



Reflexivity and technology in adult learning

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Abstract

It is argued by influential commentators such as Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash that we now live in a 'reflexively modern' age. People are seen to now be free of the structures of modern society and driven instead by individualised opportunities to reflexively engage with their fast-changing social worlds and identities. Taking the notion of reflexive modernisation as its starting point, this paper explores the roles that information technologies (ITs) may play in supporting adults' reflexive judgements about, and reflexive engagements with, education and learning. Through an analysis of interview data with 100 adults in the UK the paper finds that whilst a minority of interviewees were using ITs to support and inform reflexive engagement with learning, the majority of individuals relayed little sign of technology-supported reflexivity when it came to their (non)engagement with education. For most people ITs were found, at best, to reinforce pre-established tendencies to 'drift' through the formal education system. The paper concludes by considering the implications of these findings for ongoing efforts in developed countries to establish technology-supported 'learning societies'.

Introduction

Reflexivity is now recognised as a prominent way in which people, organisations and even nations can find a foothold in a 'runaway world' which is increasingly individualised, intensified and accelerated (Giddens 2002). Correspondingly there is a long tradition of debating 'reflexivity' and the 'reflexive subject' in Euro-American social science. Authors from Jurgen Habermas to Anthony Giddens have spent time elaborating upon Immanuel Kant's discussion of 'reflective judgement' and the move away from applying given universals to particulars (Guyer 2004). This theoretical concern with reflexivity in contemporary society has culminated recently in the individual and collaborative works of, among others, Scott Lash, Ulrich Beck, John Urry and Bruno Latour. Over the last fifteen years these authors have documented an epochal shift from a 'simple modernity' to a 'reflexive modernity' as individuals have begun to be freed from the structures of society and driven instead through opportunities to reflect both upon their selves and social worlds. Although there are clear differences between these individual writers' conceptualisation of 'reflexivity' (see Beck 1999), they are in broad agreement that thriving, rather than merely surviving, in contemporary society involves more than being determined by the predetermined structures within which one finds oneself. Instead, successful actors develop a capacity for constant

self-evaluation and self-awareness in the face of an ever-changing and challenging social world.

As Beck and colleagues (2003) are at pains to point out, the concept of reflexivity is concerned not just with the self-referential quality of modern life but with the fundamental transformation of key institutions and principles of modern society. This is seen if we contrast the reflexive modernity with the first 'simple' modernity. Society in the first modernity can be characterised as highly structured and ordered around institutions such as the nation, the state and the nuclear family. Although individuals may reflect on and react to the inherent structuration of society, any action remains determined primarily by these structures. In the first modernity, therefore, any reflexivity is more "a matter of reflection" (Lash 2003, p.49), where the subject developed an understanding of their place within the structures which bound their lives. Beck and colleagues' account of the second reflexive modernity, on the other hand, acknowledges a shift away from this linear, structured and *predictable* logic of society. They describe instead a situation where the functions, operations and services of society have become *decentred*, *destabilised*, *disintegrated* and *disorganised*. In this way the second modernity approaches what Beck would describe as a society characterised by risk rather than regulation.

This disorganisation and de-structuration of the contemporary social world leaves the individual subject in a position where they have to negotiate their own role and respond to choices not necessarily faced by previous generations. Thus the role of the reflexively modern subject is transformed from one of passively negotiating prescribed, determinate rules to being the active finder and re-configurer of the rules. This requires 'reflexive judgements' to be made which address questions of risk and uncertainty often on highly individualised and subjective grounds (Lash 2000). In this way the ability to make reflexive judgements is an essential part of surviving and thriving in contemporary life.

Of course, reflexive modernity is not imagined as a social utopia where all individuals prosper. The outcomes of reflexive judgements are risky and uncertain and can often entail 'unintended consequences' and unforeseen side-effects. Thus Beck and others acknowledge that "a new distribution of possibilities is simultaneously a new distribution of impossibilities for someone else" (Beck et al. 2003, p.25). For every empowered 'reflexivity winner' there are large populations of 'reflexivity losers' who remain disempowered and inert (Kelly & Kenway 2001). The successful subjects in the reflexive modernity are therefore those who are cosmopolitan and exhibit few of the older attachments to traditional institutions as shared communities of fate - able instead to respond almost instantaneously to choices and life-chances (Lash and Urry 1994). In this sense, effective social action is a dynamic but often *ad hoc* activity:

"We may wish to be reflective but we have neither the time nor the space to reflect. We are instead combinards. We put together networks, construct alliances, make deals. We must live, are forced to live, in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-chances are precarious" (Lash 2003, p.51-52).

