

## **E-Learning and Public Value**

**Nigel Ecclesfield and Fred Garnett, BECTA**

### **Abstract**

Taking as its starting point the Grigg and Mager's paper "Public value and Learning and Skills" (2005), the present paper seeks to explore the articulation of the concept of public value in the context of post compulsory education in the United Kingdom. Where Grigg and Mager and other authors focus on the provider's role in developing public value through its activities, this paper looks at alternative articulations of the concept of public value to develop an outline of the contribution learners can make to public value through the media of ICT and e-learning.

Drawing on previous work such as that of Garnett and O'Bierne (2005) and the perspectives of constructionist approaches in poverty and community studies, the potential role of ICT and e-learning in helping learners to create and record public value is outlined. A short outline of the development of this work, beyond this paper, is given.

**Keywords:** e-learning, ICT, post compulsory education, public value

### **Context**

In November 2005 the LSDA, now the Learning and Skills Network <sup>1</sup>, published a short stimulus paper authored by Peter Grigg and Caroline Mager entitled "Public Value and Learning and Skills" (2005). This paper gives a brief overview of the concept Public Value and its possible use in the learning and skills sector, where a focus on "outcomes" was failing to capture the contribution of providers in the sector to their communities and wider national priorities such as inclusion.

At e-Lit 2005 Ronan O'Bierne from Bradford Libraries and Fred Garnett, in their paper "E-literacy and Andragogy? A view through the Community content lens" (2005) looked at ways in which socially and digitally excluded individuals and groups learned in Community Learning contexts with ICT, how content could be developed for use by these learners and a potential metadata framework to tag this content for future retrieval. The work described in this paper, could, at one level, be seen as an exemplar of what Grigg and Mager define as public value – i.e. the contribution made by public services to economic, social and environmental well-being that is wider than that which is normally measured through performance targets.

The present paper seeks to explore how communication technologies and e-learning can develop and sustain services that provide “public value” defined by Grigg and Mager. This definition will be set in the context of subsequent discussions on quality in the learning and skills sector occasioned by the operation of the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA)<sup>2</sup> in England and the consultation of the key statement of principles and operations in the Quality Improvement Strategy (QIS), which will result in the publication of a national strategy for quality in the learning and skills sector in April 2007.

Both authors work for Becta (British Education, Communications and Technology Agency) and are currently engaged in work to develop tools for use in the learning and skills sector to enable organisations to review and enhance their use of ICT to support learning, teaching and organisational development.

## **Introduction**

Since the publication of Mark Moore’s work on public value from a North American perspective (1995), government and other agencies in the United Kingdom, have responded to the concept through a range of publications which explore how public value can be used as a performance indicator for public services. Moore argues that public sector managers ‘must produce something whose benefits to specific clients outweigh the costs of production; and they must do so in a way that assures citizens and their representatives that something of value has been produced’ (quoted in Grigg and Mager 2005 p8).

In its journey across the Atlantic there has been a clear shift in the way in which the concept has been considered by the Cabinet Office, the Work Foundation and others, who seek to locate the idea in the context of government reform of public services and the need to identify the value created for citizens by government. Kelly (2002) definition of public value as referring “to the value created by government through services, laws, regulation and other actions’, has been influential and has been used to address the perception that despite many initiatives taken by Government since 1997, the electorate’s views on the value of public services has not improved. In outlining the range of positions taken, Grigg and Mager (2005) argue that the concept is a valuable one and should not be seen to be as a means of dealing with short-term political problems, but as an opportunity to explore and promote;

1. The contribution of the learning and skills sector to wider government priorities such as social and community cohesion, equality and inclusivity, neighbourhood renewal and economic prosperity.
2. A more compelling story about the learning and skills sector that could raise its profile across government and with the wider public; and
3. A richer dialogue about the longer term and sustainable development of the learning and skills sector as a public service.

While Grigg and Mager describe the perspectives that might be developed through the use of this concept, they call for the sector to develop its own

responses using these ideas and contribute to the development of the thinking that will influence the formulation of the Quality Improvement Strategy. (From October 2006 the QIS will be known as the “Improvement Strategy”).

