

e-learning in the digital age

The utility of the entrepreneurial self

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Abstract

In the article we reconstruct the logic of utility and apply this concept to contemporary e-learning discourses. One main thesis is that a concept of neoliberal utility functions as a subtextual topic which influences these discourses: Not the objectives and needs of the actors define the utility of e-learning strategies, but neoliberal logic and its narration topoi. According to this neoliberal utility, anything that fosters the skills of the learner is considered as utile. The actor who actually defines why the skills are of vital importance is replaced by the discursive topoi of the neoliberal ideal-image of an *entrepreneurial self*.

In a first step, the logic of utility will be reconstructed. Subsequently the influence of neoliberal logic on contemporary e-learning discourses is analysed via a discourse-analytical orientated approach.

Keywords e-Learning, Web 2.0, neoliberalism, entrepreneurial self, connectivism, utility.

The article discusses the neoliberal embedding of contemporary mainstream e-learning discourses.

One consequence of this embedding is that the practical demands of actors in e-learning, such as teachers and learners, vanish in a neoliberal underpinned understanding of e-learning. This understanding of e-learning defines, what is utile for contemporary e-learning.

One thesis of the article is that the logic of e-learning discourses needs a reflected premise, i.e. an argumentative starting point which represents the goals of a contemporary e-learning. With such a premise it is possible to detach e-learning discourses from its neoliberal embedding and develop an appropriate meaning of 'utile e-learning'. As digital change proceeds, learning and teaching are becoming increasingly digitalized and their characters are shifting: "it is true that the Internet and the use of ICT in distance education have changed significantly the look and feel of the learning experience" (Elloumi 2004, p. 70, *cf.* also Kergel & Heidkamp 2015). The process of digitalization is more than simply a technical issue. The new technologies facilitate new structures of learning and teaching in a dawning digital age. This has led media-educational researcher Stephen Downes to describe new digital capabilities as a social revolution: "For all this technology, what is important to recognize is that the emergence of the Web 2.0 is not a technological revolution, it is a social revolution" (Downes 2007, para. 26).

The emergence of so-called 'User Generated Content Technology' (*cf.* Lehr 2012) has placed the user in a position to become interactively involved in the internet. The ability to generate digital content enables the user to 'inscribe' themselves on the internet: He or she can easily write articles on Wikipedia, maintain a blog, or record podcasts. Thanks to the technical possibilities of the medium, users can communicate with each other instantly. Unlike earlier mass media such as television, through which the user receives a message but cannot answer it (uni-directional communication), social networks like Facebook or Google+ provide a platform for internet-based dialogues. In consequence, an increasingly user-centered internet, based on poly-directional-communication, is evolving. O'Reilly (2002) termed this poly-directional internet the 'Web 2.0'.

With the rise of the Web 2.0, the possibilities of digitally based learning, or e-learning, changed profoundly. Before its interactive potential had been developed, e-learning was – at least within the field of higher education – generally a rather passive mode of organized learning. At universities, students downloaded teaching material, such as literature, from so-called learning management systems (LMS, e.g. Moodle or Blackboard).¹ They could enrol for examinations online and had access to the course schedule. This kind of passive e-learning is still practiced. Learning Management Systems function mostly as Content Management Systems (CMS): Students receive material and information but have little opportunity to engage in collaborative learning processes within the LMS. It does not provide the interactive spaces available with Web 2.0 tools. Collaborative interaction spaces based on Web 2.0 technology include collaborative writing tools such as Google Drive, Etherpads, Padlets or Authorea. Shared writing platforms of this type make it possible to produce texts collaboratively, synchronously and asynchronously.

Technical developments have not stood still since the emergence of the Web 2.0 concept. At the time of writing, young people in Germany mostly access the internet by smartphone (*cf.* Feierabend, Plankenhorn & Rathgeb 2014) – the internet has turned into an internet ‘to go’: a mobile internet. Web 2.0 tools are increasingly accessible through smartphone applications. A mobile Web 2.0 opens new possibilities for learning in a digital world.

