

# **A PRELIMINARY VALUES AUDIT OF SOCIAL ISSUES IN TECHNOLOGY-BASED DISTRIBUTED LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS\***

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports a preliminary review of values evident in early discussions about the social impact of technology-based distributed learning (TBDL, otherwise known as flexible learning). It is suggested that public debates and the emergent literature are characterized by extreme positions that indicate deep value conflicts. Modest research is reported to identify values being used to justify claims about social impacts. 'Value' was selected as the unit of analysis. Data were the presentations and debates of informed post-graduate students concerned with the social impact of TBDL. Content analysis identified values in their claims.

It is shown that the references to key issues were in five realms; educational (29%), social (25%), existential (20%), organizational (19%) and commercial (7%). A values audit using Hodgkinson's model of value showed that about 37% of claims appealed to Type I principles, about 28% to Type IIA views of consequences, about 12% to Type IIB notions of consensus and about 21% to Type III personal preferences. Were this study replicated in jurisdictions to obtain broadly similar outcomes, it is tentatively concluded that educational administrators might anticipate most challenges to be based on ideological grounds with some driven by consequential and personal justifications. Concerns would focus fairly evenly on the anticipated impacts of TBDL in educational, social, existential and organizational realms.

Educational administrators might note three issues for further research. There was little to suggest that structure might be used to implement strategically smart or collectively valued policies in society. Second, respondents lacked the epistemological tools that might have helped them critically examine their prior ideological commitments and methods of justifying values claims. Third, this implied that few respondents realized the apparently significant role that ideology plays in interpreting the projected social impacts of TBDL.

## **Introduction**

Leaders and educators keen to anticipate challenges could well be confused about the likely impact of TBDL in the Knowledge Age. Higher education curriculum is beginning to confront the scope and depth of the need to develop fresh combinations of dual-mode delivery; real and virtual. Post

graduate TBDL students that enroll in the 'Social Issues in TBDL' semester-length unit at the University of British Columbia, for example, are warned at the outset that perspectives on the future range from 'techno-utopian' to 'neo-Luddite'. Gayol and Schied's (1997) review of distance education literature confirmed that the social impact of computer-mediated communication was being considered using four 'epistemological' orientations. The most common, 'techno-rational', was functional in focus and neutral regarding social impact. 'Techno-utopic' views anticipated universal, democratic and athenangoric impacts but were decoupled from history and politics. 'Oppositional' views tended to use inter-disciplinary analyses of negative consequences of technology in the past to conclude that disastrous social impacts were inevitable. 'Critical' perspectives framed issues in global terms, issues such as gender, language dominance, nationalism, colonialism and culture, access, and learning. However, in a situation where facts must significantly underdetermine theory, the existence of such markedly different mindsets and conclusions suggests that personal values are playing an unchecked role during interpretation.

An example can illustrate the problem. Sullivan's (1983) ground-breaking review of the social impact of TBDL sought to identify the 'core values' involved. He argued that instrumental forms of reasoning and technological solutions to cultural problems had rendered human intentions and agency invisible, limited goals and responsibility to the issues of utility and efficiency, and transferred accountability to the technology itself. The overarching policy myth that ingratiated this rendering, he argued, was 'progress.' Progress, he went on, was framed by a 'liberal social consensus' that also celebrated

science, technology and expertise. And the technological component of the progress myth, he claimed, could be repartitioned into three ‘core value positions’; advocacy, reactionary and critical-dialectical.

The relativity of Sullivan’s position has been clarified (McKelvey and Ragsdale, 1983). Socially critical values are intrinsic to his ‘critical–dialectical’ position. His view is primarily radical humanist in nature, and to a lesser degree, radical structuralist (Morgan, 1980). His position is similar to Gayol and Schied’s (1997) ‘critical orientation’. When he attacks ‘instrumental rationality’ with critical dialectic, he does so on historical, social, economic and political grounds. It is notable that he barely hints at the subjectivity and contestability of structures. Boshier (1996, p. 7) made a key distinction: “If the radical humanists focus on consciousness and meaning, the radical structuralists focus on structures, modes of domination, deprivation, contradictions within an objective social world.”

Since value commitments translate into action, and are made particularly manifest in justifications for decisions, it can be speculated that Sullivan would favor dialectical critique in a largely subjective world of willful people in order to deal with the anticipated social impacts of TBDL. There is much less to suggest that he would use radical structuralist tools to implement collectively valued policies. This is a key issue to educational administrators who must devise and sustain organization to ensue that the right things get done.