Reflexivity and adult learning

This portrayal of a fast-changing world in flux has particular resonance with the field of adult education. Although it is easy to exaggerate the pace of educational change, a significant restructuring of adult education systems has occurred of late. The provision and consumption of post-compulsory education around the world has become noticeably more decentred, dispersed and, many would argue, flexible. In fact adult education has undergone a

pattern of reorganisation which mirrors the ‘flattening’ of hierarchies seen to characterise the reflexive modernity. For example, the last decade has seen the disaggregation and outsourcing of much work-related training and education across private and public sectors - often on global rather than local lines and with an increasingly fluid emphasis on ‘just-in-time’ training and ‘on-the-job’ learning. Traditional providers of education such as colleges and universities now compete with new sources of remote and flexible education offered by an array of actors – commercial and non-commercial, large and small, formal and informal. This ‘disorganisation’ of education has, at least in theory, led to an abundance of choices and challenges for the contemporary adult learner. No longer constrained by essentially localised structures of formal provision, individuals are faced with a dynamic but often uncertain ‘chaos’ of educational opportunities and choices – as Giddens (1998, p.101) puts it, a significant ‘redistribution of possibilities’.

This ongoing fragmentation of adult education has often been approached by governments, politicians and many educationalists in a rather optimistic, sanitised and decidedly non-reflexive manner. The diversification and ‘massification’ of adult education, for example, has been rationalised in political and economic discourse as providing a cornerstone for a coherent and unified ‘learning society’ founded upon full participation in lifelong learning (OECD 1996, Coffield 1997). What social theorists would see as a disorganisation of education has subtly been recast within official channels as a neat *reorganisation* of education along the more convenient, democratic and effective lines of the ‘learning society’.

Yet the notion of the learning society is an aspirational rather than actual account of education in developed countries - with most adults’ experiences being far removed from the linear, smooth progression through the life course that the notion of ‘lifelong learning’ implies. We know that adults often experience lifelong learning as a complex and volatile journey with many unintended and unforeseen consequences. In this way reflexive judgement, as described earlier, is likely to be crucial to the successful navigation through the ever-changing landscape of real-life adult education. As Giddens (1994, p.7) speculates, “a world of intensified reflexivity is a world of clever people”. Educational research is beginning to provide empirical support for this contention. As Kelly and Kenway’s (2001) study of Australian youth demonstrated, transitions through the post-compulsory education system are now increasingly risky and no longer as straightforward as they once may have been for previous generations. The transitional phase from being a ‘non-learner’ to becoming a ‘lifelong learner’ is not a straightforward matter of shedding old identities and adopting new ones as implied in the rhetoric of the learning society. Instead Kelly and Kenway describe it as marking a period of risk, confusion and contradiction (see also Brine and Waller 2004). Thus the exhortative notion of the learning society belies the ‘real-life’ situation where some individuals are better positioned and equipped than others to choose to participate in adult education and accrue the benefits which may result. How individuals may be encouraged to develop and refine their identities as learners is therefore a pressing concern for educators around the world. Of particular significance – and the focus of the remainder of this paper – is the faith placed by growing numbers of educationalists in new media and technology as providing a ready means of stimulating the reflexivity needed to support the realisation of the learning society ideal.

Technology and the reflexive adult learner

For many commentators “it goes without saying that information and communication technology plays a leading role in the increasing reflexivity of modern society” (van Dijk 1999, p.21). Information technologies (ITs) are widely seen to be invaluable means of informing and supporting reflexive

judgement and social action. If she exists at all, then the life of the reflexively modern individual is likely to be bound up with an array of technological affordances. Much interaction with others takes place via mobile communication devices such as cell-phones and palm-held computers. For many people the internet has become a pervasive conduit for the sharing of all manner of information. As Roger Silverstone (1999, p.7) concludes, technology and new media “are central to th[e] reflective project ... the world about us is displayed and performed: iteratively and interminably”. Thus, whilst reflexivity continues to also be supported via traditional means, new technologies are at the heart of a new immediate quality of reflexivity in the second modernity. Through this technologically-facilitated immanence, reflexivity is “no longer about distanced decision-making [now] there is no distance at all between knowledge and action” (Lash 2002, p.156).

In these terms, ITs should be a ready means for reflexive individuals to successfully fulfil the ideal of becoming ‘lifelong learners’. New technologies like the computer and the internet are seen by many adult educators as the embodiment of ‘the technocratic dream’ where “knowledge can be transmitted, efficiently and without any problem” (Nordkvelle 2004, p.428). In particular, there is growing credence within educational circles that IT-based learning is the obvious means of extending educational opportunities to those adults who previously have not participated in formal or informal learning. The logic for such assumptions derives from the central role that ITs have been given by the educational establishment in the current diversification of adult education. From blended ‘e-learning’ to wholly online distance education, ITs are seen to be transforming the twenty-first century educational landscape. In terms of taking learning into people's homes, workplace and wider communities, ITs are providing new spaces for education and blurring the distinction between formal and informal episodes of learning. Moreover ITs such as the internet are able to support flows of information relating to educational opportunities and thereby increase individuals’ educational choices. In short educationalists are hoping that these technological affordances will combine to facilitate the ideals of the fully participative and egalitarian learning society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although compelling, many of these assumptions remain untested – especially with respect to the roles that ITs may play in supporting individuals’ reflexive judgements about, and reflexive engagements with, education and learning. We know little of how the reflexive potential of new media like computers, the internet and digital television is working out in practice. As such a range of questions arise in relation to exploring ITs and reflexivity in adult learning, in particular:

1. **How are ITs being used by individuals to exercise reflexive judgement on learning and being a learner?** How are ITs supporting people to locate adult learning within an ever-changing, unstable and disorganised system of co-ordinates? To what extent are people recognising a pluralisation of learning opportunities and what can be considered as learning through ITs? How are ITs leading to the broadening of educational boundaries and allowing people to construct their own boundaries, rules and decisions? To what extent are ITs being used to facilitate reflexive judgements on individuals’ self-identities as learners?
2. **Which individuals and which social groups are using ITs in these reflexive ways?** Who appears to be empowered by ITs and who is more powerless? Who are the ‘reflexive winners’ and ‘reflexive losers’ when it comes to education and learning? What are the circumstances behind this?