If a multitude of changes – from the Web 2.0 to the mobile internet – are to be negotiated successfully, e-learning must develop appropriate pedagogical concepts and strategies. In this context it is important to clarify, alongside the technical possibilities for contemporary e-learning, how contemporary e-learning can be defined theoretically.

- What should contemporary e-learning achieve?
- What are the goals of modern e-learning (beyond the truism that it should provide/mediate knowledge)?

One way of locating contemporary e-learning theoretically is to use the concept of utility as a term of reference when analysing the discourses involved.

The Logic of Utility

A logical argumentation represents the formation of a systematic relation of arguments which lead to a conclusion. Starting with a premise other arguments can be derived. This scheme can be used to develop a logical approach towards the notion 'utility':

Utility can be thought of as an intermediate concept: Something is utile when it fulfills the demands of the actors. The demands of the actors are based on their objectives. We can describe utility as when a strategy, phenomenon, circumstance etc. is judged as a means of fulfilling goal-based demands. In employing such an understanding of utility, it is of vital importance to identify the actors of e-learning, who define the goals. The following subsections set out the thesis that the practical demands of actors in e-learning, such as teachers and learners, vanish in a neoliberal understanding of the field.

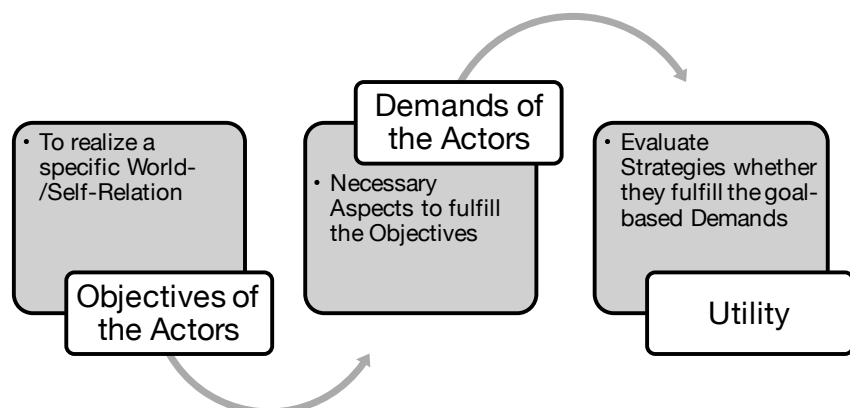


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the 'utility-logic' (own figure).

The entrepreneurial learner: neoliberal thinking in education

Originally developed in the economic field, neoliberal approaches increasingly affects other societal sectors. An essential feature of neoliberal thought is the premise that a free market, deregulated to the greatest possible extent, is the best platform for people to unfold their potential:

For neoliberals, there is one form of rationality more powerful than any other: economic rationality. Efficiency and

an `ethic´ of cost-benefit analyses are the dominant norms. All people are to act in ways that maximize their own personal benefits. Indeed, behind this position is an empirical claim that this how *all* rational actors act. Yet, rather than being a neutral description of the world of social motivation, this is actually a construction of the world around the valuative characteristics of an efficiently acquisitive class type. (Apple 2006, 60f.)

Neoliberal thinking has increasingly come to shape social policy in western countries such as the United States, Britain, and Germany. Beginning in the Ronald Reagan-era United States, a roll-back of the welfare state also occurred in Britain with the Thatcherism of the 1980s, and spread to Germany in the early years of the new century (*cf.* Biebricher 2012). Critique arose alongside the implementation of neoliberal policies. Sociologists like Bourdieu (2003) analyse the negative effects of neoliberal politics on social cohesion. Political movements like Attac and Occupy protest against the spread of neoliberal politics and thinking.