Apart from the substantive and comparative content, and the practical implications of Sullivan's position, how did he actually process contested values claims? He characterized the 'advocacy position' as being optimistic about technological and scientific innovation, seeing it as "educationally progressive and culturally transcendent." (p. 22) Sullivan saw such claims as backing up into principles endowed with transcendental qualities or transrational values. Reactionary positions, however, in his judgment, used nostalgia, pessimism, and organic and romantic metaphors to present "technology as having a life of its own which negates human intentions." (p. 23). They were seen as backing up into a deep dislike of alienation, that is, into an emotive and subrational reaction to dehumanization. The 'critical-dialectical' position Sullivan personally advocated accepted innovation as a human characteristic yet insisted that innovators retain responsibility. His answer to technological determinism was personal moral accountability. How was his own personal position justified? Sullivan used criteria from current social and political conditions to hold innovators accountable in terms of their socio-cultural consequences. Hence, having set aside alternatives claims using transrational and subrational justifications, his personal position was justified using consequentialist rationalism.

The same patterns of justification have been evident in public debates in higher education concerning the social impact of TBLD. The patterns have been made all the clearer by iconoclastic rhetoric that suggests the presence of values regarded as absolute and immutable. Noble (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999), for example, claimed that TBLD was a tool intended to commodify and commercialize intellectual property, automate teaching and learning, and

undermine academic autonomy and communitarian accountability. White's (1999) rebuttal began by agreeing with much of Noble's indictment, but then added that although managerial priorities were clashing with traditional academic values, this "does not make them inherently evil." (p. 2) In somewhat *ad hominem* terms he claimed that Noble had deliberately maintained ignorance with regard to TBDL, and (at best) had ignored the research evidence on the relative effectiveness and advantages of TBDL.

While Noble tended to use transnational and subnational justifications to mount his moral crusade intended to save the soul of higher education, White's position backed up into a more rational evaluation of consequences courageously projected from emergent research findings. Both Noble and White claimed the support of academic constituencies; apparently sharing the belief that intrinsically moral claims also had to be backed by a consensus of rational colleagues to be worthy of general support.

To summarize to this point, emergent literature and public debates concerned with the social impact of TBDL are often characterized by deeply conflicted values-based positions that seek justification in markedly different ways. A policy community concerned with social impacts of TBDL would be well advised to clarify, before it embarks on policy making and implementation process, *how* it intends to arbitrate the values conflicts it will encounter. How can a jurisdiction served by an educational administrator evaluate policy claims based variously on transnational principles, rational consequentialism, consensual rationalism or personal preferences?

Three research questions were selected to further explore this issue:

1. What are seen by informed educators as the key issues regarding the social impact of TBWL?
2. What values claims are being made with regard to these issues?
3. How are these values claims being justified?

## **Method**

Theoretical and practical disputes can be addressed using a critical-constructivist methodology that serves as a learning infrastructure (Macpherson, 1984, 1999). A critical-constructivist view of educational policy making and implementation assumes that a cultural artifact known as 'a policy' is built in a way that reflects how the mindsets present interact and construct fresh understandings of contexts, options and strategies.

A critical-constructivist methodology has practical merit. It is familiar to many educators as an action theory of learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) and in the norms of collegialism. It would parallel the norms and processes of a constructivist classroom (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) and action research, with one crucial difference. It would not accept that one values-based position is as good as any another. It would interrogate the justifications for moral claims while also testing the position for internal and external coherence. In 'high theory' terms, this methodology means constructing and testing holistic and practical knowledge using a post-paradigmatic, non-foundational and

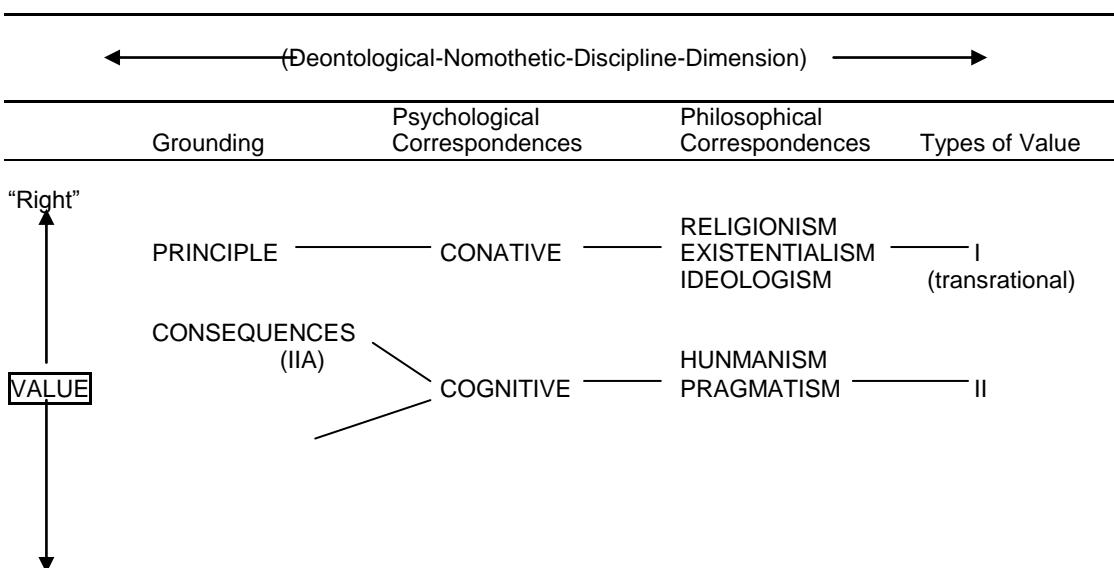
pragmatist epistemology (Evers and Lakomski, 1991, Macpherson 1991, Berrell and Macpherson, 1995).

