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The Luddite Revolt continues

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The bicentenary in 2011 of the Luddite Revolt prompts us to ask 'what would Ned Ludd think of today's automated styles of distance education?' He would no doubt echo the common criticism that educational technologies create an impersonal style of teaching and learning, and devalue the teacher. He would probably agree that online methods have major potential for millions of distance-based students who cannot attend classroom-based education and training; but he would emphasise the need for quality assurance and cost-effectiveness studies in distance education implementation. He might also ask why anyone would encourage the development of e-learning in countries where the Internet is largely inaccessible. This article uses the Luddites' views of workplace automation to explore how global distance education practices might be improved. It suggests that the intentions of the original Luddites were laudable and worthy of application in distance education today.

Keywords: Luddism; opposition to technology; quality assurance; cost-effectiveness; globalised education; appropriate technology

The year 2011 marks the bicentenary of the Luddite Revolt, which established its probably fictitious leader, 'General' Ned Ludd, as one of the most notorious figures in social history. The Luddites were workers in the British textile industry – spinners and weavers who opposed the introduction of automated methods that they believed would ruin their livelihoods. In 1811, they famously ransacked their workplaces, destroyed the machinery, and were rapidly put down by the British army. Seventeen Luddites were hanged, and hundreds exported to Australia (Binfield, 2004). Two centuries later, their name is synonymous with opposition to technologies.

It is timely, therefore, to consider whether Luddism was just a passing phase or whether the true spirit of General Ludd still lives. Why, for example, in distance education (DE), do so many teachers resist technological innovations to this day? Not all teachers, nor all students, strive enthusiastically to embrace the latest technological approaches – social networking, for example. Are these people Luddites? And why are technologically dependent fields such as DE routinely criticised as an educational poor cousin, even though countless people would not have access to education and training without it? And why do skeptics always pick on DE for its lack of 'the personal touch,' when some of their own teachers probably lacked any recognisable personal touch, despite the benefits of being physically present?

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Today, the term Luddite is used unthinkingly, to suggest resistance to any kind of technology for any reason. As Pynchon (1984) pointed out, Luddite has become a convenient label for dismissing anyone with whom we disagree with as being 'politically reactionary and anti-capitalist'. Equally disparaging is the use of terms such as 'techie' and 'zealot' for those at the other end of the reactionary scale who suggest that technologies have educational value. This article provides a reminder that the original Luddite viewpoint was unfairly represented in history and suggests that there is a good case for true Luddism in DE today.

The Luddite Manifesto

He turned to his workmates and said: 'Death to Machines'
They tread on our future and they stamp on our dreams.

(Calvert, 1985)

Myths have circulated about the Luddite movement since its inception in 1811 in the British Midlands county of Nottinghamshire. For one thing, there probably was no General Ludd. A local weaver called Ned Ludd is alleged to have destroyed his machinery in 1779 after a disciplinary whipping by his father, his name becoming synonymous for anyone who resisted using industrial equipment thereafter. The simple motive attributed to Luddite attitudes – a fear that automated methods lead to loss of jobs – is still reflected in the scary titles of books such as *No more teachers, no more schools: The commercialization of Canada's schools* (Robertson, 1998); and Luddite-type frustration with machines lingers on in the popularity of the various man-smashes-computer videos on YouTube (kokasexton, 2007), enjoyed by millions. By the time of the Luddite revolt in 1811, however, automated spinning equipment had already been standard in Britain for two centuries (Pynchon, 1984). A new level of frustration or provocation evidently caused the Luddites to smash the tools of their trade, rather than a hatred of automation per se. To the Luddites themselves, the issues involved were sufficiently serious to compel them to raise arms against the British army.

The Luddite Manifesto (1812; reprinted by Aspinall & Smith, 1959, p. 531) certainly does not appear to have been produced by a band of hooligans, nor by the kind of hooligan group that would secure the services of a lawyer. Written in respectably obtuse legalese, it states the workers' (possibly naïve) belief that they were entitled by Royal Charter to decommission their machinery if its uses should depart from agreed principles. The Luddites' goal was to prevent the production of 'fraudulent and deceitful manufactures to the discredit and utter ruin of our trade.' With sly (though unwise) British humour, the document stated that it was issued by 'Ned Ludd's Office, Sherwood Forest', hangout of Nottingham's other fabled renegade, Robin Hood. The industrial managers and the British government were doubtless in no mood for joking, and created a similar though less sympathetic outlaw legend for the Luddites.

