

## Google for Education as a Learning Management System, Do the Benefits Outweigh the Ethical Concerns?

Nathalie Lossec

Nicholas Millar

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Tampere, Finland

[nathalie.lossec@outlook.com](mailto:nathalie.lossec@outlook.com)

[nickmillar1@outlook.com](mailto:nickmillar1@outlook.com)

**Abstract:** Educational technology companies hailed themselves as saviors during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Private Learning Management Systems (LMSs) like Google for Education or Microsoft Teams for Education saw their user base grow exponentially thanks to the open endorsement from governments worldwide. The governmental decision in response to an unpreparedness to a full pivot to online learning enabled Edtech services to launch fast implementation to facilitate learning during this period. Google for Education rose to the challenge and has regularly updated their tools to entrench their position. A rushed and incautious implementation of a private LMSs can be seen as naive and short-sighted, given Alphabet Inc.'s track record on unethical considerations regarding data privacy. In this paper, the rise of Google for Education as a solution to online learning is reviewed by two teachers and end-users with a holistic view of the prospective privacy issues. Furthermore, the benefits and concerns regarding the incautious adoption of EdTech tools provided by companies with questionable ethical records are discussed.

### Introduction

In 2008 the first cloud based LMS, Eucalyptus, was created (Sharma, 2015) and since then the implementation of private LMSs in Education has grown exponentially. The pandemic catalyzed this increase of users as governments around the world looked for solutions to facilitate remote learning. For instance, Italy moved their entire school system online thanks to GSuite for Education (GSfE) (Bergen & De Vynck, 2020). In primary and secondary schools in England the market is divided between two major providers, Microsoft Teams for Education and GSfE, and both platforms were endorsed throughout the first lockdown in March by the current government (GOV.UK, 2020) as a response to the pivot to online learning. The initial results of this short-term initiative were positive, and the majority of students were provided with satisfactory online lessons with both providers developing further tools following the analysis of data collected and user feedback. Yet, questions arise regarding the ethical use of private LMSs, regarding their data practices, policy wording, reputations and possible opaque capitalistic agendas. Within the next three years, schools are set to double their spending on Edtech, Pearson Education for example, experienced 14% year-on-year growth in its online division in the

first nine months of 2020 (Lam, 2020). Focusing on GSfE, its policies and our experience as platform users, in this paper we, secondary teachers but also primary users, will look at the benefits of the adoption of a private LMSs, and also the aforementioned ethical concerns these adoptions raise.

### **The Benefits**

#### **Online learning solution during Covid**

One of the major benefits of Google for Education is the accessibility of the online learning platform provided. It is simple to set up and as they note it enables “easier collaboration, centralized organization and streamlined processes” (Google, n.d.-a). The platformization of schools is relatively fast and can be done in only eight steps. There is specialist help on hand and schools are given two options regarding the kind of set up they need, either a basic free version, ‘Gsuite for Education’ or the upgraded monthly paid version, ‘Gsuite Enterprise for Education’. The main differences between the two, beside price, is some extra cloud security and increased control of the tool for the school.

#### **Ease of use for stakeholders**

The beauty of private LMSs is simplicity. Once implemented, users can access every tool at the click of a button. Teachers, like us, feel a personal ownership of our accounts and the understanding of all Google Classroom possibilities is now becoming comprehensive teacher-knowledge given the comprehensiveness of the platform’s adoption. The need for school inset training on using this wide range of tools is thus obviously necessary. Google provides teachers with online training sessions through its Teacher Centre page (Google, n.d.-d) and also has a partnership providing lessons created by the Google for Education Community with TES in England. An interesting benefit is the equity and access this tool provides for students as it works theoretically on any device. Furthermore, our students like the stream layout as it is akin to Facebook and Google Calendar provides a great organizational tool, especially for due dates on assignments and live lesson meetings. The communication between students and teachers is alleviated as comments under each post can be either private or public and are notified by email too.

