

Learning analytics: a noble attempt to solve problems in Higher Education

RICHARD GARRETT, Observatory of Borderless Higher Education, UK



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I think learning analytics is an attempt to try to respond to longstanding problems in education, higher education, school education. And to respond to the fact that higher education has moved rapidly from a very elite system to a mass participation system and is approaching universal participation in just a few decades. And as a result, higher education must accommodate a much wider variety of students and that is, in theory, a response to social and economic trends that demand post-secondary education for a much higher proportion of the population if they are to thrive as citizens and workers. And we have seen over the last few decades a lot of tension around who gets in and who doesn't get in, who thrives and who doesn't thrive, who graduates and who doesn't graduate, who becomes employable and a contributing citizen and who doesn't. And conventional elite higher education I would characterise as very artisan, very bottom up, very idiosyncratic. It is not the best place to accommodate mass participation. And, hence, we have this tension.

Learning analytics is an often crude but I think at times a noble attempt to say: Can technology help? Can we, through technology, through insights from technology, through better gathering and interpretation of data, can we better understand what is working and what is not working in the classroom and then can we somehow intervene? So no question that is a sort of very simple framing of a complicated problem. However, I think we have to respect the underlying problem. And simply saying – and I do not think you're saying this – but to simply say, “Look how complicated this is, look how ethically fraught this is,” the danger is we become paralysed. We can do nothing because everything is potentially problematic. I think that is just as dangerous as giving into the utopian visions of sometimes naïve learning analytics companies and gurus who think education is a simple problem to be solved and just no one until then has come around to figure this out.

Therefore, we need to occupy a middle ground. We need to respect the complexity and the ethical dangers, but we also need to remember that there are big problems to be solved and we don't want to give the impression that simply perpetuating an elite, artisan, bottom-up approach to teaching and learning is somehow okay if we just got more money from the government, or regulators just left higher education alone. That is not, I do not think, a sustainable, practical, or moral solution either. Therefore, to me learning analytics, if we view it positively, is pushing higher education to become comfortable with its mass role and responsibility. And in that sense, it is useful.

I think the responsibility then on higher education is to say, "Okay, how can we come to a hybrid solution here? How can we respect our traditions and corporate sensitivities but also acknowledge where technology can help, where data can help, and can we start to be more systematic as institutions, as faculty members, as systems, in applying teaching and learning good practice?" I mean, I would argue that the literature on teaching and learning is quite consistent and not characterised by dramatic differences of opinion. So I would say the tension in the literature is how do you apply that consistent theory and not that the theory is contested. No one really agrees on what good pedagogy is. And learning analytics to me is an attempt, however flawed, is an attempt at least to say: Can we be more systematic about what we know works, at least at a high level, accepting contextual differences, what we know works at higher education level?

In addition, from a student point of view, I think you are right that students should be concerned about who is using their data and they should have a voice. Equally, I think they rightly assume that institutions know what they are doing when it comes to teaching and learning. They are naïve as students; inevitably, they look to institutions to know what good teaching and learning is, to apply it consistently, to offer good value for money. They have a voice, they have something to say and that is often helpfully counterintuitive and refreshing. But I do think the onus is on institutions and faculty members to take their responsibility as pedagogues, if I can use that word, seriously, rather than their teaching and learning responsibilities as secondary to their role as researchers or as experts or as administrators. I think that is the tension here and learning analytics is simply a response to that tension.

And even if we are dissatisfied with the current iteration of learning analytics, and I think no question, it is early days, we need to push. The results are limited. 2011 was not long ago, and higher education has had a lot more time to adjust to mass participation. Again, only a few decades. Not a long time in the history of higher education. But I think we need to avoid a standoff. We need to avoid the companies over here with their suspect agendas and higher education over here wishing it would all go away. We really need to occupy a middle ground and then I think, collectively, we can make some progress because I think it is about application, not so much about... You know, I think we know what the problem is, and I think we have many clues about what the solution is. We just do not seem to have the right combination of administration, management, bottom-up buy-in, institutional willingness, money. That equation seems to be what is missing. And I would like to see more attention focused on how to address that, having accepted your very valid critique about what is potentially fraught with learning analytics, but I want to see more attention on moving forward.