3. **What outcomes are the reflexive use(s) of ITs leading to, and for whom?** To what extent are new technologies allowing reflexive learning to take place - i.e. individualised, flexible learning, 'free' from dominant structures and with increasing opportunities to reflect upon the self as a (non)learner? What unintended consequences are in evidence in current patterns of adult learning and what roles do ITs play in reaching them?

METHODS

This paper now considers the evidence for adults' reflexive engagement with technology and learning via an analysis of interview data collected for a recent large-scale research project on adult learning in the UK. In-depth interviews were conducted with a stratified sample of 100 adults selected from a survey sample of 1001 adults in the west of England and South Wales (see Selwyn et al. 2005). Interviews focused on individuals' educational, technological and employment 'careers' as well as their current technological and educational activities. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and covered a range of open-ended questions relating to educational participation and engagement with ITs. In this way the interviews approached a life-history or 'life-story' method (Dhunpath 2000) which focused on eliciting individuals' experiences through chronological autobiographies of education, work and technology use.

One limitation to the use of this method of data collection to investigate reflexivity lies in the self-construction of interviewees' accounts of educational participation and technological engagement. As Lash (2003, p.51) points out, "in the second modernity we haven't sufficient reflective distance on ourselves to construct linear and narrative biographies". If individuals' reflexivity is the complex and 'messy' affair described earlier then it is inevitably less straightforward than the sanitised narratives it was possible for us to elicit in an interview context (Mcadams 1998). Nevertheless, our interview data do allow for a detailed investigation of how people recounted the contexts and nature of their (non)reflexive engagements with education – providing insights into processes which would otherwise be difficult to empirically capture. With this caveat in mind the paper now goes onto discuss the research questions via an analysis of these interview data.

RESULTS

We present the interview data in two distinct sections: (i) those instances where individuals displayed reflexive engagement with learning and/or reflexive judgements not to engage in learning; and (ii) those instances where individuals were engaging with learning with little or no sign of reflexive judgement. The roles which ITs played in all these cases are now described and discussed in the following sections:

(i) ITs and reflexive (non)learners

Only a few interviewees could be described as reflexively engaging with education with the support of IT. One such individual was Maria, a single woman in her late thirties, who had engaged in a wide variety of learning since leaving school. Her career of lifelong learning, as with the handful of other interviewees in this category, was very much a 'bricolage biography' (Hitzler 1988). After leaving school at seventeen she had engaged in a variety of jobs, from working in a warehouse to running her own internet services business. She described her post-school education as taking a similar 'mix and match' form, ranging from week-long residential courses to part-time higher degrees in subject areas from computers to art history. These bouts of learning took place either during "gaps [in employment] or for entertainment and leisure".

Maria described how she aimed to strike a balance between learning for its own sake (“stuff that’s of no use to you whatsoever, but interesting”) and using education as a way of (re)positioning herself as a ‘portfolio’ worker in a buoyant and fluid labour market.

Technology had played a prominent role in most stages of this eclectic learning career. As Maria described with regards to her current educational decision-making, technology offered a flexibility which fitted with her lifestyle:

I looked at [an online distance learning degree] ... even though I don’t need the qualification. And also there is a chance I might be going to work abroad for a while, so not knowing where I’m going to be means signing up for a [traditional] course isn’t practical. I could sign up for a course today, and then find out in a fortnight’s time I’ve got to move to Aberdeen. So doing something that I can do at a distance, you know, at home, and that is a bit more flexible, suits me.

Here Maria is using IT to juggle between what Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p.4) describe as “the desire [in the reflexive modernity] for a self-directed and autonomous life with the need for ... steady employment”. Other interviewees also recounted how technology-based education provided a flexibility of opportunity which complemented their transient and uncertain careers. As this part-time translator recalled:

I bummed around a bit and got myself a few part time jobs, I convinced myself I was going to write my masterpiece and other extremely clever things. For a period of several years I did nothing much apart from odd jobs in shops, after I began to work with my father as a head hunter working in the management consulting field and also got involved in odd projects like marketing intelligence projects. As a result of that I started to acquire some computer skills and did some [computer-based] courses and taught myself the basics of various other things. Having been self employed I’ve spent my time doing other various odd things like building computer databases here and there, since then I decided to try my hand at web design when that seemed to be all the rage. (female, 33 years)

The specific educational affordances of ITs for these individuals were often described in practical terms. For example, technology was described as supporting people’s preferences for an *ad hoc*, ‘just-in-time’ approach to learning in terms of time and place. As this graphic designer recounted on two separate occasions:

The advantage [of e-learning] is that you can do it whenever you like, and I’m one of these people – you know, for me in the last course, two in the morning, I want to look for an electronic journal. That’s great. You can’t go to the college in two in the morning.