So what were the Luddites' grievances? They appear to have derived, in part at least, from a fear that automated methods would destroy the craftsmanship of the textile industry, the artistic skills and 'dreams' handed down to them by their forefathers. This attitude resembles modern-day suggestions that DE methods erode the artistry and personal touch of the teacher–student relationship. On this basis, it

would appear to be the critics of DE who most closely resemble Luddites today. But the Luddite Manifesto went on to explain the workers' concerns in detail, as relating to the specific ways the managers required them to use the technology, rather than being motivated by hostility to the machinery itself. These practices were clearly identified: 'print net frames making single press and frames not working by the rack […] warp frames working single yarn or two coarse hole – not working by the rack … [and] all plain silk frames not making work according to the gage' (reprinted by Aspinall & Smith, 1959, p. 531). All of these, argued the Manifesto, departed from the practices agreed by workers and management months earlier, in 1809 and 1810. This then appears to have been the immediate trigger for the workers' threatened action – the fact that their 'collective agreements' were being ignored.

But the Manifesto went still further, indicating the need for formal quality control measures. Automated methods not quality-assured ('frames not marking the work according to quality') should be discontinued, the Luddites stated, and the quality of the textile products should be related specifically to their costs. It was not the machinery that the Luddites opposed, but the fact that the textile bosses were abandoning fixed prices and raising their charges for the goods produced (Thompson, 1963). The Manifesto demanded adherence to 'the regular prices heretofore agreed to (by) the masters and the workmen' and for their wages to be paid 'in the current coin of the realm' – reasonable positions for workers to take. As the Industrial Revolution gathered speed, however, the government of King George III was more anxious to side with the new industrialists by sending a decisive message to any workers who might oppose their methods (Thomas, 2009). The authorities reacted to the Luddite grievances as follows (the capitals are theirs):

> Whereas EVIL-MINDED PERSONS have assembled together in a riotous manner, and DESTROYED a NUMBER of FRAMES, in different Parts of the Country…any person who will impeach his Accomplices shall, upon CONVICTION, receive (a 50-guinea) Reward, and every Effort made to procure his Pardon. (cited by Tomczak, n.d.)

To quell the angry Luddites, an army of 12,000 British troops was dispatched to the industrial Midlands and North of England – twice as many as were sent to Europe to defeat Napoleon; and the term Luddite was distorted into a label of 'contempt and abuse that has lasted all the way to (the) 21st century' (Thomas, 2009).

Luddites then and now

When academics discuss in their articles and conference presentations the need for quality control in educational practice, and for the tools and pedagogies of DE to be subject to careful evaluation, we are more likely to applaud them than to dismiss them as unthinking barbarians. Yet the suggestion that educational policy and practice should be justified via cost-effectiveness principles is completely consistent with the demands of the Luddites, obfuscated for 200 years by a political smear. If it were demonstrated that today's practitioners are fighting for DE 'best practices' with the passion shown by the textile workers of 1811, the term Luddite would be highly applicable to them, and a label of honour. To identify the real Luddites of today, questions should be asked about current DE practices.

(1) Have evaluation studies yielded guidelines for quality in distance education?

Countless evaluative studies have been published over the last 40 years, pointing to the strengths and weaknesses of educational media practices (Liu, Johnson, Maddux, & Henderson, 2001). Today's DE journals regularly report cost-effectiveness comparisons between software products and their uses; and since 2002 an average of two papers per issue on this topic have been published by one DE journal alone, the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl). A recent theme in this literature has been the pros and cons of learning management systems (LMS), and the relative inflexibility yet costliness of commercial LMS products (Morningstar, Schubert, & Thibeault, 2004). For a while, LMS products such as WebCT and Blackboard flourished in online education, their annual licenses renewed with or without the benefit of evaluative evidence at the institutional level. At the writer's DE institution, the need for an evidence-based decision was addressed in 2006 by advocates of open-source software, who mounted a persuasive campaign that led to the replacement of WebCT by Moodle as the University's standard course delivery system. The faculty members behind this campaign were – according to the current, more enlightened view of Luddism – true Luddites. They argued that the costs of teaching should be reduced by the abandonment of unnecessarily expensive delivery systems in favour of more cost-effective ones and presented detailed comparisons of licensing and infrastructure costs relating to their case. Similar concerns are raised by online students, when asked to bear the extra cost of printing online course materials! Such evaluations indeed produce evidence for quality control in DE, and those who report them are Luddites in the true and un-smeared sense of the word.