The expansion of neoliberal thought has carried it into the educational field and the specific area of e-learning in higher education: “in the neoliberal climate of the day, the emergence of for-profit university corporations and the need to ensure value in order to gain and retain public support, compels university administrators and faculty to examine the means by which value is created and retained by their institutions” (Elloumie 2004, 63). In this climate “the Internet has intensified the competition and rivalry among post-secondary institutions [e.g. universities], especially in distance education, where the pressure to enhance efficiency and effectiveness is intense” (Elloumie 2004, 70, for a critical approach *cf.* Selwyn 2014).

Neoliberal social policy and discourses draw on complementary narratives, discursive topoi of the neoliberal way of living. The sociologist Bröckling has analysed the construction of such neoliberal narratives in several works (*e.g.* 2003, 2005, 2015). He identifies the metaphor of the *entrepreneurial self* as the societal interpellation (which can be explained as a normative societal requirement towards the individual, *cf.* Althusser 1970) directed at the individual to act as a neoliberal entrepreneur. Such discursive conceptions construct the neoliberal individual. This view would hold that the

“ideal model for the future is the individual as self-provider and the entrepreneur of their own labour. The insight must be awakened; self-initiative and self-responsibility, i.e. the entrepreneurial in society, must be developed more strongly” (Bröckling 2015, xi).

A crucial point is that interpellations to act as an *entrepreneurial self* are seldom explicitly articulated. Bröckling uses the metaphor of the *entrepreneurial self* to condense a discourse, or rather discourses, which actualize the narrative topoi of neoliberal thinking across different social fields. For an example of neoliberal interpellations that discursively actualize the concept of an *entrepreneurial self*, one might refer to the neoliberal re-organization of unemployment benefit in Germany. It was legitimated with the slogan “challenge and encourage” (“Fordern und Fördern”) by then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The unemployed were to be empowered by this re-organization process to transform themselves into so-called Ich-AGs (I-incorporated). The expression Ich-AG denotes the possibility that an unemployed person could become self-employed. This example demonstrates how the ideal of the *entrepreneurial self* has been shaped discursively in German social policy.

From a methodical point of view, Bröckling’s metaphor of the *entrepreneurial self* can be used as a heuristic strategy to identify narrative topoi which actualize the concepts of neoliberal thinking. Applied to the field of e-learning and its conscious discourses, the metaphor enables us to identify the neoliberal narrative patterns which shape them.

The central findings of this analysis are summarized in advance for the sake of clarity: The analysis reveals that contemporary e-learning strategies and pedagogical approaches such as PLEs (Personal Learning Environments) actualize topoi of the *entrepreneurial self*. These approaches seem to depend on the neoliberal principle which states that the individual learner should act as an entrepreneur. This principle holds that competencies, like self-directed learning, self-organized learning, and the learner’s own self-management etc. should be fostered by appropriate e-learning strategies.

Following this logic, utile e-learning strategies are those which foster the skills of the *entrepreneurial e-learner*. This criterion of utility is not advanced explicitly, but structures the pedagogical discourse of the e-learning discipline. Viewed in this way, the concept of neoliberal utility functions as a subtextual topic which develops its im-

pace by structuring the discourse. This neoliberal conception of utility does not refer explicitly to the demands of the actors. Anything that fosters the skills of the learner is considered utile. The actor who defines why the skills are of vital importance is replaced by the discursive topoi of the *entrepreneurial self*. Not the objectives and needs of the actors define the utility of e-learning strategies, but implicitly neoliberal narration topoi. Consequently, one effect of neoliberal thinking is that the so-called *entrepreneurial self* is more or less explicitly an educational goal in e-learning. One goal of e-learning has become to cater for the development of the *entrepreneurial self*. There are aspects which signify neoliberal acting, for example efficacy and self-empowerment. These aspects are more or less explicitly considered as utile within the mainstream e-learning discourse. But which demands on the part of which actors are fulfilled by this strategy – a crucial aspect of the logic of utility – is left open. Crucial texts feeding into this analysis are sketched out below.