‘Cos I run my own business [life] all merges into one anyway. Weekends actually can be better some times, it can be quieter [at home], you can get on with things. (male, 32 years)

Yet the reflexive educational affordances of ITs were also described by these interviewees in more abstract terms. For Maria, new technologies allowed her to retain an emotional distance from what she felt to be the socially uncomfortable aspects of ‘normal’ engagement with formal education. For example, she had deliberately chosen an MBA course which used a ‘blended’ e-learning approach and thereby allowed her to learn ‘at an arm’s length’ from the ‘student culture’ of British universities:

I took voluntary redundancy and signed up to do a Masters. I couldn't stand the thought of learning with 18 to 22 year-olds. You know, I'm old enough to be their mum! That was really not part of the fun of it! So I signed up for the MBA and thoroughly enjoyed it. Technology was quite important. We used electronic resources quite a lot and being able to access them from home was – you know, you can have a cup of tea when you're at home, you can't when you're in the library or in the class.

It should be emphasised that for all these individuals, ITs were just as likely to be reported as leading them to *not* engage in education at all. Indeed, ITs offered these learners just one option in their arsenal of educational options. That new technologies were not being unquestioningly being used at every opportunity is to be expected. As Beck et al. (2003, p.16) argue, in the reflexively modern age there is an “erosion of the bases of certainty ... space is opened up for alternative forms of knowledge to come into play ... there is no longer ‘one best way’ to solve every problem, but rather several equally valid modes of justification that operate simultaneously”. Thus in many cases IT-based formal educational provision was rejected due to perceptions of its restrictive nature – either that it fitted a narrow employment-focussed agenda or was felt to be of little actual educational value. For example, the UK government's high profile e-learning provision was rejected with a degree of scepticism by some of our reflexive learners who described it as “an electronic youth training scheme”, for those “who aren't interested in learning” (Maria) or “money for old rope” (male, 55 years).

It was clear that these interviewees were using ITs to create and sustain situations where they could control what learning they engaged in, as well as when and where they learnt and on what terms. This use of technology to retain control extended to their patterns of informal learning, with many interviewees using ITs (in particular the internet) to foster personal networks of expertise and information. As Maria describes in the following extended quotation, the accumulation of informal educational opportunities and sources of expertise was often - although not exclusively - supported by old and new media:

[People] I've met through my course ... there are people who I know through my previous job. It's just knowing where to get the data from. And if it was something that I hadn't done before, I'd probably look online. Maybe newsgroups or look for a chat room. And I would ring someone. I would phone the local college and ask to speak to [someone]. I suppose it sounds weird, but there are pockets of expertise around. If I wanted to know something about driving around interviewing people about lifelong learning then I'd ring you! I'd say, 'do you remember, you came to visit me and I'd really like to know where did you get started, how did that work?' I think people are always frightened to ask.

Maria's approach to seeking information and knowledge neatly mirrors the fluidity of boundaries seen to exist in the reflexively modern society where “there is not a limited array of already available options. Instead the boundaries have to be created along with the decisions” (Beck et al. 2003, p.20). Of particular significance here is the use of IT to learn independently of the official 'learning society' and formal education system. Like many of our reflexive learners Maria described how the worldwide web allowed her to experience the serendipity of 'surfing' an ever-growing wealth of knowledge (“you find yourself going off on a tangent ... then you end up looking up at sites there and you end up finding out about [things] that you never knew”). Thus for many of our reflexive learners, ITs were being used to construct their own rules of learning and information seeking – usually beyond what would be considered official channels of learning. For example, we found many instances of adults using the internet to challenge expert sources in a variety of

domains of expertise - from the medical profession through to other family members:

We've got a pompous uncle in our family and he knows everything. I've never proved him wrong in front of his face, but – I know that he's wrong on some things! And then I'll find that information out using the internet. (Male, 35 years)

Although such 'self-education' is often dismissed as trivial by the education profession, the use of IT to challenge expert sources in this way is a prime example of reflexivity. As Tulloch and Lupton (2003, p.3) reason:

“people are no longer accepting the judgements or advice of experts on face value but rather actively seek to invest their trust in them by assessing their worth and credibility. As a result there are a far greater number of uncertainties than ever previously existed. Greater knowledge has led in turn to greater uncertainty and a subsequent turn to alternative expertise and knowledge claims”.

Of course there is a fine line between acquiring random snippets of information and *bone fide* learning and there were far more instances in our interview data of adults using ITs to seek specific information at specific times (e.g. holiday information or football results) rather than using technology to support sustained quests for knowledge. Nevertheless, for our reflexive learners, ITs were often cited as mainstays of a fluid engagement with education. If we return again to Maria, IT allowed her to maintain a busy educational trajectory alongside work and domestic mobility (“there are always things... that you can go back to and you can say, ‘I’ll pick that up where I left off’”) - echoing the reflexively modern credo that “everything can be straightened out in the long run” (Beck 2003, p.26).