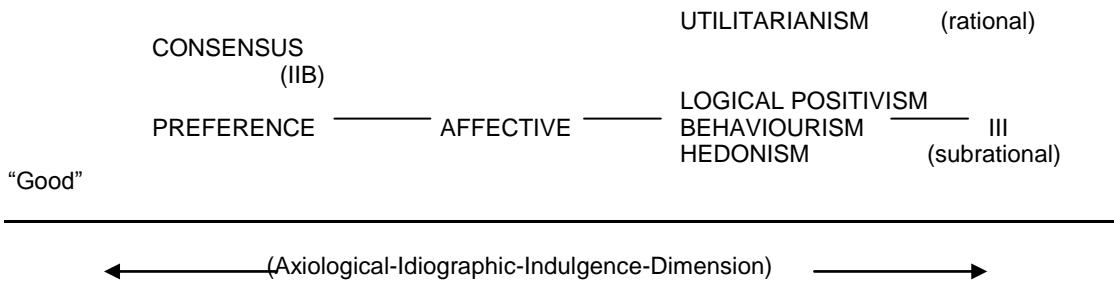
Applied to the case of the purported social impacts of TBDL, in a given policy community, an appropriate critical-constructivist approach would comprise

- Constructing a map of the principle values involved.
- Constructing touchstone on the overlap between positions.
- Expanding this touchstone using various forms of action, strategic political and cultural research.
- Constructing policy and programmes on the common ground.
- Critical reflection on the values and justifications and their relationship to outcomes.

Hence the decision to map and interrogate the values used in a sample of informed and reflective discourse concerning the anticipated social impact of TBDL to better understand the role of justification. 'Value' was selected as the unit of analysis. Hodgkinson's fourfold model of value was adopted to classify the justifications of claims (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Analytical Model of the Value Concept (Hodgkinson, 1978, p. 111)





Hodgkinson based his model of value on the difference between good and right, axiological and the deontological judgements, the idiographic ego and the nomothetic superego, and self-indulgent desires and a disciplined view of what is desirable. The key issue he identified for arbitrating values is “how can one validate, justify, determine, rank-order given concepts of the desirable in given contexts?” (p. 112) Hodgkinson’s advice was that Type III values claims are inferior because they are grounded in personal preference structures and basically asocial. They would reduce the complexities of social impacts of TBLD to the false certainties of logical positivism and behaviorism (i.e. facts  $\Rightarrow$  value) or the indulgences of hedonism (i.e. feelings  $\Rightarrow$  value). Type II values, he advised, are those that use reasoning and collectivities in context to either articulate a consensus (IIB) or assess consequences (IIA) in order to determine the rightness of TBLD. While Type IIA values may be technically limited by the quality of science involved, they are superior to Type IIB values since consensus is typically an uncritical pooling of personal preferences. Type I values are grounded in absolute and transrational principles that are unverifiable by empirical science and unprovable in logic. Hodgkinson recommends Type I values when they are demonstrably “superior, more authentic, better justified, of more defensible grounds than

Type II." (p. 116) Type I values are seen in moral codes, ideologies, religious revelations and forms of aesthetic enlightenment.

The sample comprised the members of the post graduate 'Social Issues in TBDL" semester-length unit taught online by the Distance Education and Technology Centre at the University of British Columbia. A web site provides asynchronous learning with announcements, assignments, course content and structure, a forum, help, resources and tools in a WebCT environment. Assignments are submitted and returned by email. The assignments include position analyses (25%), online brainstorming (5%), online presentations, discussions and syntheses (35%), and a final paper (35%). The data analyzed were the text of online brainstorming data, threaded discussions, presentations, and syntheses contributed by students.