The same period that public value has been developed as a concept and measure of performance, has seen the publication of the Government’s E-Learning Strategy “Harnessing Technology” with its clear actions for “the post-16 sector” drawn from the system priorities;

1. An integrated online information service for all citizens
2. Integrated online personal support for children and learners
3. A collaborative approach to personalised learning activities
4. A good quality training and support package for ICT, for practitioners
5. A leadership and development package for organisational capability in ICT

These priorities can be seen as addressing the requirements of public value as outlined by Grigg and Major. They also point to the critical importance of e-learning and communications technologies in supporting the 5 Year Strategy’s<sup>3</sup> principal requirements for personalisation of learning and flexibility in provision to meet the actions set out for the “Post-16 Sector” in “Harnessing Technology”. To meet these requirements, however, a more active, involving conception of public value may be needed: one that has a more developed view of learners as both contributors to and beneficiaries of education.

One development of the public value model has been “Capturing cultural value”, John Holden’s (2004) paper for the UK think tank Demos which proposes a model that;

1. recognises that professional judgement must extend beyond evidence-based decision-making
2. sees the source of legitimacy for public funding as being the public itself rather than government
3. overturns the concept of centrally driven, top-down delivery and replaces it with systemic, grass roots value creation.

By replacing the words “culture” and “cultural” with “education” and “educational provision” an active sense of education and the role of learners emerges, and this will be worth more detailed consideration than can be given in this paper, although the authors will be using wikis as public forums to explore the issue in detail.

The model

1. recognises the **affective** elements of cultural experience, practice and identity, as well as the full range of quantifiable economic and numerical data;
2. locates the value of culture partly in the subjective experience of participants and citizens

3. seeks a forward-looking model for assessing the **broad public value** (or loss of value) that can result from the decisions both of publicly funded organisations and funding bodies
4. adopts unchanging **public goods** such as equity and fairness, enhancing trust in the public realm, health and prosperity, as long-term objectives, thereby creating a context where more specific goals such as social inclusion and diversity can be more easily understood
5. promotes a **'strong' culture**, confident in its own worth, instead of a 'weak' culture dedicated to the production of ancillary benefits.

In an analysis that shares similar views to Holden, the work described by O'Beirne and Garnett (2005) identifies the shift needed for education to meet the needs of learners and generate public value as being to;

- "prioritise context over content (e.g. too much emphasis is currently placed on 'content' rather than the group and community dynamics that are needed to exploit and use this content.)
- Learner moves to the centre of the process
- Learning activity becomes the focus of learning
- Collaborative learning prevails
- Constructivism challenges Instructivism"

This approach also shares similar attitudes to emerging constructionist perspectives in community and poverty studies that recognise how much more individuals and communities contribute to learning, development and safety in their surroundings than has been recognised by many authorities and how, with access to communication and learning tools, they can help to change and focus services to meet real rather than perceived needs through collaborative actions and learning – see Quinn, Snowling and Denicolo (2003), Loader and Keeble (2004), Pilling, Barrett and Floyd (2004), Seaman et al (2005) and Harford (2006).

Emerging from these discussions and the work being carried out by Becta and its partners on e-learning and communication technology, is an awareness of the outcomes of learning using technology. These are creating benefits that go beyond the participating individuals and their closest relationships, and are being used to develop, monitor and revise services for their communities. Examples known to the authors include community advocacy, services for the housebound, cascading learning e.g. transmission/sharing of digital skills and recovery of community history emerging from seemingly disparate learning activities.

It is clear from this that the technology can both identify and sustain the creation and recognition of public value defined as both the benefits for the public of public services, and a view of public value as also being the benefits of learning participation for communities and groups beyond the participant's immediate circle of relationships. It is a view that recognises that learners can create collaborative contexts for learning, contribute and create content for that learning and to community resources.

In the consultations around the Improvement Strategy, the concept of public value can, potentially play an important role to balance the overemphasis on current performance indicators in planning and financial allocation that are seen as restricting recognition of the full range of value for communities and national agendas by providers of further, adult and community education. The role of e-learning and digital technologies in this process would appear to be;

- Creating contexts and environments for learning;
- Recording and storing the outputs of educational activity/learning;
- Supporting and sustaining collaboration;
- Offering a variety of modes of participation in learning;
- Transmitting outcomes; and
- Supporting active evaluation going beyond satisfaction surveys described in the FE White Paper, the Government's most recent articulation of its policies for the learning and skills sector<sup>4</sup>.