In highlighting these instances of reflexive learning it is crucial to acknowledge that these were all interviewees who could be considered to already be reflexive in other aspects of their lives. In this way, these individuals were merely using ITs to continue engaging reflexively with learning as they always had done. Maria, for example, had been raised in a background of uncertainty and change. She described how her parents had “constantly moved” around the country renovating and then selling pubs and bars. As a result of this constant transition her “education went up and down”. She attributed her fluid approach to adult learning as stemming from these disjointed and uncertain early experiences of education. As a whole, these interviewees’ lives displayed much of the fluidity, mobility and connectedness which is associated with the cosmopolitan subject (Kesselring & Vogl 2004). Their participation in technology-based education therefore followed the reflexive contours of their overall lives. For example, a freelance film producer described his current learning with the internet as allowing him to continue the ‘really satisfying’ learning and ‘developing as a person as a result of education’ which he had only begun to experience during the later stages of his university education: “there is a thrill about finding things out and the web encourages that wisdom. I enjoy finding a reference and looking that reference up” (male, 34 years). In this sense we would contend that ITs were being used by reflexive learners to repeat previous learning behaviours or reconnect with earlier learning habits. As with all our ‘reflexive’ respondents there was little evidence that technology had created a new-found desire for learning - rather that these instances of IT-based informal learning were building upon previous learning behaviours and dispositions. As a retired lorry driver reasoned: “I think it’s a lot of information that’s at the back of my mind. [The internet] is just bringing it all out” (male 63 years old).

(ii) ITs and non-reflective (non)learners

These instances aside, the majority of our interviewees could not be said to be reflexively engaging with education and learning. Indeed, most interviewees who were participating in adult learning could be characterised as being driven by the social, economic and educational structures in their lives rather than driving themselves (Kesselring & Vogl 2004). In this respect, the stated motivations for using ITs and participating in e-learning were often ones of devolving responsibility and control away from themselves. As one respondent rather obliquely reasoned: “it was more to do with the fact that I liked the idea that science could help you learn, rather than relying on having the willpower to do it myself” (female, 38 years).

One common occurrence was the appropriation of IT as an easy and convenient ‘way in’ to formal education. In contrast to our reflexive learners, these interviewees tended to describe informal learning with IT as simply a first stage in the pursuit of ‘legitimate’ formal learning opportunities rather than an end in itself. For example, at the time of interview one man was using the internet to trace his family tree, but was keen to stress that he had arranged to ‘take it further’ and ‘study it properly’ by joining an established society: “[in the summer] I’ll join the Royal Family History Society, they do lots of courses in tracing your family tree and when I get the time it will be something I do” (male, 50 years).

The most common instance of formal learning with technology evident in our data were those individuals who had chosen to take ‘information technology’ or ‘computer literacy’ as a subject in itself. Many of these learners described an unreflexive linear progression through the formal structure of IT qualifications available in the UK. We came across ‘serial takers’ of formal computer skills courses – individuals seemingly enrolling on courses for their own sake rather than through a desire to develop computer skills to use elsewhere. As one retired respondent explained: “I’ve been signing on for computer courses in Marketown [since] they first started off in about, oh God, the early ‘90s ... I’ve tried so many times ... you just race through this disk and it’s all very nice, but you just get used to taking tests, you don’t actually learn what you’re doing” (female, 64 years).

The unreflexive nature of this engagement is highlighted by another learner who had taken all the IT courses on offer at their local college and then had to stop once having exhausted their options. In this case, IT had not fostered an ability or desire to actively seek any learning beyond the formal courses:

“Like I say, I like waiting for an envelope to come through the front door and things like that ... I did CLAIT in 1992. When I’d done the IBT2 [Integrated Business and Technology] following on from CLAIT, there wasn’t an IBT3. Then it was like ‘what shall I do now?’ and there wasn’t anything” (woman, 29 years)

Many learners in the interview sample appeared content with this non-reflexive style of engagement. One talked of enrolling in IT courses in her local college to “just go along with the flow” of what courses were on offer (female, 38 years). Others talked of their desire to be guided in the ‘correct’ ways to use computers to learn: “it’s hugely important to generate the correct uses and the correct services and applications on it” (male, 42 years). Some described not feeling sufficiently motivated to use their computers for learning unless compelled to do so by the structure of the formal education system – “I’m not doing anything that makes me want to log onto the computer to find out information - no one is setting me projects where I need to find out something” (female, 26 years). Similarly, “I still need a nudge in the right direction. Nudge me, persuade me to do it then I will – but not on my own back” (female, 46 years). Thus, for the majority of interviewees, it would be

misleading to say that ITs were increasing their control over their learning – rather that ITs and e-learning were being used to detach the individual from the personal responsibility of engaging with learning.

