

*Need for a robust debate around the ethics of Learning
Analytics*

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The past few years have shown how online learning in its various iterations has featured prominently in Education delivery, alongside traditional face-to-face education. 2020 marked a watershed with remote learning earning its place in Education with educational institutions globally being forced to operate in online mode, due to Covid19 induced shutdowns (Vogels, 2020). The unfolding remote education reality has brought with it both opportunities and challenges. On the back of remote learning, Learning Analytics (LA) has been received a massive boost for monitoring learner behaviour in an online learning. LA coupled with widespread remote learning has made such monitoring possible at a scale not seen before. There is, for now, little debate over the supposition that application of LA allows educators to plan timely and targeted educational interventions based on learner habits. This can only be done effectively by monitoring and collecting learner data consistently for a specific time period, which LA apps are designed to do (Bach, 2010). This paper does not delve into the debate over efficacy of LA as a tool for adjusting teaching and learning interventions. The emphasis is on ethicality of deploying LA and whether it may hold unconscious bias. This is an area deserving greater attention in contemporary academic discussions, given the rising prominence of LA.

Learning analytics as a subcategory of broader set of use of learner data has been labelled as a “structuring device informed by current beliefs about what counts as knowledge and learning, coloured by assumptions about race/gender/class/capital/literacy”. (Princloo 2014). Competing definitions and characterizations of Learning Analytics do exist, but there no prevailing one. Defining Learning Analytics could itself be an area of contestation, depending on the how and to what end such a definition will be utilized for.

Going by Princloo’s definition, what is implicit is that biases can creep up in how data

is ‘sliced’ and ‘diced’, how raw data is transformed and processed using various filters and criteria on what to ignore and what to emphasize.

The varied skill sets of data professionals also impacts assumptions that underlie data collection, use, and processing. This is because data does not exist independent of contexts and a lack of contextual knowledge can open the gates for assumptions about race, gender, class to embed themselves in data analysis.

Working towards creating and implementing a code of ethics to promote responsible deployment of learning analytics may be a step towards curtailing if not eliminating assumptions about race, gender and class in collection, use and analysis of learning analytics data as well as in the design and deployment of learning analytics tools (Princloo 2014). The process of sensitization must start by awareness of the existence of such assumptions and how they can permeate data collection, data analysis and data usage.

Other than embedded biases and their ramifications, ethics of Learning Analytics is also shaped by concerns over privacy. There are significant benefits of tracking learner data, but concerns about privacy, unsolicited messages are real, albeit not talked about very broadly, geographically speaking.

The issue of Privacy as a concern for learners who were part of the study conducted by Ifenthaler (2017) raises interesting questions about attitudes of learners towards Learning Analytics (LA). The finding that only two respondents in the study indicated that they did not want to use learning analytics systems due to privacy concerns raises the question of whether the overwhelming majority of respondents did not think privacy was a concern or were simply not aware of the possibility that their privacy may be encroached upon.

There is, for now, little debate over the supposition that application of LA allows educators to plan timely and targeted educational interventions based on learner habits. This can only be done effectively by monitoring and collecting learner data consistently for a specific time-period, which LA systems are designed to do. Educators in several countries have raised concerns about ethicality of use learner data mined by LA systems. In Canada, for instance, there is some hesitancy over potential misuse of learner data of learners from underrepresented groups, which may be labelled for lack of participation (Nkabinde, 2017)

On the other hand, proponents of LA argue that most learners are readily offering much more sensitive personal data to internet service providers such as Google, Facebook and the like, so they have little reason to object in sharing data on learning habits with educators and institutions, which support learning.

Use of LA and the data collected on learner habits opens another site for contestation between advocates of user privacy and those who are pushing for greater use of LA in the domain of education and training. This contest needs more voices, those of users which in-

cludes, learners, trainers and institutional actors. The lack of robust debate at a time when LA is scaling up on the back of widespread online learning should be a cause for concern.

The time is ripe for initiating the process of wide scale sensitization to ethical quandaries relating to bias and privacy in implementing LA. This can begin by building awareness of the existence of embedded assumptions which permeate data collection, data analysis and data usage as highlighted in this paper.

References

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