asserted technology as a challenge to the institution’s hegemony on the basis of theories of learning. The outcomes from the interventions from projects like iTEC suggest that the theories cannot be right. The problem appears to be the intangible nature of learning itself, and the impossibility of being able to impute concrete processes to things which go on in peoples’ heads. The PLE not only attempted this but also attempted to design a technological infrastructure and set of practices whereby imputed learning processes could be supported: metaphysics drove technological development!

There is plenty of evidence of individuals making careers and advancing themselves through society with online activity. What is required is a theory to explain this which does not rely on metaphysics, but practical and concrete description. Searle’s social ontology helps with this task. Networks of rights, responsibilities, obligations and commitments can be revealed by looking at the connections between people, and by simply asking people about their relations with one another. Who has to do what? Who says who has to do what? Who has the right to change things? Basic transformations in rights and responsibilities bring with them the paraphernalia that typically are associated with learning: increases in self-efficacy, confidence, skilled-performances, and so on.

Institutions have always done this. However, they have presented what they do not as a ‘status game’ but rather as a metaphysical process of learning. We might ask whether for institutions to maintain their economic advantage, a certain degree of obfuscation
about what they are really about is necessary. Veblen suggests that the appeal to the metaphysics of learning works by pretending that mysterious processes are going on in peoples’ heads whilst in reality there is social climbing and grappling for responsibility and power. The real opportunities of the institution (opportunities which all-too-often are most accessible to those who already come from positions of privilege) lie in those activities conducted beyond the degree certificate which carries graduates into high-flying employment after education.

Something happens to individual confidence and status within the learning process – and particularly in the face-to-face interactions, whether it is in the validation of personal viewpoints, or the enhancement of self-expression. If the PLE operates as an illumination on institutional processes and socio-economic structures, then there may be ways in which the example of successful YouTube artists, software developers and bloggers might be codified and amplified to provide examples of using technology for social advancement. But his requires a deeper research project. Among the factors that would need to be investigated are:

- the socio-economic status of individuals engaging in institutional study or online activity
- the costs of study to learners in institutions
- the motivations for online activity
- the family backgrounds of individuals engaged in online activity
- the financial rewards of study to institutions
- the financial rewards of online engagement to technology corporations
- the financial rewards of online activity to individuals
- the net contribution to national economy of institutional performance
- the potential benefits of student loans to the government and industry
- the extent to which individuals engage in ‘potlatch’ style behaviours online or within institutions
- the power of networks of rights and responsibilities gained through online activity
- the causal efficacy of educational interventions in making a difference (or not) to social status
- the economics of course provision and the means by which institutions maintain their viability
- the utilisation of free course offerings through MOOCs and the marketing strategy of institutions
- the consequences of the commodification of knowledge and the consolidation of enterprise operations in universities.

Such a list is only a beginning, but it is an indication that the research project of the PLE is a large-scale, transdisciplinary affair. It must bridge the gap between a discourse around educational processes, technological affordance, and economic analysis if it is to
have any power. Illich (1971), whose work provided one of the polemical foundations of the PLE argued that:

"Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools. Neither new attitudes of teachers toward their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software (in classroom or bedroom), nor finally the attempt to expand the pedagogue’s responsibility until it engulfs his pupils’ lifetimes will deliver universal education."

In ruling out many of the popular initiatives in educational thought (including the PLE as it was initially presented!), Illich’s (1971) argument concerned the nature of the relationship between education and society. He goes on to say:

"The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring.”

In order to do this, the task requires inquiry into the nature of society, institutions, economy, technology and educational activity. The PLE’s apparent failure might yet be the root of its eventual success as a way of situating modern social life with educational processes.

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