Yet, at least these individuals were engaged in learning - albeit in structured and confined ways. A significant proportion of our interviewees were not engaged with either formal or informal education. Here ITs were, if anything, adding to the multiplicity of ways in which education was being bounded off for these non-participants through differing combinations of need, interest, access, expertise or constraints of time and finance. Beyond the commonplace denials of interest or need (“I don’t think there is any way we can apply it to our lives to make such a vast difference. We are happy as we are” - male, 67 years), it was clear that such non-engagement was often framed by social conditions which negated any reflexive potential of ITs. For some women the restrictive structures of the home and household were in stark evidence. One example was Eva, a middle-aged mother who had left school with no qualifications (“I’ve got nothing academic”) but after buying a computer when her daughter was young found herself learning and retaining skills and other information quite easily; “if you’ve read it in a book, you forget ... I don’t know what it is ... I suppose on the computer I’ve remembered everything [that I have learnt]”. However, this new site of learning had been less used as her daughter had grown older and a spatial repositioning of the computer within the household had taken place:

I use [the computer] very rarely now. I suppose because – it’s an excuse, I guess – it’s in [my daughter’s] bedroom. If it was in the living area, ‘cause I’ve got a small house and nowhere to put it – if it was in the living area I think I would go on and off it quite a bit. Because it’s in her bedroom, I tend not to use it so much. And when she first had it, she wouldn’t use it all the time. She’d go on it occasionally and I would pop on it now and then. When she comes home from school she always seems to be up there or back and forth. And it’s in her room, so I tend not to use it so much.

Unfortunately, in this case, although IT allowed Eva to reflect on her learning (especially that she had learnt more effectively with a computer than with books) it had not led her into a sustained reflexive engagement with learning:

Now I don’t think I have it in me to study – I’ve got no qualifications at all basically. But I’m ok with that at the moment because I’ve always thought of myself now, at my age, that all I’ll do is shop work. As long as I have a job to keep my head above water. It’s too late for me to go for a career ... I don’t think I’d be able to do anything now. I like to learn, but in my own time. I’ve never been one for being in a classroom and having to study. I’d rather just learn as I go along.

Although in stark contrast to the spirit of reflexive modernisation, such a ‘negative fatalism’ pervaded many of our interviews with non-learners. Moreover, this sense of educational inertia was a predicament which IT was seemingly unable to impact on even when it was readily available. People’s reasoning in this respect was often obtuse, from the granting of an excessive agency to the computer - “it’s when it makes rules I don’t like it” (male, 56 years), to the argument that only having a good education allowed someone to use a computer, rather than using a computer being able to lead to an improved education. Thus these non-learners remained profoundly bounded by their learning biographies and histories – in spite of technological affordances. Unlike our earlier reflexive learners, there was scant evidence of these interviewees reaching the supposed stage of reflexive modernisation where “the past loses its power to determine the present” (Beck 2000, p.214).

DISCUSSION

In terms of the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper, we came across a number of individuals in our sample who were engaging reflexively with education and learning with the support of ITs. Embodying the rhetoric of the learning society, we found some ‘cosmopolitan learners’ who were engaging with different forms of educational opportunities in a variety of intuitive and often instinctive ways. For these individuals, learning had been transformed from being a collective and institutionally bounded process towards becoming a fluid part of their everyday lives - an integration which was often supported by technology-based flows of information and opportunities. These individuals were using ITs to find out about learning opportunities (via formal and informal flows of information), to learn on their own and with others in informal ways and, on occasion, engage in formal learning. In this way, educational participation had become a major personal project which was driven in part by technology. In particular, our data highlighted the important role that technology can play in allowing engagement with informal modes of learning, with new technologies providing these learners with an effective means with which to ‘work around’ the formal education system. Conversely we also saw how some individuals were using ITs to support and inform reflexive judgements not to learn. There is a tendency in the educational literature to approach ‘reflexivity’ only in narrow terms of successful engagement with education. Yet our data demonstrated how reflexivity refers to not only an increase of mastery and consciousness, but a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible, unnecessary or undesirable (Latour 2003). Thus we saw how ITs were hastening different forms of ‘reflexive non-engagement’ for some adults by offering alternatives to learning, or even highlighting the inadequacies of the learning opportunities on offer.

Although in all these instances ITs were supporting and facilitating reflexive judgement, we would not conclude that technology was causing reflexivity. Instead ITs appeared to be helping already reflexive individuals to continue being reflexive. ITs could not be said to be propelling the reflexively modern (non)learner to be an active agent and constructor of her life narrative. More accurately ITs could be said to be simply reinforcing (or sometimes rekindling) these traits in those who already have them. These were individuals who already “imagine[d] themselves as those who influence the direction of their own moves” (Kesselring & Vogl 2004, p.10). It was noticeable that those individuals who did appear to work on their learning identities as a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens 1991) enjoyed conducive conditions in which to be secure enough to construct their self in this way. This is an important distinction to make with regards to the political expectation of new technologies widening engagement to those social groups who previously had not been learners.