Personal Learning Environments – the construction of the organizational learner

The appearance of Web 2.0 tools has encouraged discussions on how the learners can organize their digital learning appropriately. Atwell (2007) introduced the concept of so-called personal learning environments. A PLE can be understood as the integrative and systematic use of Web 2.0 based applications in formal learning processes. A PLE embraces “all the different tools we use in our everyday life for learning” (Atwell 2007, 4). Atwell stresses that the pedagogical concept of the PLE changed how education is understood and envisaged: “The development and support for Personal Learning Environments would entail a radical shift, not only in how we use educational technology, but in the organisation and ethos of education” (Atwell 2007, 5). This change is increasingly focused on the (self-)organisational dimension of learning: “Indeed it may be that PLEs offer considerable potential for knowledge development and sharing and what has been called organisational learning” (Atwell 2007, 8).

The PLE concept is increasingly bringing self-organisation into the focus of educational technology discussions. Metonymically this concept articulates the relevance of the ability to organize and manage one’s own learning and, in doing so, focuses on skills such

as ‘self-organisation’ and ‘self-management’. “The idea of a Personal Learning Environment is also based on being able to aggregate different services” (Atwell 2007, 5). The utility of PLEs consists in the fostering of the autonomy of the learner, as PLEs require a high degree of independent organisation. The discourse surrounding PLEs actualizes the ideal of an autonomous learner able to organise their digital learning and aggregate different services.

Here, the ambivalence of a neoliberal re-definition of freedom becomes visible. On the one hand, there are typical narration topoi of the self-emancipation of the learner. But on the other hand, a self-emancipation of the single learner fosters the topoi of an individual which empowers itself to become a self-responsible autonomous *entrepreneurial self*.

Neoliberal freedom is a freedom of a self which acts autonomous and self-responsible. Neoliberal freedom neglects social embedment, and overemphasize aspects like self-responsibility (*cf.* Bourdieu 2016). Such a neoliberal meaning of freedom influences at least to a certain extent e-learning discourses. That is, even if authors like Downes and Attwell focus on the emancipatory aspects of learning (e.g. to empower learners to build their learning networks or extend them beyond the curriculum), they actualize with their epistemological emphasis of the single learner a neoliberal notion of freedom.

Web 2.0 – the premise of the single learner

In the PLE approach, Atwell (2007) provides a model for contemporary e-learning which integrates the “growing ubiquitous nature of internet connectivity with the development of wireless and GSM networks, as well as the spread of broadband, resulting in connectivity becoming available almost everywhere in the future” (Atwell 2007, 3). These fundamental considerations about PLEs is the ignition for ongoing discussions about the possibilities and limitations of PLEs (*cf.* Buchem, Atwell & Tur 2013).

In reference to the increasing mobility of the internet via smartphones, Atwell modifies the understanding of digital learning put forward by Downes (2005) as *e-learning 2.0*. Faced with the polydirectional and productive possibilities of the Web 2.0 (in which the user is able to generate digital content) e-learning must turn into polydirectional and productive e-learning 2.0:

The e-learning application, therefore, begins to look very much like a blogging tool. It represents one node in a web of content, connected to other nodes and content creation services used by other students. It becomes, not an institutional or corporate application, but a personal learning center, where content is reused and remixed according to the student's own needs and interests. It becomes, indeed, not a single application, but a collection of interoperating applications – an environment rather than a system. (Downes 2005, para. 33)

The concept of a 'personal learning center', prefigures Atwell's PLE model. Both approaches focus on the single learner even when the single learner connects with other learners in a learner-network. From this point of view, the learning network is still conceptualized as a connection of single learner and not as a supra-individual, collaborative learning process.

This description of learning shows no appreciation of the inter-subjective learning which unfolds in dialogical co-construction processes (cf. Gergen 2001 and Ryberg et al. 2010) based on Web 2.0-tools.

Nodes: All the single learners

Despite the potential of Web 2.0-based collaborative learning processes, the focus of both Atwell and Downes is confined to the single learner meeting other single learners in temporally limited interactions. These temporally limited encounters and interaction processes are conceptualised as 'nodes'.