#### **Centralized data**

GSfE, especially Enterprise mode, associates itself with data security, claiming to be a safe tool for school use. Schools use datafication for coercion and confirmation and generate a huge amount of data, which results in storage issues. GSfE is an LMS that stores all its data on Clouds, meaning various schools’ data is stored in various data centers in various locations, on possibly different continents. The data stored in data centers for the LMS is run externally, thus, the need for IT technicians in school is minimized resulting in savings in school budgets. Finally, clouds enable mobility and accessibility for students/teachers working from home or at school, which were essential during the first pivot to online learning.

## **The Issues**

Regardless of many benefits, GSfE raises concerns of a serious ethical nature. These concerns are founded in a lack of transparency regarding the use of educational data collected and stored (Perrotta et al., 2020). Google has invested so much money into Edtech tools and to offer its basic GSfE services for free, one must be wary of underlying incentives. For a company with such an imperfect reputation (Bartz, 2020; Burdon and McKillop, 2014; Lomas, 2017), one must question the motivations of these investments. After all, “there is no such thing as a free lunch” (Heinlein, 1966/1997, pp. 8–9).

## **Collection and use of data**

The promotion of private LMS platforms by the British government (GOV.UK, 2020) exemplifies the utilitarian philosophy of providing “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Bentham & Montague, 1891) in order to facilitate the comparatively inflexible dictatorial curriculum of English schools. For instance, when one directly compares the pre-pandemic educational structures of Finland and England, one will note that the utilitarian platformization of education during the pandemic suited the English Department for Education objectives. If we compare schools and teachers in Finland who are much more autonomous in many respects and much less surveilled, one can hypothesize, the intent of platformization in the United Kingdom was to enable mass access to education but also to avoid any possible disruptions to the national standardized curriculum and testing, which thusly would enable school league tables and Ofsted appraisals to continue. Additionally, it allows for privatized assessment companies to continue charging entry and accreditation fees. Additionally, this implementation lacked proper professional development for teachers, and did not adequately inform children and parents on data privacy issues.

Google must conform to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act ,COPPA, a US federal law on the collection of children’s data. Google is also “committed to GDPR compliance across Gsuite for Education” (Google, n.d.-c), however, their privacy policies lack transparency in regards to data privacy. The latest Google data privacy breach resulted in a €134,000,000 GDPR fine this December (Ray, 2020) and yet schools in England are being advised to use their tools for online learning and teaching. Google clearly specifies in policy documentation that data profiling and tracking will take place on the Additional Services like YouTube in order to “to provide, maintain, protect and improve them, and to develop new ones” (Google, n.d.-b). Google ensures that data collected from users within primary and secondary schools from ‘Core services’ (Gmail, Docs etc.) and other Google services will not be used for targeted advertising “...while using a Google Workspace for Education account”. When this is compounded with other wording in the policy stating that “We may combine personal information [device information, phone numbers, log information, GPS, IP address, cookies etc.] from one service with information, including personal information, from other Google services” (Google Workspace for Education, n.d.) this begs the question whether or not Google is

using combined information collected through Workspace for Education and information in users' personal Google accounts for targeted advertising while users are logged out of their Google for Education accounts. Additionally, with the implementation of Google Education from primary school to secondary schools (and possibly at university level too), it is reasonable to ask what will happen to the structured and unstructured data collected when a student leaves the platform permanently as policy wording on this is weak at best (Google Workspace for Education, n.d.). There is a clear power imbalance between the way the data is used by schools and Google's practices. Unlike schools, many of Google's data privacy protections cease when one reaches the age of 13, which in itself raises questions why 13 year olds can't vote, drink or own weapons when they are treated as adults regarding online activity at this age.