The majority of our interviewees displayed little sign of self-determination or reflexivity when it came to their (non)engagement with education. Many participants appeared to have either ‘drifted’ into (or drifted past) learning since having concluded their compulsory education – driven by institutional structures and expectations rather than actively defining their own rules and boundaries. ITs were apparently doing little to alter this situation, often perpetuating the existing structures of education and the ways in which education was bounded off. Belying the presumed current ‘disorganisation’ of adult education provision, the rigid structure of the UK’s formal education system continued to pervade interviewees’ (non)engagement with learning. For example, many people remained bounded by the cultural norm of linear progression through the formal education hierarchy with its credential milestones of school examinations, college degrees, post-graduate qualifications and so on. Far from displaying reflexive, just-in-time decision-making many of our interviewees remained driven by the dominant structures of formal educational ‘achievement’, with ITs acting only to reinforce the

'conveyor-belt' approach to progressing through the education system. Thus ITs were only capable, at best, of perpetuating a passive, phenomenological reflexivity where the individual was 'witness' rather than 'judge' of the learning choices that they made (Lash 2002).

This was especially evident with the 'e-learners' in our sample who were learning in IT centres and colleges and through 'official' websites and internet resources. Although in the reflexive modernity "planning and rationalisation in the conduct of life ... is increasingly becoming the task of individuals" (Beck-Gernsheim 1996, p.139) our data reflected a subtle appropriation of ITs by the state to plan learning for people – therefore decreasing the need for individual agency. We saw how ITs can easily become part of a restrictive re-organisation of an individual's experience of education rather than an emancipatory dis-organisation. Although authors may like to talk about the internet hastening the decoupling of education from official structures and facilitating public deliberateness and reflection over alternative choices (e.g. Slavin 2000), in reality new technologies have been appropriated by official organisations in ways which reinforce the structuring of education. For example, many people's uses of computers and the internet were located within a series of disempowering social contexts and structures (such as libraries, workplaces, homes, colleges and schools) - running counter to argument that ITs hasten reflexive modernity's "gradual freeing of agency from structure" (Quicke 1997, p.141). Only when IT use was truly individualised, truly private and truly informal did anything approaching reflexive engagement appear to be taking place. Similarly, much e-learning content could be seen as little more than an official attempt to "restore the authority of the old boundaries" of education (Beck et al. 2003, p.20) rather than stimulate new and uncertain boundaries. It was notable how official learning organisations such as the BBC and Open University dominated how many of our interviewees' experienced and imagined the internet as a learning resource - with these established institutions acting as authentic and reliable anchors in the otherwise unfamiliar and choppy seas of adult e-learning.

Although some individuals displayed signs of being self-determining, reflexively empowered non-learners our data suggest that for a sizable proportion of people one of the (side)effects of IT-based lifelong learning was a less empowered disengagement and distancing from education. It was striking how many of our interviewees expressed a profound ambivalence and ambiguity when it came to education – with technology seeming to compound their existing ennui for education rather than (re)instilling an enthusiasm. Although reflexivity is seen as a prerequisite to finding a 'foothold' in an increasingly pluralized and differentiated world, it seemed that many people had already established their 'foothold' as non-learners during their compulsory schooling - forming rigid learning identities which contact with IT in later life could do little to alter, tied up as technology was with the same structures and discourses of 'official' learning.

Thus ITs appeared to 'flatten out' any reflexivity which many individuals may have displayed away from deeper ontological judgements about learning and education and towards more immediate confirmations of selves as a 'learner' or 'non-learner'. In this way technologies such as the computer and internet could be said to act more as reminders and reinforcers of pre-set learning identities rather than a means of reflexive change and action. It was clear that for many of our interviewees ITs were merely increasing the opportunity (and propensity) for lifelong learners to continue to participate in a rather non-questioning and non-reflexive manner. Conversely, ITs were providing yet another prompt for non-learners to 'blame' themselves for continuing not to learn. Although reflexivity should be a matter of active 'self-confrontation' (Beck 1994), in many cases ITs were merely leading to a passive 'self-affirmation' of educational identities.

We would argue that the extent to which ITs contribute to the individual 'freeing' of educational engagement is linked to the general extent to which an individual tends to cede control of their actions to others - in all aspects of life not specifically education. Richard Sennett (1998) provides a useful illustration of this point when categorising people's reactions to the situation of flexible employment in terms of 'surfers' and 'drifters'. Whereas surfers accept the need for rapid change and uncertainty and adopt a contingent model of decision making and activity, Sennett describes drifters as experiencing contingency and non-continuity of life as a threat and a loss. Rather than seizing the opportunity to steer their lives through the different options available to them, these individuals therefore become "passive and mouldable objects of social restructuring" (ibid.). Surfers, on the other hand, are able to deal with non-directionality and to move of their own volition despite lacking a clear destination (Kesselring & Vogl 2004). These categories of 'drifter' and 'surfer' can act as a crude but useful means of understanding the varying degrees of active and passive (non)engagement with adult learning evident in our sample. They also illustrate the roles which new technologies play in this, with ITs acting as ready vehicles to either surf or drift through the lifelong learning landscape depending on the nature of the individual concerned.

