Chapter 14
Culture of Use of Moodle in Higher Education: Networked Relations between Technology, Culture and Learners

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the use of Moodle, an open source Learning Management System (LMS), by the Department of Electronic Media and Mass Communication in Pondicherry University, as a means to supplement classroom teaching has been examined drawing on Actor Network Theory (ANT). This chapter reveals that the use of Moodle gives rise to a new digital culture which is inscribed on the prior cultural template that students, instructors and institutions bring to have a bearing on their teaching and learning activities. However, the rise of such a digital culture is due to the human and material assemblages constituted by how students and instructors inscribe their manifestoes on Moodle and how Moodle inscribes its manifestations on them. Further, the performative potential of Moodle is explained by its networked interaction with other social, human and non-human actors such as the culture of using technology for learning, digital literacy skills, emergent digital divide, access issues among students and teachers, educational and economic background and institutional media ecology among others.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is the lynch pin of intellectual capital and hence it has an essential role to play in the evolution and development of an information society. Technological innovation in the contemporary era points to the emergence of ‘informationalism’ era wherein knowledge production is predicated on collaborative, interactive and networked technologies (Castells, 1996). Universities and colleges are required to incorporate internet technologies into teaching and learning. While adoption of technologies and infrastructure do not indicate a widespread embracing of e-learning practices, government norms prescribing understanding of technology-mediated learning as one of the eligibility criteria for teaching posts in higher institutions have brought about substantial
changes in the pedagogic practices. The survival of educational institutions will be determined by the technology capital or resources and infrastructure they would invest in for augmenting teaching and learning (Mlitwa, 2005).

This is apart from the internet cultures adults grow up in. With the introduction of computer into education and its use in social life, reading as a performative activity has found new meanings in the digital environment. Reading text as an enterprise depends on the materiality of the medium. The material affordances of the digital medium require users to possess literacy or competency to not only read and construe content but also know how to engage with the remediated content (Bolter, 2000).

While emphasis is laid on technology, the social and cultural contexts in which technology is placed cannot be excluded or studied in isolation. Since the digital technology’s invasion, assumptions about its application in education and society have been either to invest in the precepts of technological determinism or the oppositional social determinism. Technological determinism essayed the position of medium as an omnipotent influencer having unassailable impact on events in society and on people. On the other hand, social determinism posited that technology is shaped by society.

However, both approaches seek to advance their claims discounting their mutual influence. There is a systemic failure to understand the need for interleaving technology and society. The discourse of technology (Foucault, 1988) expounds on how self is shaped and honed by technology and the interaction between the self and society whereby governmentality of technology over the self and the self over technology is mediated through symbiotic relations built between the humans and non-humans. Extending this concept, what one would find in web 2.0 is an empowered reader whose agential potential to interact and influence a communicative and cognitive ecology is sustainable and tenable.

In the specific domain of education and ICTs, research on learning is dependent on human and non-human actants. “Purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are not properties of humans either. They are the properties of institutions, of apparatuses, of what Foucault called dispositifs” (Latour 1999, p.192). According to Latour, the ability of a human to ‘act’ is made possible through a distributed system of human and non-human actants that are both tangible and intangible. The inscription of human actions on infrastructure and the imposition of programmed actions of technologies on humans interweave and mesh together producing fibrous, rhizomatic and fluid networks.

Use of digital artifacts in learning is an intersection of infrastructure, institutions and their policy, preparedness of teachers to adopt technology-mediated instruction, users and their varied cultural background, power structure in operating a technology such as LMS, use of open sources and peer-peer learning. The type of institution, its policy, and perception of using technology for imparting instruction and the culture of teachers and students in using technology or willing to shift the pedagogy from traditional to technology-mediated practice are essential parameters of e-learning adoption (Holt & Challis, 2007; Weaver Spatt & Sid Nair, 2008).

Culture of an institution primarily concerns with the culture of learners and instructors. Culture is both an individual product when considered as knowledge acquired by a person; it is also a collective entity that generates groups of differential capabilities and practices (Savard, Bourdieu & Paquette, 2008). In the context of learning and technology, culture is predicated on their exposure to digital technologies, the user experience in having used the Internet (or any other digital technology) for learning as well as teaching, having understood the participatory spaces technologies afford and having engaged in participatory activities in a decentralised network for top-bottom and peer-peer learning. The culture also indicates the
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