If this potential can be realised, the broader case for providers in establishing their value at local, regional and national levels can be made, especially for those programmes that are difficult to justify using the current performance indicators employed by funding bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council<sup>5</sup>.

We hope, through this paper, to stimulate discussion about the concept of public value and the way in which digital technologies and e-learning approaches can help identify public value in educational activities. The concept as described by Grigg and Mager tends to focus on the provider, as might be expected, but we feel that a wider view incorporating perspectives derived from Holden's paper and those described by O'Beirne and Garnett which shift the focus to learners and community outcomes provide a focus on public value that recognises what learners bring to their learning and take out into their social environments.

As a result of presenting the earlier version of this paper at e-Lit 2006, the authors, Becta<sup>6</sup> staff, have set up a public value and digital literacy wiki at <http://publicvalue.pbwiki.com> to further explore the ideas presented here. Any readers who wish to participate in the discussions are welcome to contact the authors for password access. Other work around related issues e.g. poverty, community and public value can be found by accessing the links at the public value wiki. We are happy to link to related discussions and public forums and will seek to make our work and collaboration public for the future.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge our gratitude to the organisers of e-Lit 2006 and colleagues for their comments and encouragement. The gains in clarity are due to the discussions and suggestions we have received, any remaining inconsistencies and lack of clarity are down to ourselves.

## References

Grigg P and Mager C (2005). Public Value and Learning and Skills: a stimulus paper. LSDA

Harford I (2006). Digital nations in the making. NIACE

Holden J (2004). Capturing cultural value: How culture has become a tool of government policy. Demos

James A and Prout A (1997). Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Routledge Falmer

Kelly G, Mulgan G, Muers S (2002). Creating public value: an analytical framework for public service reform. Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office. At [www.strategy.gov.uk/files/pdf/public\\_value2.pdf](http://www.strategy.gov.uk/files/pdf/public_value2.pdf)

Loader B and Keeble I (2004). Challenging the digital divide? A review of online community support. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Moore MH (1995). Creating public value: strategic management in government. Harvard University Press.

O'Bierne R and Garnett F (2005). E-literacy and Andragogy? A view through the community content lens. e-Lit 2005 Proceedings

Pilling D, Barrett P and Floyd M (2004). Disabled people and the Internet: Experiences, barriers and opportunities. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Quinn A, Snowling and Denicolo (2003). Older people's perspectives: Devising information, advice and advocacy services. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Seaman P et al (2005). Parenting and children's resilience in disadvantaged communities. National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

## Notes

1. The Learning and Skills Network provides training, consultancy and conducts research on topics of concern to the learning and skills sector in England, publishing guidance documents and maintaining web sites for use by managers and practitioners.
2. The Quality Improvement Agency is responsible for improving the quality of provision within the learning and skills sector in England, providing a strategy and interventions to assist individual organisations and sectoral bodies e.g. through the provision of consultancy, identifying and disseminating good practice.

3. The Department for Education and Skills published its “Five Year Strategy for Education” in 2004, which provides the overall direction for subsequent policies and the integration of strategy across all educational sectors. Regular reviews of the progress of the strategy are undertaken, the most recent being published in September 2006.
4. The FE White Paper provides a policy framework for the learning and skills sector, which will be renamed as the “Further Education Sector” putting all providers in this sector on a similar basis for funding and review. This paper was published in April 2006.
5. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is responsible for allocation of Government funding for post-compulsory education, with the exception of higher education. The funding covers schools, further education colleges, work-based learning providers and other agencies. The LSC is developing its own quality framework called “Framework for Excellence” which will be developed alongside the QIA’s Improvement Strategy, but with a focus on organisational capacity in the context of delivery of programmes.
6. Becta (the British Education, Communications and Technology Agency) is charged with delivering the governments E-strategy and improving the use of ICT and e-learning across all educational sectors in the UK.