The various labels of 'drifter' or 'surfer', 'reflexive winner' or 'reflexive loser' are indicative of the deep-rooted inequalities that appear to persist within the reflexively modern age. The stories told by interviewees contain a strong sense that the ability to be actively reflexive rather than passively reflective is unevenly distributed along the familiar 'social fault lines' of the first modernity such as socio-economic status, gender, age and educational background (Golding 2000). Although technology may well be "one of the major sources of public power in modern society" (Feenberg 1992, p.1) we have gained a glimpse of how the distribution of this power remains entwined with the social, economic, cultural and political structures of society. As Frank Webster (2002a, p.39) contends, in contemporary late-capitalistic society the kind of individually directed and conceived reflexivity which is described in popular accounts of reflexive modernisation is untenable for all but "the most privileged elites". Our own data have shown how this is manifest in a variety of ways. For example, not all of our interviewees could afford to be autonomous and self-engrossed when it came to education, learning and technology. Indeed, many individuals had more pressing concerns than deciding whether to engage with education or not. Issues of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty mean that "talk of choice in a cybernetic society to the world's majority is hollow" (Webster 2002a, p.42)

This reproductionist conclusion reflects the fact that the second reflexive modernity is as much a continuation with the first modernity as it is a clean break. As Robins and Webster (1999) observe, reflexive modernity is best seen as an intensified rather than wholly new period of reflexivity – an extension of long-term trends rather than a novel epoch. Large swathes of modern society remain rooted in the highly structured first modernity. We must be careful therefore not to over-emphasise the revolutionary nature of the reflexive modernisation thesis, which in many ways is a matter of re-structuration and re-conceptualisation of society rather than the more post-modern notion of a de-structuration. Indeed, Bruno Latour (2003) has recently contended that reflexive modernisation should more conveniently be seen as 're-modernisation'. However, there remains a tendency amongst proponents of the reflexive modernisation thesis towards a 'deep silence and refusal' of the entrenched social antagonisms which persist despite the societal changes experienced over the past three decades (Avis 2000). In this way we should be still tentatively feeling our way as to how society is being re-orientated (if at all) in the second modernity, rather than brazenly proclaiming the dawning of a radically 'new' age.

CONCLUSION

The central premise of much commentary on educational technology is that the digital age “is throwing many of our educational practices and emphases and their underlying epistemological assumptions, beliefs, concepts and substantive theories into doubt” (Lankshear & Knobel 2003, p.20). Yet our empirical exploration of the supposed reflexive potentials of new technologies such as computers and the internet points towards a less revolutionary situation. Indeed, as with most empirical explorations of the social world, we found that many people live outside of our theoretical presumptions of ‘everyday’ life. Most respondents in our study remained bounded by social circumstances and structures redolent of the first modernity, with ITs merely perpetuating the status quo. In this way we would side with Webster’s (2002b, p.56) reflection that “life today is certainly more information intensive, but this is not sufficient to justify projections that it represents a new sort of society”. At best we would concur with Beck et al.’s (2003, p.25) admission that in practice the reflexive modernity inevitably sees people being both “the prisoner of their own decisions [and] of the decisions of others” – albeit to varying degrees.

Of course, our evidence-base for this analysis is limited and more work certainly needs to be carried out on the different aspects of ITs, reflexivity and education. This paper has focused on the micro-level of the reflexively monitoring and self-monitoring subject, leaving a range of unanswered questions about the macro-level concerns of the reflexively modernised society and the meso-level concerns of the reflexive organisation. We should also remember that the reflexive modernisation thesis remains a “completely Eurocentric” analysis (Beck et al. 2003, p.7). Whether or not the patterns of IT-based learning outlined in this paper apply to other parts of the world needs to be explained.

Our main recommendation for policymakers and practitioners concerned with promoting reflexivity and technology in adult learning is largely one of caution. It would seem prudent for all those involved in developing and implementing IT-based adult learning initiatives to readjust their expectations away from widening educational participation to those groups currently not participating to improving participation with those who already do. Indeed, the uncertainty and imbalance inherent in the notion of reflexive modernity renders obsolete the idea of a full-participation learning society (as with a full-employment society). The notion of technology as a ‘technical fix’ for educational woes should be similarly discouraged. In fact retaining a faith in the innovative and transformatory ‘power’ of technology is itself an especially non-reflexive position to adopt. Instead we would urge policymakers and practitioners to concentrate their efforts on the social precedents of the inequalities which are all too apparent in reflexively modern society. If, as Lash (2003, p.55) argues, “reflexivity in the second modernity is profoundly socio-technical” in this sense we must concentrate both on the technological and the social aspects of increasing inclusion and participation in reflexive adult learning.

Above all, in attempting to engineer such social improvement it must be borne in mind that linear change is not a ready feature of reflexive modernisation, and that unintended consequences (such as social inequalities, non-participation and increased disengagement from education) will almost certainly result from any intervention. As Kesselring & Vogl (2004, p.2) conclude, “social change in the light of reflexive modernisation theory does not result from rational planning and directional optimisation”. Educators, politicians and all other stakeholders in the ‘e-learning society’ would do well to bear this limitation in mind.

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