The node metaphor, representing contemporary, digitally based learning, can be traced to Siemens's model of *connectivism* in learning theory. In *connectivism*, Siemens seeks to provide a theoretical learning model for the digital age:

Behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are the three broad learning theories most often utilized in the creation of instructional environments. These theories, however, were developed in a time when learning was not impacted through technology. Over the last twenty years, technology has reorganized how we live, how we

communicate, and how we learn. Learning needs and theories that describe learning principles and processes, should be reflective of underlying social environments. (Siemens 2005, 1, for a critical approach towards Siemens interpretation of learning theories *cf.* Jones 2015)

For Siemens, learning “is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources” (Siemens 2004, 5). Like Atwell and Downes, Siemens too focuses on the single learner: “The starting point of connectivism is the individual” (Siemens 2004, 6).

The epistemological starting point of the ‘single learner’ neglects the social embedding of learning. One could say that learning is a social process in which the learner unfolds himself or herself within social collaborative dynamics. From this perspective the assumption or concept of a single learner fosters the ideal-image of a self-responsible individual which is a typical topoi of neoliberal narrations.

The learning process appears to become a process of information management, not realized by a supra-individual learning community, but by a single learner in an encounter with another single learner. The learner *uses* ‘learning communities’ for his or her individual aims, without engaging in a collaborative learning effort (*cf.* Gergen 2001): “In Connectivism, learning occurs when a learner connects to a learning community and feeds information into it” (Sahin 2012, 442). In focusing on the importance of decision-making, Siemens stresses the autonomy of the learner. Connectivism therefore envisages (more or less explicitly) the learner as an autonomous actor obliged to *manage* their learning process. Unlike constructivist approaches in learning theory, which stress the interactive dimension of learning processes, connectivism interprets learning as a management process, conducted by the individual autonomous learner: “Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision” (Siemens 2004, 5).

Although Atwell, Downes, and Siemens frame their pedagogical and theoretical approaches with reference to the learner and changing technology, they actualize discursive topoi which give life to the

metaphor of the *entrepreneurial self*. Atwell, Downes, and Siemens concentrate on the fostering of skills and a learning attitude which are considered to be utile. Why they are utile, however, is not discussed. A counter-example serves to illustrate what is left open in mainstream e-learning discourses: Critical pedagogy articulates the concept of the self-determining learner who is able to emancipate themselves from repressive power relations through learning (cf. e.g. Freire 1970).

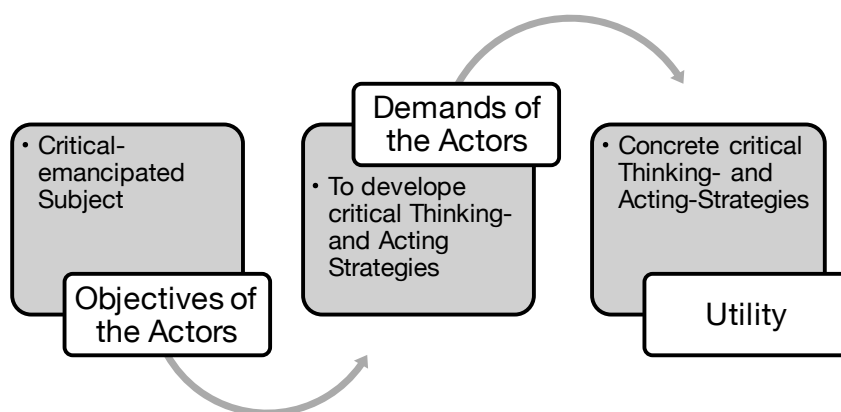


Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the 'utility-logic' of critical pedagogy (own figure).

