

MySpace Is Not YourSpace: The Promise and Pitfalls of Social Computing Constructs in Distance Education

Alan R. Foley
Learning Technology Liaison
University of Wisconsin System Administration

Hal Meeks
Digital Media And Learning Space Consultant
North Carolina State University

Online social constructs such as Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, multiplayer online environments, blogs, and wikis represent forms of social computing that are wildly popular, but might seem out of place in a distance education course. There are attractive aspects of these constructs; the level of engagement of the participants, the occasional deep discussion, the mixture of forms of literacy, the simplicity of publication. These are often stated goals in formal educational environments, but examination of online coursework often shows a different picture. A goal of distance education advocates has been that distance education should be “just as good” as a “realspace” classroom, offering the same opportunities to interact and learn. Vis-à-vis these emerging online social constructs which form spontaneous pools of contributors that share affinities, we see that this is not an adequate goal: it is not good enough to be “just as good.” Rather, the goal of distance and online education should be to actually improve the state of education overall. Unfortunately, the implicit assumption within distance education has been to try to replicate the best aspects of a classroom experience, a “cyberspace” mirroring of actual classroom practices often including hierarchical and role-dependant (e.g., teacher, student, group member) organization. But when we look at a social construct such as Flickr, we something completely different: a flattened environment where anyone can contribute and share.

Social Computing and Instructional Technology in Distance Education

Social computing constructs provide an opportunity to rethink and rediscover the practice of teaching and learning in an online environment. The fields of instructional technology and design are good examples of how this opportunity can be acted upon. Most standard views of Instructional Technology are grounded in some form of “scientific” practice: behaviorism (e.g., Burton, Moore, & Magliaro, 1996), cognitivism (e.g., Wynn & Snyder, 1996), systems theories (e.g., Banathy, 1996), or constructivism (e.g., Jonassen, 1990). Traditional approaches to instructional technology are typically predicated on the principles of systematicity, replicability, and predictability (Smith & Ragan, 2004). Unfortunately, many of these models fail to consider the social and cultural aspects of technology and instructional technologists often still do not consider the broader role of technology within society. These perspectives can be limiting because they focus primarily on how to teach with technology, not on how those technologies shape the world in which we live, the ways in which we work, learn, are entertained, communicate, and form relationships. Additionally, social computing constructs provide opportunities for explorations of different forms of literacy (i.e., visual vs. textual) that extend beyond current common practices in course design and pedagogy.

Distance-learning technologies via the Internet construct (and re-construct) both the teacher and learner within particular discourses of power that often exist tacitly in particular technology forms. For example common course management systems structure interaction between teacher and learner in ways that are determined by the design and process of the technology. It is important to note that this is not a natural consequence of the integration of the Internet into education, but an artifact of the policies and practices that surround its use.

Understanding what constitutes distance education is no easy task because these tools seep into courses offered on campus and courses both for educational and administrative purposes. Techniques previously reserved for distance models are increasingly commonplace in the traditional mode of higher education and the lines between traditional and distance education begin to blur. Hybrid courses combine aspects of both; online meeting, discussion and housekeeping, and lab/studio sessions to accomplish activities that can't take place online effectively. Distance education was once focused on the physical separation between teacher and student; today it often refers to the tools by which instruction is mediated. The Internet has tremendous abilities to deliver instruction over great distances. It can also mediate the construction and re-construction of knowledge, automating and narrowing instruction (and curricula) by defining and prescribing particular pedagogic methods inscribed by specific philosophical and theoretical conceptions of teaching and learning. For example, the testing features in most course management systems (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle, and D2L) emphasize objective testing and timed performance. Additionally, while these tools do have modest image and digital media capabilities, their features pale in comparison to YouTube. The assumption is that digital media is an add-on, while students may think otherwise.

As has been noted elsewhere (see Voithofer, 2003), the guiding principals behind most online instructional design processes represent a narrow epistemological base grounded in Tylerian curricular design or linear/sequential instructional design models. Moreover analysis of instructional software have been conducted (e.g., Streibel, 1998), but these analyses have not been applied to the particular form and function of online instructional tools. While there has been research on the development of constructivist or collaborative online learning environments, these models still rely on narrowly defined constructions of technology as a pedagogically and culturally neutral "tool" (Bowers, 1988). The affordances built into course management software presuppose particular types of learning and knowing, and by virtue of their near-exclusivity, structure how online courses are constructed and conducted. It has been noted that generally within online instructional development, emphasis is placed on delivery of content at the expense of developing a social and experiential learning context (Gilroy, 2001). Bates (1995) cautioned that a directed, prescriptive model of content delivery no longer meets the changing needs of the knowledge economy workers, where communicating effectively, working in teams, analyzing information and generating new knowledge are creating complex new educational needs. Concern has been raised against creating an online instructional model that relies on assumptions and strategies derived from traditional classrooms and learning environments (e.g., Linser & Ip, 2002) but these concerns do not consider the meta-level structuring aspects of the technologies in use.