Between 8 January and 3 April 2000, course members posted 1,440 messages to the forum. These postings were complied and saved to a Word document file. All personal identifiers and addresses were deleted to guaranteed the privacy of participants. Messages peripheral to the purposes of this paper, such as personal introductions and resource sharing, were also deleted. The 2.1MB of text was then subjected to modest content analysis. The first reading identified the range of key issues. Second, the Microsoft Word Edit Replace function was used to count references to each key issue. Third, the group presentations and summaries were then read to link values to the nature of justifications in claims.

## Findings

The issues referred, the counts, percentage of all counts and general realms of references are summarized in Table 1:

**Table 1: References to Issues regarding the Social Impact of TBDL**

References to Issues	Total	%	Realm
Students 539 Discussion 458 Teaching 402 Language 153 English 118 Research 116 Pedagogy 78 Constructivism 69 Professionalism 61 Literacy 59 Distance Education 50 Face-to-face 46 Lifelong learning 20 Remote education 16	2185	28.6	Educational
Culture 437 Access 318 Public interest 210 Community 159 Politics 132 Media 120 Democracy 119 Relationships 73 Cross-cultural 50 Labor 45 Teams 45 Digital Divide 39 Family 31 Youth 26 Marginalization 23 Ethics 19 Social isolation 17 Games 16 Elites 14 Minority interests 11 Colonialism 9 Civilization 5 Adolescents 4 Bi culturalism 4 Entertainment 3	1938	25.3	Social
Time 316 Quality 172 Knowledge 170 American influence 142 Control 136 Power 120 Science 91 Dehumanization 78 Asynchronicity 48 Paradigms 45 Equality 41 Ideology 36 Gender 36 Epistemology 30 Fairness 30 Empiricism 16 Progress 18 Feminism 9 Linearity 8 Justice 6 Heritage 2	1550	20.3	Existential
Communications 261 Government 175 Systems 148 Structures 141 Globalization 111 Corporation 99 Planning 87 Tools 78 Distributed learning 76 Mega-universities 74 Libraries 37 Collaboration 35 Imperialism 30 Sovereignty 29 Developing countries 29 Standards 20 Diploma Mills 20	1450	19.0	Organizational
Marketing 113 Private enterprise 98 Privatization 98 For Profit 92 Commerce 90 Free trade 29 Monopolies 6	526	6.9	Commercial
Total	7649	100.1	

The presentations and summaries posted by groups were then analyzed.

Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of the issues raised by each group's presentation, values explicit in the positions taken and in the following discussion, and the types of justifications they used.

**Table 2: Issues, Values and Justifications regarding the Social Impact of TBDL**

Group Question/Issue	Issues Presented + Discussed	Values related to the Question/ Issue	Justifications Used
1. Is Technology in TBDL Neutral?	Ideologies in pedagogy, communication structures, delivery structures, communities of practice + Comfort, authenticity, efficiency, service, cultural integrity, sectors, competition, quality, care, access, opportunity, social, actions, organizational structures, evaluation, critical reflection.	Ideologism Communitarianism Radical Humanism Pragmatism Commercialism	I I IIA IIA III
2. Will university education control	Systems, government, actions, power, partnerships, quality, participation, access + Democracy,	Ideologism Democratism	I IIA

TBDL or vice versa?	professionalism, communication, governance, adversarialism, vocationalism, participation, planning, change management, distribution of wealth, determinism, ideology of structure, unintended outcomes, spontaneity, reciprocity, will, costs crises.	Professionalism Statism Managerialism	IIB III III
3. Why is Access a Non-Issue?	Access policy, issue saliency, quality, political quiescence, finance + Content control, digital divide, distance education, education design, privatization, educational divide.	Egalitarianism, Pragmatism, Commercialism, Statism	I IIA III III
4. Cross-cultural education via the web: Superficial, multi-cultural or imperialism?	Socially critical multi-culturalism, inter-cultural communications + Interculturalism, communication, domain statistics, ideology of icons and graphics, ethical sensitivity, national firewalls.	Ideologism Hyper-liberalism Radical Humanism Statism	I I IIA III
5. Will TBDL dehumanize education?	Cyber communications, educational relationships, interdependence of emotion and cognition + Emotional maturity and literacy, technology of language, psychology of the Internet, netiquette, virtual communities, reciprocity in TBDL.	Egalitarianism Communitarianism Radical Humanism Utilitarianism	I I IIA IIB
6. Free Trade in HE: Threat of Opportunity?	Mega and meta universities, consortia economies of scale, appropriation and rationalization and commercialization of curriculum + Global governance, regional uniqueness, integration of teaching and research, territorialism.	Ideologism Pragmatism, Professionalism, Commercialism	I IIA IIB III
7. An educator's role regarding IT in a traditional university?	Pedagogical purposes, effects of TBDL, participative decision-making, new approaches to teaching and learning + Business v.s educative and virtual structures, being a teacher, being a university, IT enabling constructivism and virtual learning organizations, epistemology of constructivism.	Ideologism, Existentialism, Radical Humanism	I I IIA
8. Is the internet inherently democratic?	Instrumental rationality (myth), responsibility stays with intentional agents, distributed control and information, open publication + E-trails, crime, subversion, access not a right, open to abuse, democracy low priority of governments.	Ideologism, Consequentialism.	I IIA

