

Preface

INTRODUCTION

This book addresses a need for a debate about the future of Web-based technological innovations. We have entered a new phase in the development of the Internet, one that has pushed us to rethink our understanding of the Web as both an active experience and a cultural artefact. The rise of social software and social networking has driven the transition from content-centred to people-centred activity. This shift of focus represents as much a cultural phenomenon as a technological one and has resulted in many commentators assessing the impact on our sense of identity, the meaning of community and the nature of this change.

By examining the impact of new technologies through the particular lens of education, this book says something significant not only about the future of education but also about the future of our relations with new emergent technologies. Importantly, it explores how our interactions with social software are challenging the way we manage ourselves in connected, distributed and increasingly performative spaces.

By engaging the foremost thinkers and researchers in this area to grapple with the critical aspects at the intersection of social software and education—as a shared human activity—the book provides important insights into where new social technologies and emergent behaviours are leading us.

THE ‘SOCIAL’ IN SOCIAL SOFTWARE: COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITY

Web 2.0 has moved beyond the original meaning given to the term by Tim O’ Reilly in 2005 to encompass a set of tendencies exhibited by virtual communities. The terms Web 2.0 and social software are often used together or synonymously, though Web 2.0 describes more the new ways in which the World Wide Web is used, while social software, built on Web 2.0 platforms and services, describes the universe of possible interactions between individuals and communities. The attitudes and behaviours of these communities or social groups have become as significant as the distributed technological platforms that are being exploited by increasing numbers of Internet users.

One of the major characteristics of these new practices has been a shift towards “user-generated content” where:

- Collective and collaborative information is gathered, shared, modified and redistributed in creative acts;
- Personal sites and content increasingly belong to the so called “me media” category;
- The user controls their choice of software, tools and services;
- The “collective intelligence” of users is harnessed through aggregation and large-scale cooperative activities (O’ Hear 2005).

Participants in Internet-based social networking are immersed in fragmented digital environments, and engage in acts of computer-mediated communication (Hatzipanagos 2006) through e-mail, e-mail conferencing and mobile texting, podcasting, personal publishing via blogs and Wikis, aggregation¹ and mash-ups², voice, chat, instant messaging, and videoconferencing. Social networking is productive of and exercised by virtual communities of people with common interests, and exposes articulations of identity through self-representation, performance and play.

While there is no official agreement on the definition of “social software” it broadly describes the link-up between social entities in a digital network and their interaction (Wellman et al., 2002; Shirky, 2003; Klamma et al. 2006; Prolearn report, 2006).

The term community has been expanded to include the notion of interdependency and encompasses a set of relationships that connect people and groups. Citizens become Netizens, an identity that relates them to the entire world, and moves them outside their local life and work settings.

For example, social network sites, a particular form of social software, have become integrated into the daily practice of millions of users. Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe the key features of these services as allowing individuals to:

1. Construct a public or semi public profile within a bounded system,
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Blogs, a popular tool across many learning contexts, allow individuals to keep a chronological record of their own thinking over time, facilitate critical feedback by letting readers add comments and as such they become a window on both inner and outer motivations and activities. In this manner, blogs can be interpreted in terms of social action (Miller, 1984) and become loci for identity performance, dialogic interaction, creativity and community formation.

Folksonomy or dynamic ontology production has emerged as a major dimension in the way that users have become embedded in the ordering of content on the Web and one of the cornerstones by which Web 2.0 technologies can be said to afford the harnessing of collective intelligence. This refers to the cooperative manner in which information is categorised on the Web by users. Instead of using a predetermined centralised classification system, content is navigated through context and meaning via an emergent taxonomy of user-generated tags (metadata) and categories. This activity forms the potential realisation of what Tim Berners-Lee first described as the Semantic Web.

Nadin (1997) states that the complexity and abundance of new forms of interconnectivity takes precedence today at many levels, a function for which literacy is ill prepared. Berners-Lee’s notion of the Web was based on a “read” and “write” approach. “Reading” and top down content production has dominated the first era of the Internet. Now a participatory bottom up or “read/write” approach is emerging as a dominant future trend. In parallel we can detect a movement from the classical concept of literacy to a more fluid remediation (Bolter, 2001) and diversification towards the development of a range of cognitive, cultural and social skills that need to be acquired.

SOCIAL SOFTWARE AND LEARNING

It has been a turbulent time for educators where new paradigms of user-centred behaviour have contrasted sharply with control-orientated Virtual Learning Environment platforms, placing increasing pressure on institutions and their ICT services to respond to ever widening support demands from learners. The

metaphor of the virtual campus has dictated transmissive approaches to teaching and not taken into account those collaborative interactive functions that the Web can support well, instead augmenting rather than disrupting traditional approaches in education. Our systems have remained as firmly transmissive as any other traditional form of teaching, not engaging the learner and frequently putting emphasis on content rather than dialogue and communication.

E-learning has become a devalued concept in higher education (HE) and rethinking the nature and form of technological interventions in the learning and teaching process has been spurred by changes in our relationship with social media. The rise of social software has created a space in which debates concerning fundamental educational values and beliefs are once again being aired. Students have experienced their personal lives as change—moving between communities, charting new territories, benefiting from networking and open computer mediated communication. When these learners come to tertiary education they are often forced to deal with transmissive or “didactic” approaches to education, where significant aspects of learner community behaviours are not explored or encouraged and creativity is pushed into the margins.

Embedding learning within an educational setting supported by social software does not necessarily mean that learners will become active members of a community of practice of learners. Active membership of communities of practice is a common theme in this book, yet it is still an area that needs to be critically evaluated, as has been done elsewhere for example in sociolinguistics. However the debate and critical approaches to the uses of social software that are inaugurated in this book need to be taken forward, and into other fora. The relationship of communities, social software and digital social networks is a fertile area that needs to be explored further.