"Styles" of Learning and Teaching: The Impact of a Particular Technology

An important part of understanding technology's impact in online environments, it is instructive to look at how technology affects physical learning spaces as well. It can be argued that the use of technology in this environment has been disruptive in several ways. Edward Tufte (2003) noted that PowerPoint forces certain assumptions about content points to the inadvertent shaping of outcome. The use of PowerPoint impacts teaching directly, but is teaching and learning better or worse given its introduction into the classroom? Certainly the misuse of PowerPoint—a lack of understanding of how it can be used effectively—has led to a general distaste for the software itself. Is Powerpoint bad, or is it a fundamental misunderstanding of what the software can and cannot do? Tufte (2003) argued that people best receive visual (image and text) information, and contrasted it with the way that (most) people present visual information using PowerPoint. Tufte illustrated how presenters are often unintentionally hindered by the "cognitive style" of PowerPoint, or in other cases they apparently intentionally use this style to make what Tufte called "witless PP pitches." In both cases, the audience is generally misinformed, bored, or often both. In an elaborate deconstruction of a PowerPoint slide, Tufte illustrated how the use of PowerPoint, in the particular organizational culture of NASA, decontextualized vital data, and potentially contributed to the bureaucratic unawareness of the severity of the Space Shuttle Columbiasdamage prior

to its accident in 2003. Tufte noted, "...the popular PowerPoint templates (ready-made designs) usually weaken verbal and spatial reasoning, and almost always corrupt statistical analysis" (2003). Similarly, instructional technologies and the practices that accompany them can "miss," exclude, or preclude diverse ways of knowing and learning.

David Byrne (2003) took a slightly different approach to PowerPoint. Byrne acknowledged that the design of PowerPoint structures the way in which a user thinks about and presents information by providing a limited range of options "assuming, a priori, a specific world view." Byrne further observed that the designers and engineers of PowerPoint based their design decisions on what they felt was the most "natural and practical" (p. 4). As a person uses PowerPoint, he or she is "subtly indoctrinated into a manner of being and behaving, assuming and acting, that grows on you as you use the program" (p. 4). What makes Byrne's exploration of PowerPoint different from Tufte's is that he felt there is untapped potential within PowerPoint for emotional and philosophical exploration.

Even without a discursive look at these two different approaches to a tool such as Powerpoint, it is important to consider that both are commenting on PowerPoint's structuring of information in a visual framework. The presentation of information is through not just the literal text, but through visual representation of information as well. This point of commonality in both Byrne's and Tufte's consideration of Powerpoint illustrates tangibly that the shaping and representation of content by a piece of software (and a medium) affects outcome. The difference may lie in whether it is intentional or not.

Given the common understanding that PowerPoint is often misused, what are the expectations of a more complex tool, such as a course management system? Certainly, in the context of a more narrowly defined set of expectations, there are decided assumptions about specific roles in these types of learning environments. There is the instructor, who acts as the guide, or the enforcer of the education environment for a class. There is the student, who is expected to treat the instructor and their fellow students with respect. There is likely a way to distribute content from the instructor to the student, and a way for the student and faculty to assess the student's performance. These roles are clearly defined, and there is little fluidity between them. An instructor can't be a student, but a clever instructor could potentially let a student lead other students in a learning exercise. However, it is everyone's expectation that the instructor has the ultimate say over what is and what is not possible.

Distance education courses often have chat forums, where students are encouraged to post comments. The wish is often for spontaneity, for those brief moments of exchange where something is revealed. However, chat forums outside of a course settings tend to be much more dynamic, much more spontaneous. There are certainly still rules in place (no slander, etc.) but that is in the background of the moment. People feel free to write what they want. The hierarchy is much less formal, and as a result, users are free to contribute. This is a dilemma for education, for it is based on dynamics based on hierarchies, and in the wild and woolly world of the Internet, those hierarchies are much more fluid and dynamic.