(2) Do decisions to implement less costly educational media lead to greater effectiveness?

The current trend towards open-source software and freeware in DE has created new ways for teachers to create and update their online course materials, and to augment them with quizzes, blogs, wikis, tweets, and e-portfolio tools, for example (Mishra, 2010). These developments are not without problems, however. Moodle, the open-source LMS, enthusiastically embraced as the latest best thing four years ago, is already becoming increasingly inaccessible in the hands of designers who do not appreciate the need to maintain its accessibility over low-bandwidth connections (Baggaley & Batpurev, 2007). The current use of social networking software and graphic environments in online education also creates accessibility problems, and raises questions as to the pedagogical justification for 'virtual learning environment' activities. Cheal (2009), for example, reports that students who are concerned about the learning efficiency of their work express frustration at being asked to conduct 'virtual world' activities that seem to them to be mere play; and McKee (2010) has written about the constant 'moving technological target' that online teachers and students are expected to handle. Such dissatisfaction and loss of interest have been described by Garber (2004) as reasons for the constant decline and cessation of online communities; and Hughes (2010) indicates that the need for attention to pedagogical validity and assessment is as central in the adoption of the new educational media as at any time previously.

So the answer to the question of whether cheaper means better is 'sometimes'. Technologies are used well and used poorly in education regardless of their cost, and

their effects tend to be unpredictable – hence the need for the cost-effectiveness of educational delivery to be constantly monitored and optimised. This key Luddite principle has remained unchanged over the years. In developing countries it should be implemented as a matter of high priority, so that the interests of students and teachers are not ignored in the new, Internet-based revolution.

Conclusion

Ned Ludd, were he alive to pursue his workers' crusade today, would not be hostile to the use of technology itself. He would probably be interested to learn how far educational technologies have advanced in 200 years, and of their potential for the millions of workers who can obtain training only by DE. Ludd would no doubt be critical of the adoption of new technologies in educational situations where they have little hope of being widely used (a not unreasonable position); for example, web-based education in countries where the Internet is largely unavailable; and mobile learning using 3G and 4G cellphones in countries where the students cannot afford them. He would certainly maintain his nineteenth-century emphasis on the need for evaluation and quality assurance in the automated workplace, and he would probably observe that no one educational technology is appropriate globally. Radio and TV, Ludd would suggest, should be preserved like the nineteenth-century frame knitting machines, as major engines of training and progress in developing nations, rather than being abandoned in the hope that Internet infrastructures will soon replace them.

Lasar (2009) has suggested that times have changed since the Luddites' day:

> Let's be grateful that we live in a more open society where we can debate labor and technology problems via peaceful and democratic means, and remember General Ludd's Army as the product of a time when others couldn't do the same.

The test of this argument is whether new workplace practices could be implemented today with the disregard for the workers demonstrated by industry and government in 1811. At that time, the governing priority was to bring society into the Industrial Revolution. Today, the priority is to create the Internet-based industrial revolution. If this process is managed without marginalising the poorer citizens who lack Internet access, it will indeed be arguable that society has become more peaceful and democratic over two centuries. If educational institutions are urged to shift their attention exclusively towards online education, however, and away from media that do reach the students, the ruling attitudes of 1811 will be seen to be unchanged.

Could a Luddite Revolt occur again? The global media present regular examples of the violence that erupts when communities feel neglected and marginalised. It is not impossible to imagine angry citizens laying waste to Internet kiosks in countries where the poor still live in the mud; or robbing tourists of their cellphones so that local people can use them instead; or developing open-source materials to break the monopoly of commercial vendors. After all, as hinted in their ballads, the Luddites aspired to the reputation of Nottingham's other hero, Robin Hood, whose practice of robbing the rich to pay the poor has been a tactic throughout the ages.

> Chant no more your old rhymes about bold Robin Hood –
> His Feats I but little admire.
> I will sing the Achievements of General Ludd,
> Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire.

Brave Ludd was to measures of violence unused
Till his sufferings became so severe
That at last to defend his own Interest he rous'd
And for the great work did prepare.
('General Ludd's Triumph', cited by Thompson, 1963, p. 534)

Acknowledgements

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