### **One-trick pony**

During the pandemic, teachers have been and are still bombarded with offers from EdTech tools supposedly created to revolutionize teaching and learning. Yet it is recognized that teachers are resistant to EdTech tools and will only incorporate them if benefits are experienced (Howard & Mozejko, 2015). For example, contrary to Edtech's promotion of the simplification of tasks, a 2020 research project by Neil Selwyn over three Australian schools found that the increased datafication of schools resulted in increasing the workload of teachers and students through on-screen activities. Furthermore, the personalization of learning being promoted does not take into account the social aspect that teaching and learning require and results in the user being limited in his/her development (Okita, 2012). Indeed, Google classroom increasingly seems to be more about "datafication, automation, surveillance, and interoperability into digitally mediated pedagogies" as noted by Carlo Perrota et al (2020) than actual learning. GSfE through this business model claims to offer equity for all by providing easy access on any devices. Yet it disregards its users' economic backgrounds or learning abilities therefore creating a divide (Lam, 2020) by driving wealthier students and parents to throw themselves into 'shadow education' by subscribing to further tools (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). Reinforcing this fact that non educators are creating EdTech tools, their coding and algorithms are being influenced by their own experiences and values thus their platform outcomes are biased.

### **Dependency and the business model**

The EU has recently shown its frustration in regards to antitrust lawsuits involving large tech firms such as Google and Amazon for their aggressive business practices and attempts at monopolizing many different markets in Europe (Chee, 2020). The EU now seeks to limit these abuses of power with the Digital Markets Act (DMA) which will seek to deter market dominance with fines of up to 10% of annual turnover and breakups of companies.

By restricting the user to one EdTech tool like GSfE, Google makes sure to create a dependency by providing users with Google affiliated tools and by getting users to upload their resources, lessons and whole syllabi courses to their cloud, 'Google Drive'. By monopolizing the users' tools Google has created a generation of loyal Google

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certified teachers, “rather than a generation of teachers capable of flexibly using technology to navigate the biggest disruption to education in over a century” as Ainsley Harris (2020) pointed out. Worryingly this domination carries on to a Google selection in its search engine tool too, despite getting fined in 2017 and 2019 by the European Commission for unfair practices. Additionally, Google’s ethical practices are currently under scrutiny as observed by the firing of Timnit Gebru, their former AI ethics researcher (Tiku, 2020).

### Conclusion

Part of the contemporary issues we face as educators in this digital culture are those suggested by Jonas (1984), that we are forced to endorse the implementation of a utilitarian culture at school. However, this Kantian motive can be elusive as these righteous incentives can be faked and result in an unreliable perception (Froehlich, 1991, p297). Past incidents exemplifying the misuse of personal data for the purpose of ‘Surveillance Capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019) such as voter manipulation (Cambridge Analytica scandal (Confessore, 2018)), and a contemporary covert implementation of Foucault’s interpretation of the Benthamian panopticon in education (Foucault, 1977; Wintrup, 2017) has alarmed us as to the potential negative outcomes of inviting in the ‘Edtech Trojan Horse’ (Lossec et al, 2020) to our schools. The rapid adoption of a private LMS as a short-term solution has been useful, but may have serious long-term consequences if it’s implementation is not fully transparent in terms of data collection and use. Fortunately and unfortunately, we are not the only educators or researchers raising flags, as in the past year and before, there has been literature and projects based on the same worrying trend (Williamson and Hogan, 2020; Lupton and Williamson, 2017; Watters, 2020; Coates et al., 2005).

In conclusion Henry Giroux stated in an interview (França, 2019): “Education is not just about empowering people, the practice of freedom, it’s also in some ways about killing the imagination”, which when paralleled with GSfE, could be seen as killing not just the imagination but also stakeholder privacy and autonomy. Despite Google for Education being a useful tool for blended learning, it displays limitations for a full online pivot. As useful as this tool can be, serious ethical concerns exist, especially regarding data privacy and the company’s track record of deceiving users (Burdon and McKilliop, 2014), which does raise serious concerns for long-term use of these platforms within education.

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