The first presentation focussed sharply on the impact of ideologies that undercut the neutrality of technology and relied exclusively on Type 1 justifications. Claims made during the following discussions by other members of the course, however, backed up into all types of justification except consensus. The second presentation addressed the dilemmas of governance and change management, again using only Type 1 justifications, and once again, the discussion entertained many options and justifications. The nature of the discussion concerning 'professionalism' implied a collective consensus, a consensus that was ingratiated by fears concerning worse alternatives but one that did not consider communitarian responsibilities and the principled discharge of accountabilities.

The third group identified how political quiescence was managed by governments to lower the political saliency of access. The free-ranging discussion, in a virtual pub, saw Type 1 egalitarian values gradually displaced by Type IIA pragmatic values and Type III commercial and control values. The fourth presentation led to a tightly focussed discussion. It used Type I and IIA ideals to promote inter-cultural understanding, while acknowledging the presence of Type III control values in state firewalls. The fifth presentation noted that education requires full emotional engagement. Since cyber communications can limit the emotional content of relationships, it was proposed that TBDL could potentially 'dehumanize' learning. The focussed discussion countered this proposal using Type I and Type II values.

The sixth presentation argued that global free trade in higher education would lead to mega- and meta- universities and consortia seeking economies of scale and the rationalization of curricula and employment conditions. While regretting this likelihood, on transnational grounds, the discussion moved to pragmatic and professional means of mediating the effects of commercialization. The seventh presentation challenged participants to declare themselves as educators in a traditional university facing the impact of I&CT and TBDL. The response was a reiteration of pedagogical ideologies, with some existential and radical humanist reflections, and ending with a preliminary exploration of the epistemology of IT-enabled constructivist learning. The eighth and final presentation considered the extent to which the Internet is inherently democratic. It argued that responsibility for the use of the Internet lay with users, designers and governments, i.e. intentional agents. Democracy was undefined and enjoyed the privileged status of an

absolute principle. When some features of the Internet were seen as having potentially anti-democratic outcomes, the justifications for claims backed up into dire consequences.

## **Discussion**

The evidence summarized in Table 1 suggests that anticipated educational and social impacts are marginally more salient than anticipated impacts on self and organizational forms. The significantly lower saliency of commercial issues could indicate that they were seen as relatively uncontested. It might also be speculated that strong engagement with the interests of students, pedagogy and social issues reflects ideological commitment to altruism. The lesser yet substantial concern with impact on self and organization could reflect a more pragmatic concern with potential consequences. The methodology did not allow any measures of association.

The analysis summarized in Table 2 tended to confirm that most presentations and discussions of the social impacts of TBBL were driven by ideological commitment to principles, such as egalitarianism, communitarianism and hyper-liberalism. Occasionally consequences were invoked, usually in radical humanist and pragmatic discussions of immediate options and likely outcomes. Less frequently used was an appeal to a collective view, a constituency, or to professional ethics. When the issue was seen as largely inevitable, or in the gift of government or business, Type III values were deployed in criticism.

## **Tentative Conclusions**

Despite the limitations of the methodology, it is reasonable to assume the saliency of issues (to the group) was related to the deployment of their values and their patterns of justification. This preliminary values audit of reflective discourse suggests that the concern for pedagogical, existential and organizational impacts together significantly outweigh concern for social impacts, despite the aims of the course, largely due to prior ideological commitments of course participants. It can be assumed, for example, that relatively little strategic analysis focussed on long-term options and consequences concerning the nature and development of society – the key indicators of ‘social impact’. There was little to suggest that radical structuralist tools might be used to implement strategically smart or collectively valued policies in society.

The crucial implication for educational administrators is the need to develop epistemological tools that might help governors of policy in educational jurisdictions to critically examine prior ideological commitments and methods of justifying values claims, and the apparently significant role they play in interpreting the projected social impacts of TBDL.

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