What could be termed the emergence of a new “ecology of participation” will continue to blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning spaces (Downes, 2005; Warburton, 2006) and pose serious challenges to the dominant orthodoxy of hierarchical and standards-laden content delivery. One of the answers to overcome this gulf between teacher-centred versus student-centred learning, and a shift towards open content and open learning, may well lie between three related terms “literacy”, “multiliteracy” and “transliteracy” (where transliteracy refers to literacy across several media forms). Imbuing our learners with the necessary skills and competencies to manage their own learning effectively is one of the first steps towards embracing the value of openness, dialogue, ownership, and democracy.

CHARTING THE SOCIAL SOFTWARE TERRITORY

These are some of the questions and issues that this book has been drawn towards. Such has been the rapid rise of social software that there have been few complete studies that map the current landscape. We have approached this task with equal measures of enthusiasm and caution. It is the right time to categorise emergent technologies, to extract taxonomies and analyse the outputs from significant adventures in the territory of social software. We also want to explore fully the implications for user communities, and education is a fertile field for this exploration.

We have made a conscious decision to include submissions in the book that were peripheral to the initial vision we had for its structure in targeting only work that related to the “learning in HE” paradigm. However, the comments from reviewers and discussions with the editorial board convinced us we needed to be as inclusive as possible, as the implications for HE in these debates were significant. We believe that the structure and the discourse that this book puts forward emphasises the nature of these implications for the reader and articulates an appreciation of the continuum themes that impact both inside and outside the educational landscape.

The current problems we identify in the educational system are characterised by a call for diversity in response to the changing needs of learners and the transition to more informal and learner-centred spaces. This is compounded by a need for flexibility in the time and place at which learning occurs and determining learner needs depending on background knowledge, expectations and preferred methods of learning. Nowhere is the (digital) divide between social media cultures more evident than inside and out of the school where they appear as stark contradictions. Out of the classroom these social spaces are experienced as diverse, participatory and often commercialised and inside the school they are frequently defined by decontextualised skills and a lack of student motivation (Buckingham, 2003). Postman (1995) argues that the crisis derives from an underpinning failure to supply learners with transcendent, unifying narratives like those that inspired earlier generations.

Past debates on e-learning have highlighted that computer-based technologies would be *disruptive* to traditional models of education. The expectation has been that these models would not be sustainable as technological developments pervade teaching and learning and, as witnessed across many traditional industries, cause disruption to the system. However, despite ongoing developments in e-learning, these predicted changes are not yet evident. It appears that whilst mainstream education, relying traditionally on expository teaching and receptive learning as the main form of instruction, (Bueno, 2005), has been augmented by technology it has been resistant to the potential disruptive effects of technology on both (formal) learning and schooling structures. There is now evidence that this is set to change. The emergence of Web 2.0-based technologies that have seen the enculturation of social software, increasing availability of online collaborative tools and widespread use of social networking spaces such as MySpace, Facebook, and Second Life are gradually shifting established approaches to educational provision.

OVERALL OBJECTIVES AND MISSION

The book follows a critical exploration of current, emerging or imminent, technological and conceptual developments and the effect they have on user communities. It investigates whether developments in social software offer real advantages to learning. It highlights the educational possibilities of technologies and their disruptive effect on learning by elaborating a number of key themes that address the tensions between formal and informal learning, private and public domains, freedom and autonomy, and the implications for new and emerging learning spaces.

In addition, the book:

- Addresses the challenges of new community cultures, new technologies, and networked globalised economies;
- Examines the social shaping of new technologies in education in terms of negotiated meaning, situatedness and interpretative flexibility;
- Examines the theories and technologies of change in education and establishes a possible model that encapsulates current change and future directions;
- Argues that certain advancements in technology are clearly altering traditional pedagogical practices and their associated cultures; and
- Elaborates a typology of literacies in relation to digital media.

We are interested in how new and emerging technologies will impact on formal education and the social implications that surround the reformulation and fluidity of virtual communities.

The book contributes to the debate on what fosters a community, the concept of media literacy and how social networking can impact on learning experiences. These issues are explored from a number of theoretical and grounded perspectives. The book explores computer mediated communication and which approaches promote this, in a variety of contexts. It investigates the challenges posed by the participatory media that forms an important aspect of community engagement around dialogue, shared activity and self-identity. By bringing together key writings in the area of social software, different patterns, developments and examples of good practice, frameworks of effective design and usability will emerge alongside valuable commentary on the future pathways that these new technologies are opening up.

Finally, a note about the organisation of the book itself. It is set around nine complementary and overlapping themes. The submissions include research and evaluation but also position papers reporting developing ideas in social software and social networking:

1. **Disruptive nature of new media:** Chapters II, XXX, XXIII, XIX and XV.
2. **Learning design and pedagogical frameworks:** Chapters I, XXVII and XI.
3. **Digital literacies and Web 2.0:** Chapters XXIX, XIII and XXII.
4. **Tools:** Chapters XXIV, IX, XXXI, XXVI and XXV.
5. **Blogs and identity:** Chapters XVII, XVI and IV.
6. **Social software and knowledge management:** Chapters XXI, XVIII and XX.
7. **Communities:** Chapters VII, XIV, III and VIII.
8. **Presence:** Chapter XXXII.
9. **Case studies:** Chapters XII, XXVIII, V, VI and X.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) news feeds.

² An application or Web site that combines content from more than one source into an integrated experience (Csharp-online.net)