According to the logic of utility, the educational strategies of critical pedagogy are utile for goal-based demands, i.e. for obtaining/generating emancipative strategies through education. Such a reconstruction along utilitarian lines would seem to fail for mainstream e-learning discourses. One can certainly locate utile strategies within e-learning – the fostering of skills. But the explicit conception of an actor with goal-based demands is not pursued. The actor and his objectives vanish behind a neoliberal discourse of utility. This discourse tells him – so to speak – what is utile.² The discourses of the *entrepreneurial self* make it possible to identify goal-based demands (to be autonomous, self-competent, etc.) without identifying the objectives of the actors in advance. From these (goal-based) demands, it is possible to derive or construct the *entrepreneurial self* as the actor defining the utility of e-learning strategies.

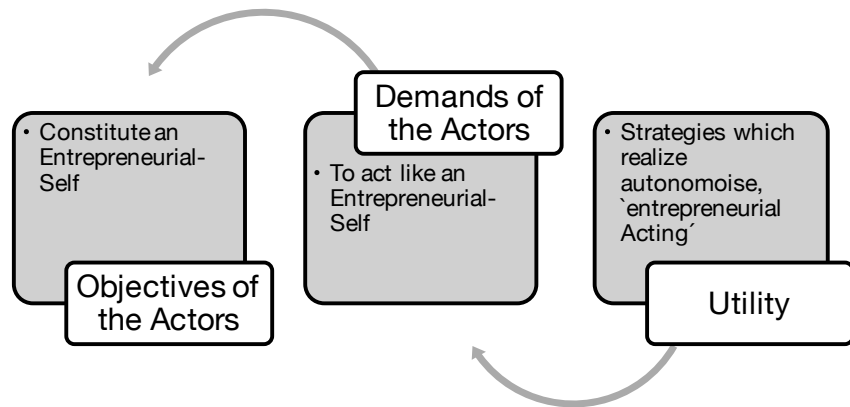


Fig. 3 Reconstruction of the `utility-logic` of contemporary e-learning discourses (own figure). Instead of starting with a premise, the discourse about e-learning only provides a conclusion. From this conclusion the premise has to be constructed.

From this perspective, topoi of the *entrepreneurial self* / neoliberal narrations can obtain the function of an educational program in the field of e-learning – but also in other educational fields such like lifelong learning (cf. Bröckling 2015).

To be an enterprising self is also an educational program. This self must especially learn to continually inspect its investments, and if necessary, to revise. To act enterprisingly does not only mean to utilize one's own resources in a cost-benefit way, but to utilize them again and again as a reaction to innovation. (Bröckling 2005, 11)

With reference to this `educational program` and its educational goals, the e-learning strategies discussed above can be analysed as utile strategies. The point of reference which determines what is utile and what is not, is located beyond the educational field, and is represented by the *entrepreneurial self* as a metaphor for neoliberal narratives. The utility of a neoliberal conception of e-learning lies in the re-production and strengthening of neoliberal tendencies in the field of (e-)education.

Outlook

In view of the issues discussed above, one could conclude that e-learning must reassure itself of its theoretical foundations. What does the ideal e-learning actor look like? To which kind of educational paradigm is e-learning committed (cf. Neumann 2005)? This brings the article full circle: in a time of increasing media change, it is for society to identify what kind of concept of human being should be point of reference and which educational strategies ought to be considered utile for which educational purposes (cf. Horster & Oelkers 2005).

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Notes

- 1 The thesis of a rather passive mode focuses on a 'mainstream e-learning' (cf. Arnold et al. 2013). Besides such a mainstream e-learning, there has always been work and discussions about the dialogical potential of e-learning, e.g. in the field of network learning. When the article traces the underlying neoliberal topoi in e-learning discourses, it is important to mention, that e-learning is not a homogeneous field. Thus there are innovative approaches towards the collaborative dimension of e-learning as well as critical research about neoliberal tendencies in e-learning, e.g. Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Jones & Lindström 2009.
- 2 But it is important to mention that besides mainstream discussions there are innovative approaches which focus on actor orientated e-learning such as network learning, cf. Jones 2015.