Big Data and Learning Analytics - Promises and Challenges: Being ‘measured’ and Being ‘careful’?

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Paper: 30mins

“…there is an urgent need for wider critical reflection on the epistemological implications of Big Data and Data Analytics, a task that has barely begun despite the speed of change in the data landscape.” (Kitchin, 2014a:10)

What happens to a university when it embraces Big Data and Learning Analytics (LA)? What happens to its being and becoming? What are the consequences of being ‘measured’ using Big Data? The forecast promises and challenges in the powerfulness and politics belie their inherent complexities – ranging from the promises of improving student success with dynamic personalised student learning to Orwellian concerns of mass surveillance.

This paper draws on Barnett’s (2011a, 2011b, 2013) compelling ideas of ‘the university’ where he traces the origins and evolution of the western concept of a university from the 12th century to the 21st century based on changes in the ideological and physical conditions of the university – “… being a university is always unfinished business” (Barnett, 2011a: 86). Barnett’s (2011a; 2011b; 2013) contention is that the in the 21st century we have become “hopelessly” “impoverished” in our conceptions of the university from its western metaphysical origins of the 12th century to the 19th century moving to the research/scientific university for a few hundred years and the to the contemporary entrepreneurial and corporate forms. Barnett (2011b: 88-89) highlights that we seem limited to “extending” and “endorsing” “contemporary emerging forms of the university” in their entrepreneurial and corporate forms, so much so that the “idea of the university … has gradually shrunk” and become “closed in’. Learning Analytics also risk such limitations if it is not careful. By troubling what and how we measure (and what we don’t), Learning Analytics is provoked as a ‘wicked’ problem by drawing on transdisciplinary debates (e.g. Kitchen 2014a,b). The argument made is that Learning Analytics needs to be tempered beyond reductionist paradigms towards more open and transparent reflexive and relational paradigms in its designs, algorithms, and platforms to nuance ‘measured’ learning more carefully. Whose gaze and for what purpose need to be at the heart of our discussion of what numbers do to ‘the quantified self’ – for our identities and voicings and that of the academy matter. So let’s be measured and let’s be careful!

References

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