Proximity and the Online Environment

Online social constructs are disruptive both pedagogically and conceptually. Disruption is a recurring theme in the study of the impact of the application of technology on a field. Walter Benjamin's "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" gives an example of how that impact can fundamentally change a perception of a medium. Benjamin discussed the impact that mass reproduction has had on the attitude and perception of art, but his perspective can certainly be applied to distance education, "... the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting it's reproduction" (Benjamin, 1936) . Benjamin's discussion of the "aura" surrounding an object (proximity in "realspace") can seen to have an

parallel to the integral conflict facing distance education. Based on the impact that mass reproduction of artwork has had on the art world as a whole, it seems that education will not escape without being profoundly changed by its migration to online space.

This fulfillment of a need for proximity is often perceived as missing in distance education, and explains some of the sudden interest in virtual worlds such as Second Life. Second life represents a manufactured, idealized rendering of an online space, where participants can construct online versions of themselves. There is an integral economy in Second Life, using a monetary unit called the Linden Dollar. As it is, Second Life strives for a high degree of comfort for its participants; it is overtly quite familiar in its representation of buildings, trees, people and the spatial relationships between these objects. There are no arbitrary hybrids such as part animal, part human, part machine mashups, although the digital nature of Second Life could allow that to occur. Participants can “fly” from one place to another, but that is merely an expeditious way for online inhabitants to transport themselves. Online avatars can crash, but they cannot die.

Second Life seems comfortable for educators; it fulfills a need to create the online analog of a classroom, a virtual meeting space, but devoid of Benjamin's “aura.” The company behind Second Life actively promotes its use in education, breathlessly exuding “Second Life provides an opportunity to use simulation in a safe environment to enhance experiential learning, allowing individuals to practice skills, try new ideas, and learn from their mistakes. The ability to prepare for similar real-world experiences by using Second Life as a simulation has unlimited potential!” While Second Life may have some value in education, it is important to understand that simply moving the class experience to online space can result in an imperfect translation.

Lev Manovich (2001) used the term “socialist realism” to describe in part what we experience in a world such as Second Life. It is an artificial representation, an amalgamation of the familiar (today) intermeshed with a world that is not real. These points of reference are important in order for participants to develop empathy—to actually care about what is happening on screen. Manovich described the Soviet practice of overlaying a vision of the future on the time that workers lived in, so that they in turn would not see the future as an unattainable dream, but could instead see the future all around them.

It is instructive to think of these things when we approach the online world of distance education, as there is much to be considered in the actual practice of using Second Life in education. Ultimately, like the introduction of mass production to the world of art, which disrupted how we perceive and interact with art, Second Life, while it purports to be a simulation of the “real world,” is instead something else entirely. It is not instructive to ask whether it is better or worse than world it attempts to reproduce, but it is a digital manifestation. When we attempt to enforce rule sets in this environment that reflect “how things work in the real world,” we are bound to be disappointed, for it is not the “real world.”

Conclusion

These considerations come at a time where Internet time collides with the semester, the class, the exchange between instructor and student. The world moves on. The expectation of students is for rich immediate communication, exchange, expression of complex ideas bound in multiple forms of literacy. It is inevitable that distance education, in its various guises, will continue to proliferate (and, in fact, that rate will accelerate) as universities and other educational enterprises use distance course to appeal to wide and diverse markets. Online education continues to offer a not quite fulfilled promise of not just “as good as,” but a superior educational experience. Examining and questioning will help us determine where to go next.

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Biographical Sketches

Alan Foley is the Learning Technology Liaison at the University of Wisconsin System Administration. He has the responsibility of effectively enabling and coordinating technology development efforts among the UW institutions of the assisting them to be higher education leaders nationally and internationally. Before coming to UW System, he was an assistant professor of Instructional Technology at North Carolina State University and a high school English teacher in Oklahoma. He holds a B.S. in English Education and a M.S. in Instructional Media and Curriculum Studies from Oklahoma State University and a Ph.D. in Educational Communications Technology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Address: 1654 Van Hise Hall
Madison, WI 53706

E-mail: afoley@uwsa.edu

URL: <http://alan-foley.net>

Phone: 608-265-9559

Fax: 608-265-9559

Hal Meeks is a digital media and learning space consultant for North Carolina State University. He has an undergraduate degree in Communications, specializing in video/film production. His first encounter with a computer was a 128 KB Mac that his film instructor patently ignored. He has been a co-PI on grants for mobile learning and biology digital learning objects, and as primary PI for small scale digitally

enhanced collaborative workspaces and digital self-publication systems. He is currently enrolled as a Master's student in NCSU's College of Design in the Art+Design program.

Address: Box 7109
NCSU
Raleigh, NC 27695
E-mail: hgm@unity.ncsu.edu
URL: <http://www.ncsu.edu>
Phone: 919-515-1525
Fax: 919-513-1893